

At Her Majesty's Discretion

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Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Expanded Universes (General)
Character:	Leo Verde
Additional Tags:	Action/Adventure , Adult Language , Drama , Legal Drama , Romance , The Lost Era (2293 - 2364) , Violence , War , Diplomacy
Language:	English
Series:	Part 5 of Star Trek: First Duty
Stats:	Published: 2024-07-14 Updated: 2024-09-22 Words: 17,621 Chapters: 6/?

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by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

Third Episode of Star Trek: First Duty!

Six months into his assignment on Starbase 8, Commander Leo Verde is called upon by Rear Admiral Neema Essa to join Task Force 17 as the force's judge advocate. The Task Force is on a diplomatic mission to the independent colony of Greenwood—a lush world beyond the Federation's borders and near the Kzin Patriarchy. Greenwood, an anachronistic society modeled on the Regency-era of British history, welcomes Starfleet for joint military exercises and renewed relations. As Leo works alongside Greenwood's Royal Navy, his efforts and personality intrigue Queen Amelia Fitzwilliam, the colony's unmarried monarch. Their growing connection challenges both his professional duties and personal feelings. Amid rising tensions with the Kzin and the complexities of Greenwood's politics, Leo must navigate his role as a Starfleet officer while managing his unexpected bond with Queen Amelia. His actions will impact not only the mission's success but also the future of his relationship with the Queen and the delicate balance between their two nations.

Cover is pending.

Notes

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

Historian's Note: This story takes place three months after the events depicted in "[Borderline Justice](#)."

Author's Note: The oscillation between US and UK English spellings of certain words is intentional, an attempt to set a tone in prose and dialogue.

Her Majesty's Cordial Invitation

Fitzwilliam Castle
The City of Readington, the Royal Duchy of Fitzwilliam, the Sovereign Realm of Greenwood
The Queen's Private Study
June 15, 2318 (Stardate 140024.74)

Amelia Eleanor Fitzwilliam, the reigning Queen of Greenwood, released an uncharacteristic sigh, her gaze locked onto the digital document sprawled across the large display device atop her desk in her private study at Fitzwilliam Castle. The verbose reports from her government officials were a necessary evil, yet their length and density often tested her patience.

Her eyes narrowed as they traced the lines of the Minister of Defence's report. Dame Jillian Munro's words held a gravity that etched a deeper frown onto Amelia's regal features. Her left hand moved, activating an internal communication system within the castle walls. Her voice, rich and melodic, echoed through the chamber with her words tinged with the accent of the upper received pronunciation: "Sir Robert."

Within moments, the grand double doors swung open to reveal a hallway stretching far into the castle's heart. A distinguished man stepped inside - his fair complexion framed by silvery hair and complemented by a tailored green waistcoat and crisp white cravat. A walking cane rested at his side as he entered with an air of quiet authority.

"Majesty," he greeted in his distinct and aged tenor brogue, bowing before raising his gaze to meet hers. "How may I serve?"

The Queen gestured towards Dame Jillian's report on her desk with a look of mild disapproval. "I assume you've perused this... *request*?"

Sir Robert Lennox GCO approached Amelia's desk, extending a hand for permission to view the document more closely. "May I, ma'am?"

"Of course," she agreed, passing her private secretary the PADD with one hand while indicating a highlighted section with another. "*This* concerns me."

With a contemplative gaze, he studied the report's contents, his silver eyebrows furrowing in silent deliberation. "Shall I call for your naval advisor, Your Majesty?" he ventured, after absorbing the critical details inked on the digital parchment.

"I would value your perspective first," she invited, her dark eyes seeking his seasoned wisdom.

A shadow of concern crossed his fair features. "I find myself in agreement with the report's predictions. Our territories face increasing peril as our enemy's audacity grows daily," he confided. He carefully set the device on her mahogany desk, keeping a respectful distance instead of passing it directly to her.

Queen Amelia's hands glided over the polished surface of her desk as she rose from her seat. She moved towards an inviting settee nestled in the room's corner. Dressed in a plush dressing gown that enveloped her like a comforting embrace, she sank into the cushioned comfort of the sofa.

In this secluded retreat away from public scrutiny, Queen Amelia savored moments of tranquility within the ancestral estate passed down since Greenwood's founding matriarch; her thrice-great-grandmother and first monarch—Queen Victoria Edwina Fitzwilliam. The castle was a testament to that first generation's best architectural offerings, gifted to their pioneering then-Duchess by the colony's initial settlers.

Quietly trailing behind his queen, Sir Robert maintained an attentive vigilance. He stood erect and patient at a respectful distance as he awaited her next words.

"Summon Sir Tracy for a consultation," Queen Amelia commanded after a thoughtful silence, referring to the naval advisor he offered earlier. "Following that, arrange to meet the Prime Minister, the Minister of Defence, and the First Naval Lord." She paused, her gaze distant. "The Chancellor of the Exchequer will undoubtedly want to discuss the financial implications."

He failed to suppress his wry grin before bowing. "Am I correct in assuming your acceptance of their proposal?"

"Unless Sir Tracy presents a viable alternative," she responded, resignation shadowing her features. "It appears my hands are tied." Then, her voice tightened with playful reprimand as she added, "And Robert, do endeavour to erase that mischievous smile from your face."

"My sincere apologies, ma'am," he responded, a playful flicker dancing in his eyes. "I shall call upon the commodore, directly."

"Thank you," she said, giving him a small smile of her own.

The Queen exited via a smaller adjoining door leading to her private quarters. She had no intention of receiving company in nothing but her sleepwear.

"Starfleet?" Queen Amelia queried, her dark eyes narrowing in thought as she reclined in the antique armchair of her castle's drawing room. This grand chamber, once a favourite haunt of her late father for entertaining dignitaries and esteemed guests, was now hers to command. Across the expanse of a small polished mahogany coffee table sat Sir Tracy, his posture rigid within the confines of his Royal Navy uniform. "The Federation's presence is seldom felt within our borders. What could possibly motivate them to extend their aid to us?"

With a subtle lean forward, Commodore Sir Tracy Newby KCV RN she noticed that his light chestnut fringe cascaded over his furrowed brow. "The annals of history, your Majesty, reveal that the Federation Council has extended Starfleet's aid to us many times. This assistance arrived in the form of swift military operations or humanitarian relief efforts," he said, his voice echoing with authority. "My predecessor, Dame Rowena, archived contingency plans endorsed by both your father and grandmother."

Queen Amelia's eyes flickered with surprise as she absorbed the commodore's detailed briefing. "Even in the recent century?"

A curt nod from Sir Tracy confirmed her query. "Precisely, ma'am. The last instance dates back to the late 2260s during a widespread outbreak of ethylene flu." He paused for effect before continuing. "A formidable Starfleet task force arrived, comprised of four starships and an additional twenty-seven support vessels, including three fully-equipped hospital ships."

He concluded with a note of reverence in his tone. "King Edward bestowed knighthoods upon the admiral and chief medical officer leading the task force, along with several doctors who worked with the Crown during that crisis."

"When has Starfleet ever lent us military support?"

Sir Tracy paused, sifting through the information on his PADD as he recalled from memory, "Their starship *Challenger* made first contact, or perhaps we could call it a restoration of contact, in 2158. But, that was nothing more than a single ship on an exploration mission. Seven years later, the Federation dispatched a squadron of five starships during the First Kzinti War. Your esteemed great-great-grandmother, Queen Eleanor, granted them permission to establish a temporary base within our star system." With a flourish, he held up his PADD to display the historical deployment. "It was one vessel of that flotilla, *Atlantis*, that stumbled upon dilithium deposits during an initial sweep-

With a dismissive wave of her hand and an impatient glance at the glowing display, she cut him off. "The discovery of our dilithium resources I'm aware of, Sir Tracy," she interjected before he could delve further into his impromptu history lesson. "However, in scenarios devoid of humanitarian considerations or without strategic advantage for the Federation's operations, how probable is it that they would rally to our defense?"

"Indeed, the likelihood is high, Your Majesty. Likely for the reasons you've outlined in terms of the Federation's interests. After all, they rely on our dilithium as a power source for their starships just as we do. Their fleet outnumbers ours, making our ore indispensable to them," he explained further. "Moreover, the historical ties between the Federation and the Realm cannot be overlooked. We owe our existence to one of their esteemed admirals. And given Queen Victoria's connection to the early days of our intertwined history, Greenwood holds a unique fascination for Starfleet. The name 'Victoria Fitzwilliam' resonates with reverence among both our peoples."

Queen Amelia was well-versed in her family's illustrious history; however, she indulged Sir Tracy's penchant for slipping into his professorial mode from his days as a tenured Royal Naval Academy instructor. She saw it as an opportunity to glean more insights from his vast knowledge base. "Quite so," she concurred with his assessment, maintaining her regal composure while absorbing his words.

The drawing-room door echoed with a trio of authoritative raps before it swung open, revealing the imposing figure of Sir Robert. "I beg your pardon for the interruption, Your Majesty," he intoned, his Edinburgh accent resonating in the hushed room. "Prime Minister Isley has arrived along with the Minister of Defence and the First Naval Lord; they await your audience."

At this announcement, Sir Tracy rose from his plush armchair. "Would you prefer if I retire to the library, Your Majesty?" His inquiry hung in the air.

"No need for that," Queen Amelia responded smoothly, her gaze steady on Commodore Newby. "Your insights could prove valuable should our guests prove reticent." She then shifted her attention back to her trusted advisor, Sir Robert. With a slight nod of acknowledgment, she instructed him in a subdued yet firm manner, "Escort them in."

The Prime Minister of the Sovereign Realm of Greenwood, Lawrence Isley, led the procession into the room. Dame Jillian Munro and Admiral Sir Joseph Harney KCO RN, the fifteenth Earl of Dundonald, followed closely behind him into the room, projecting an air of solemnity that matched their esteemed positions in Her Majesty's Government and Royal Navy. At their entrance, Commodore Newby rose from his seat—a gesture of respect toward the powerful triumvirate now gracing the royal drawing room.

The Prime Minister, a towering figure of authority, bent in a reverential bow. He delicately held the Queen's extended hand, pressing his lips to the back with an air of deep respect. "Your Majesty," he intoned, his voice resonating through the room like the echo of a cathedral bell.

"Prime Minister," she responded warmly, her smile brightening her regal countenance. "Please, I insist everyone take their seats."

Sir Tracy, ever mindful of courtly etiquette, moved with deliberate grace towards the chair furthest from the Queen. This action paved the way for the Prime Minister to claim the seat nearest to Her Majesty—an unspoken honor among Greenwood's elite. In this orchestrated dance of deference and propriety, Dame Jillian and Sir Joseph found their places nearby—their presence adding another layer to this tableau of prestige.

"Your Majesty," Dame Jillian offered a respectful bow, which the Queen acknowledged with a subtle nod.

The Queen's gaze then shifted to Sir Joseph. "Always a delight to have you in our midst, my Lord of Dundonald." An acknowledgement of Sir Tracy's presence followed her words.

The Prime Minister's response came without delay. "Indeed, Your Majesty," he said, his eyes darting towards the commodore not once but twice. A fleeting twitch of his right eye betrayed his annoyance at the unexpected presence. "I had envisioned this discussion shrouded in confidentiality and tact."

The Queen's retort was swift and unyielding. "This meeting unfolds under my auspices, Prime Minister, not yours. Sir Tracy stands as my counsel on naval matters. His advice is invaluable and for him to provide it effectively, he requires full disclosure. Pray proceed."

Her assertive stance seemed to unsettle Isley as he stumbled over his words in response - "Yes... well... I gather we are here regarding Dame

Jillian's proposed defense measures?"

"Among other matters," the Queen replied coolly. "My apprehensions lie with the proposed additional spending; it leans precariously upon dilithium futures for my comfort."

Dame Jillian's lips curled into a strained smile. "Your Majesty, without the expansion of our Royal Navy, our future might be in jeopardy." Sir Tracy cringed at her words, acutely aware of the misstep she'd taken in this critical dialogue.

Queen Amelia's gaze hardened as it fell upon Dame Jillian. Her brow furrowed in a frown. "I am not a journalist seeking sensational headlines nor is this a philosophical debate. Reserve such speculative pondering for more suitable occasions."

The Prime Minister intervened, raising his hand towards his Defence Minister while offering a placating grin to the Queen. "My apologies, Your Majesty. We will strive to articulate our points with greater clarity henceforth. Dame Jillian, perhaps you could illuminate us with the specifics?"

"Certainly," Dame Jillian replied, a blush of embarrassment coloring her cheeks. Surprised by the Queen's stern inquiry, she hastily rummaged through her valise, seeking the written evidence to bolster her suggested defense strategy. "As outlined in my proposal, I emphasized the necessity of enlarging our naval forces. With the successful recruitment campaign, we've seen an unprecedented surge in personnel tempo. At the First Naval Lord's behest, we have made offers to and hired several retired members of the Federation Starfleet to augment our officer corps."

"Am I to understand that my Government did not anticipate this influx?"

Dame Jillian was quick to allay her concerns. "Not in the slightest, Your Majesty. Our objective is to ensure we have seasoned space-faring professionals mentoring the next generation of sailors."

"And these ex-Starfleet officers have pledged allegiance as citizens?"

"Quite so," Sir Joseph interjected gently. "The Navy appreciates their expertise and insights. We've adapted our deployments accordingly and have reaped considerable benefits. However..."

The Prime Minister picked up where the admiral's words had fallen silent. "The fleet's repositioning, coupled with our vigorous enlistment campaign, has left us with an abundance of trained sailors but a deficiency of berths to harness their skills. It is fortuitous that, given our enemy's audacious incursion into our sovereign space, the urgency for new constructions aligns with both optimal utilization and national defence."

"Fortuitous that our territory is under siege?"

"Er, ma'am... I did not intend to—"

"I'm well aware of your intentions, Prime Minister," the Queen interjected smoothly. She turned her attention to another member of her council. "Dame Jillian," she began in her regal tone, "your plan suggests building twenty fresh starships within a year's span. Such an endeavor would strain our production capabilities, both surface and orbital, would it not?"

The Defence Minister gave a measured nod. "Indeed, Your Majesty. Every iota of production would need to be redirected towards shipbuilding for approximately thirteen months - plus or minus a fortnight."

"Such a course of action appears ill-advised," Queen Amelia expressed, her gaze fixed on her folded hands. "Seizing control of all facilities might destabilize the need for civilian or consumer-grade spacecraft. I fear this might precipitate industrial and economic complications."

"We welcome such discourse with the various industries when the time arises," responded the Prime Minister, his tone firm yet respectful. "We are confident that this proposal's implementation would necessitate a workforce that should appease the unions while simultaneously invoking their patriotic spirit to aid us in safeguarding the Realm."

Amelia tilted her head, a touch of nonchalance concealing her deep concern. "Pray tell, how do you propose to protect my Realm before these starships are operational?" she queried. "Especially given the Navy's alleged deficiencies."

With unvarnished honesty, Sir Joseph addressed the Queen's concerns. "Your Majesty, our current fleet is more than capable of safeguarding the Realm and its territories. Yet, we must not merely consider today's needs but also anticipate tomorrow's challenges. By this time next year, after a rigorous period of expedited assembly, we'll be in the midst of testing and refining our first batch of newly minted starships. Not long thereafter, these vessels will take their place on the front lines."

The Queen, ever pragmatic in her approach to matters of state, posed her next question with straightforward simplicity. "And should our adversaries become increasingly audacious in their attempts to seize control of our dilithium mines within that timeframe?"

"Rest assured, Ma'am," Sir Joseph vowed with unwavering resolve, "the Royal Navy stands ready to confront such aggression directly. Admiralty House shall redeploy to provide adequate protection to our holdings throughout the system."

Queen Amelia's lips pressed into a firm line, her displeasure evident as the First Naval Lord continued to spout clichéd reassurances. Her gaze shifted towards the commodore stationed at the far end of the assembly, acknowledging his previous suggestion. "Sir Tracy," she began, her tone laced with authority and resolve, "put forth an intriguing proposal. He suggested we leverage our infrequent and modest alliance with the Federation. We could request a provisional fleet of starships to bolster our Royal Navy's strength." A pause for effect, then she added, "Under the guise of a cooperative training initiative and cultural exchange, his notion is to utilize their resources for a period of no less than eighteen months."

A fleeting smirk ghosted across Sir Joseph's stern features, yet he held his silence. The Prime Minister, however, recoiled at the Queen's proposition. "Your Majesty," he protested, "I believe inviting Starfleet might be a hasty decision."

Her brow arched in question. "Why?"

"An eighteen-month joint exercise is implausible," Dame Jillian stated with a note of skepticism. "I find it hard to believe that the Federation would consent to such an extended commitment of Starfleet's resources."

The Queen's lips curved into a smile. "Is the duration your only concern? The inconvenience?"

"No, Your Majesty. I am confident in our ability to uphold the Realm's defence without requiring aid from a foreign power," the Prime Minister interjected firmly. "Not to mention, the positioning of the Federation in a conflict with our enemy."

"Our enemy was once their enemy as well," reminded the Queen softly. "If they should conquer the Realm, I would imagine that would have some impact on other nearby Federation systems such as Arbazan. We're far closer to the enemy's territory, obviously, but if we offered the Federation a long-term option in strategic positioning, it would be more advantageous for a response should the enemy forces decide to strike while the iron is hot, so to speak. Conquer us, then turn their eyes to Arbazan."

"Majesty," Isley said, his consternation made clear through a deeply furrowed brow. "It would be damaging to the pride of the nation to rely upon the Federation for aid."

"You speak of pride, Prime Minister. You would hold the balance of the nation's future against pride?" Queen Amelia queried, her voice ringing with authority. "And the lives of my subjects as well?" Isley, caught off-guard by the intensity of her questioning, parted his lips to retort, but found himself faltering at her subsequent inquiry. "I thought not," she concluded, her tone laced with a touch of satisfaction.

She called out, "Sir Robert?" The corners of her mouth lifted in a subtle grin as she reveled in her political triumph. "Would you be so kind as to extend an invitation to the Federation Ambassador to the Palace this evening? Include the Prime Minister and the Minister of State."



Upon the conclusion of their discourse, the pair of civilian leaders vacated the castle with uncharacteristic urgency. Sir Joseph, seizing Commodore Newby's attention, ushered him into the crisp embrace of mid-morning, a setting more conducive to confidential discussions.

Once they were comfortably isolated, Sir Tracy took the risk to say, "My lord?"

"Excellent work, my friend," Sir Joseph commended, his voice awash with elation. After collecting himself, he expanded further in a more controlled manner. "I wouldn't dare propose reaching out to the Federation myself. The Prime Minister staked his political future on the autonomy of the Realm during his campaign. However, considering the escalating onslaughts on Sovereign territories, it's hardly the time for vainglory and self-importance."

A knowing smile played on Sir Tracy's lips. "It's a pleasure to assist. Queen Amelia is known for her discerning mind, she has but a scant tolerance for unnecessary grandeur or pompousness."

As the military vehicle of Sir Joseph rumbled into sight, bearing the proud insignia of the Royal Navy, he gestured towards it, alerting his companion to the impending end of their conversation. "Quite so! That's the robust Fitzwilliam lineage shining through," affirmed the First Naval Lord with a note of admiration in his voice. "Now, I must hasten to Admiralty House and set in motion our collaboration for a 'joint exercise' with Starfleet's elite forces."

The Commander's New Assignment

Starbase 8
In orbit of Memory Alpha
JAG Complex, Level Four
July 5, 2318 (Stardate 0.47)

In the confines of his office on Starbase Eight, Commander Leo Verde extended his arms high above, feeling the satisfying pull of muscles strained by hours hunched over his desk and terminal. A resonant groan echoed around the room as he allowed himself a moment's respite, his heterochromatic eyes fluttering closed and his bearded jaw going slack as he expelled a weary yawn.

"This day keeps dragging on..." murmured Lieutenant (jg) Barzel Timel from the other side of Leo's desk. The Trill paralegal's fingers danced over the surface of his PADD, continuing to compile the case brief despite his commander's obvious fatigue. "Could we maybe pause here and finish up tomorrow?"

Leo's gaze flickered towards the terminal display, scanning through their progress before sighing in resignation. "But, we're so close to fini-" A chime from the door cut his words short. He shot Barzel an apologetic glance and sighed out a resigned, "Enter."

"Pardon the intrusion, Commander," Yeoman First Class (YN1) Lara Zenn said as she stepped into Leo's office.

"Not at all," Leo assured her with a small smile. "What brings you here?"

"The captain requests your presence," Zenn relayed, clasping her hands in front of her midsection.

Leo cast a look at his desk strewn with unfinished work and shrugged. "Can I have fifteen minutes? We're just tying up loose ends here."

Zenn's expression tightened. "She insists on seeing you immediately."

Barzel swiveled in his seat to face Zenn before shooting Leo an apprehensive look. "Sounds... intriguing."

"Indeed," Leo concurred, pushing himself upright from behind his desk and reaching for his pristine Class A uniform jacket draped over the armrest of the nearby couch. As he donned it, ensuring each button and twist was in place, he fell into step behind Yeoman Zenn as they exited his office. "Should I be worried?" he asked her under his breath.

"That's not for me to say, sir," Zenn responded, leading him across the corridor until they reached Captain Ch'charhat's door. Without knocking or announcing their arrival, she entered and nodded towards the Andorian captain. "Sir, Commander Verde has arrived."

"Leo!" Janeera's spirited soprano tones echoed within the cavernous office; an obvious invitation for him to enter. As the door slid open, the Andorian officer rose from her chair and circled around her desk to greet him.

Stepping into the room, Leo heard Zenn's retreat as the door sealed shut behind him. "You wanted to see me, sir?" he inquired, deciding on a formal tone to gauge her mood.

Her face lit up with a friendly grin. "Yes, and sorry from pulling you away from whatever you were buried in. A mutual acquaintance of your mother's has sent me a rather interesting message."

A wave of relief washed over Leo at her words, quelling his unease. "And who might that be?" he asked.

"Rear Admiral Neema Essa," Janeera announced with a wide grin stretching across her blue face, "Commanding Officer of Task Force Seventeen." She watched for his reaction. "I presume you're familiar with her?"

A matching grin spread across Leo's face as he replied, "In my family circle, she goes by 'Auntie Neema.'" A faint blush dusted his cheeks at the admission. "She also holds the honor of being my godmother."

Janeera let out a soft chuckle; she was privy to this information but enjoyed seeing his response. "'Auntie Neema' has extended an invitation for you to accompany her on an expedition to Greenwood," she informed him. "Apparently there's some unrest brewing between the colony and the Kzin."

"Really?" Leo exclaimed in surprise, eyes widening at this unexpected opportunity. He hesitated before adding: "I have some ongoing cases... If you believe it won't disrupt operations here too much...?"

"You've been more than hardworking, Leo... and if I haven't told you enough how much I appreciate you, then let me acknowledge that, now," Janeera said. "Perhaps it's time for you to take a breather and reconnect with family ties." She waved off his concern. "Just delegate your ongoing cases to Major Bex. She'll be acting in your stead."

"Understood, sir," Leo responded, his brows knitting together at the unfamiliarity of the colony's name. "Greenwood doesn't ring a bell."

Janeera didn't miss a beat. "Computer," she commanded, "display mission briefing for Operation CASTLE WALL." The computer hummed its compliance, replacing the screen saving digital art upon the viewscreen with a detailed sector map.

"Sigma Serpentis IV is what the Federation knows it as," Janeera clarified, her voice steady and informative. "Greenwood is its official designation. Its roots trace back to the early twenty-second century, after the Earth-Valdori conflict."

She hesitated before continuing, "In 2102, Victoria Fitzwilliam, another rear admiral and a hero from that very war, steered a fleet of twenty transport ships carrying one hundred thousand colonists towards this fourth planet. After landing, they renamed the world, Greenwood."

As Janeera elaborated on Greenwood's history, Leo skimmed through the briefing document. His eyes caught a phrase that piqued his curiosity. "It mentions here 'the Sovereign Realm of Greenwood'..."

"I'm getting to that part; don't jump ahead," Janeera chided him with an air of playful reproach.

He smirked. "Apologies, sir."

A wink from Janeera reassured Leo she bore no ill will towards his eager interruption. "Upon landing there," she continued with a gleam in her eyes as if relishing in sharing this piece of history, "the settlers resolved to resurrect an era long past — specifically Earth's late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when England evolved into the United Kingdom in 1801."

"From the start, Greenwood's charter treated the landing zone as the Duchy of Fitzwilliam, with the retired admiral wielding power as its Duchess. However, within a decade, they amplified her authority. The coronation of Queen Victoria began the monarchy, replete with a Royal House and all the trappings of grandeur and power along with it."

Leo furrowed his brows in thought, trying to dredge up memories of another colony that bore similarities. "This sounds... reminiscent of another settlement..." His voice trailed off as he grappled with his elusive memory. Instead, he managed the only aspect he could recall. "Uh... it begins with an H?"

Janeera shot Leo a lopsided grin. "Hysperia?"

A light flickered in Leo's eyes at her suggestion. "That's the one," he confirmed with a nod.

She reciprocated his gesture, adding, "Indeed, there are similarities. Although I think that world dove deeper into Earth's history for inspiration - adopting a Renaissance-era society while still embracing contemporary technology."

"Of course," he pondered aloud, "Does Greenwood hold membership in the Federation?"

Janeera shook her head, a hint of amusement playing on her blue lips. "No, not precisely. I'd say they're more akin to an informal protectorate... if that. A sovereign entity teetering on the edge of Federation territory; Starfleet has only visited three times in the last two hundred years, that's only if you include the initial contact in the mid-22nd century. The diplomatic corps has an attaché stationed there, though the Queen has recognized them as an ambassador to suit her purposes."

"All right, then. What role would I play in this excursion?" he queried.

Janeera's antennae twitched as she responded, "Admiral Essa requests your presence as her force judge advocate, seconded from my command. The Federation Council sees this as an opportunity to maintain amicable ties with Greenwood, considering the myriad advantages they bring to the table."

Driven by his curiosity, he probed further, "Could you elaborate?"

In response, she manipulated the interface, prompting the computer to magnify two remote planets on the outskirts of the system. "These two worlds," she gestured towards the ninth and tenth planets, "are significant sources of dilithium. There's also a potential opportunity for us to establish an outpost there. Such an outpost would deter the Kzin Patriarchy from escalating tensions in that sector."

"But isn't DS-Five designed to serve that very purpose?"

Janeera chuckled at this. "DS-Five is hardly imposing. It's a modest station with a quartet of cutters that have only collateral duties along the border. The Federation has intention to improve that installation, however..." She added, "Greenwood would offer a more solid base because of its abundant resources."

His eyebrows furrowed as he took in her words. "I... see." Leo's tenure in the Border Service included long patrols in the furthest reaches of Federation territory, but he never made it to that remote outpost. "When am I shipping out and for how long?"

"As soon as the Task Force arrives, they will remain here for three to four hours to take on additional cargo and personnel..." Janeera stated, her voice trailing off into an uncharacteristic silence.

Leo, picking up on the anomaly, swiveled away from the sprawling viewscreen to fix his inquiring gaze upon his superior officer. "And?" he probed, his baritone voice laced with curiosity.

She exhaled a weary sigh, her antennae twitching. "Six months' minimum duration."

"Half a year?!" Leo echoed, his tone thick with incredulity and burgeoning frustration.

She detailed, "Actually, the task force's mission duration is slated for eighteen months, with the Council sanctioning extensions at the admiral's discretion. However, it must not exceed twenty-four months in its entirety without Council approval. This does not account for travel time... a minimum of two weeks at warp speed to traverse the distance from here to Sigma Serpentis. The preliminary half-year of their assignment encompasses a multitude of cultural exchange events, and after you report aboard, Admiral Essa will provide you with a comprehensive briefing on what this involves."

Brushing aside the logistical details with an airy wave of his right hand, Leo interjected, "I've only *held* this post for six months. Can this unit withstand my absence for such an extended period?"

Janeera's laughter echoed a gentle affirmation of shared understanding. "Leo, do recall that we held the fort for eight months before you came on board," she reminded him, her voice carrying the wisdom of experience. "And while I hold your efforts in high regard, I believe this will be a major career move for you. It also presents Major Bex with a chance to broaden her skills from a far more advantageous position than the chaotic scramble she faced."

As he absorbed her words, Leo's mind wandered back to an earlier conversation where Bex had confessed that being the acting XO before his arrival was far from desirable. He exhaled, relinquishing his resistance. "You're right," he conceded. "Perhaps my restructuring has paved a smoother path for succession."

Her response was a heartfelt beam of approval - affectionate yet genuine. "Your contributions here have been invaluable," she praised him. "You've not only fortified our JAG team but also discovered some rather remarkable talents." Her gaze held his as she continued, "Yet you've shouldered immense responsibilities, tackling more cases than I'd ever envisioned you would..."

She trailed off before resuming with an added note of concern in her tone, "A change of scenery could do wonders for you." She paused again before adding, "This experience will serve your professional growth. Providing legal counsel to flag officers under diplomatic orders uncovers an entirely new aspect of JAG service and would do well to give Starfleet Command a fresh perspective on your unique abilities."

With a measure of reluctance etched into his features, Leo conceded, his head dipping in a slow, thoughtful nod. "I see," he confessed, his voice carrying a hint of uncertainty. "Yet I hadn't envisioned myself returning to the field after the *Detmer* incident."

Janeera responded with her characteristic softness and wisdom. "That was well outside your control, Leo; field work is tough," she offered, her blue-skin glowing under the artificial light. Her white hair shimmered under the office lighting, framing her blue face as she continued. "I can appreciate your... apprehension." She paused for effect before adding, "I'll remind you of what I told you when you returned: You made the right call."

A sigh of relief escaped Leo's lips as Janeera's words washed over him, quelling his unease. His eyes met hers with gratitude before he acknowledged, "Thank you."



Two days later, Leo found himself on the threshold of Task Force Seventeen's flagship, the venerable Excelsior-class USS *Farragut*. "Requesting permission to come aboard," he projected in his baritone voice to the officer of the watch—a fresh-faced ensign.

"Permission granted, sir," she responded. Her eyes flickered over his uniform and rank insignia before she asked, "May I inquire about the reason for your visit?"

With a swift motion, Leo extracted his PADD from his uniform jacket and presented his orders. "I am here to report to Rear Admiral Essa. She has requested my presence on her staff."

A flicker of understanding crossed the ensign's face. "Understood," she replied, then guided him towards his destination—the forward section of the second deck that served as both flag bridge and combat information center.

While walking through the corridor, Leo's eyes filled with admiration for the navy-blue carpet underfoot, which paid tribute to Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, the namesake of the starship. This color choice mirrored that of the United States Navy during Farragut's service in the American Civil War—an homage integrated smoothly into Starfleet's modern aesthetic.

Upon reaching the flag deck, two members of the ship's marine detachment halted him just beyond its threshold. A staff sergeant raised a hand and stated with respectful authority, "Apologies Commander, but this is a secured area by order of Admiral Essa. Are you cleared for access?"

Leo lifted his hands and showed a gentle smile at them. "I believe I am," he said. "My name is Leo Verde. I'm here on orders." He waited for a nod from marine NCO before retrieving his PADD again and presenting it for inspection.

The staff sergeant glanced at it before excusing himself to confirm its authenticity. Upon his return, his body language signalled the absence of his earlier doubt. "Commander Verde, the Admiral is in her flag quarters. Take a right at this junction, another right at the next one, and it's the second door on your left."

Leo returned his PADD to its place with a nod of gratitude. "Thank you for your assistance, Staff." He then turned to acknowledge the other marine with a respectful nod, "And you as well, Corporal."

Their surprised expressions made him chuckle as the staff sergeant managed a somewhat flustered reply: "Anytime, sir."

With their directions in mind, Leo soon stood before the correct door. As he pressed the annunciator button and heard Auntie Neema's familiar contralto voice inviting him in with an affectionate nickname—"Come in... *Lalito*"—he felt a surge of anticipation for what lay ahead.

The Commander's Family Reunion

NCC-2582 (USS *Farragut*)
Docked at Starbase 8
Flag Stateroom, Deck Two
July 7, 2318 (Stardate 4.33)

The spacious quarters assigned to the flag officer aboard the Excelsior-class USS *Farragut* dwarfed Leo's VIP Suite on Starbase 8, making it feel akin to a closet. His gaze swept across the vast room, drawn away from the knot of gold-braided uniforms gathered near his godmother, Rear Admiral Neema Essa. Despite this distraction, Essa's towering presence was unmistakable. With long and deliberate strides, she bridged the gap between them. A genuine smile brightened her features, and her voice carried an equal warmth as she greeted him, "Wonderful to see you again, *Lalito!*"

Without a moment's pause, the tall woman enfolded him in a hearty embrace. Taken aback by her exuberant display of affection, an involuntary gasp escaped Leo's lips. "A privilege to be here with you, too, sir," he replied in a choked voice while preserving their professional decorum; they were amidst company after all.

"Tosh!" Essa waved away his formal address with a dismissive flick of her hand. "I'll always be your Auntie," she asserted in her characteristic Londoner lilt before stepping back and allowing him room to breathe. "Let me introduce you to our team," she gestured towards the group of officers who stood nearby.

Flushing with discomfort at the affectionate welcome, Leo advanced, his gaze sweeping over the assembled officers. Save for a lieutenant engrossed in her PADD off to one side of the expansive desk, he was the lowest ranking among them. He recognized two of the flag officers - Vice Admiral Pavel Chekov and Commodore Thelk, the commanding and deputy commanding officers of Starbase 8.

Thelk, a figure from Leo's past encounters, directed a contemptuous gaze towards him. His Tellarite lineage manifested this scorn for a dramatic display of tusk flexing and enlarged nostril flaring. "*Verde*," he sneered. "What brings *you* here?"

Before Leo could respond, Admiral Essa intervened. "This is Commander Leo Verde," she declared to the group. "He'll be seconded to my flag staff for Castle Wall. I require an upstanding legal advisor by my side." She assessed Thelk's reaction before adding, "Would that be an issue for you, Commodore?" Her hard gaze bore into Thelk, causing his confident exterior to crumble.

Chekov, sensing the mounting tension, stepped forward with a cherubic smile. In his Russian accent, he said, "My deputy and your new judge advocate have been butting heads since Leo arrived on base," he said, his tone dripping with casual diplomacy. "If you would please pardon us, we will take our leave and wish you success in your mission."

"Cheers, Pavel," Essa replied with warmth. "Do give my love to your family." They exchanged a quick kiss on the cheek before parting ways. Thelk gave Essa a curt nod - "Sir" - then exited, acknowledging no one else.

Chekov turned to Leo and shook his hand. "Commander, come find me when you return from Greenwood." He didn't wait for a response before following Thelk out of the room; the door slid shut behind him.

"Okay..." Leo muttered under his breath.

Essa guided him towards her team by his elbow. "*Lalito*, come meet my staff." She motioned towards a Vulcan woman standing nearby at attention. "This is Sakna—she's been my flag captain and right hand for four years."

Sakna bowed her head in acknowledgment of Leo. "Commander."

Leo raised his palm and split his fingers in the Vulcan custom, and responded in a sincere tone: "I've come to serve, Captain."

Sakna reciprocated Leo's gesture with her own raised hand, along with an intrigued, raising her right eyebrow. "Your service honors us," she responded, her voice resonating like smooth stone echoing in a cavern. "I have assigned you to the flag staff section, on the port side of this deck. My executive officer, Commander Tolani, will see to any of your logistical needs."

"Appreciated, sir," Leo responded, his hand falling to his side.

Essa pivoted towards the lieutenant at her elbow, a PADD clutched in her grasp. "My flag lieutenant, Aravila. She's the one who manages all my paperwork. She is supported by her hand-picked team of yeomen."

Leo directed an acknowledging nod towards the Bolian woman and offered a warm smile. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lieutenant."

"Commander," Aravila responded, the clipped formality of her greeting reverberating in the spartan room. "Welcome aboard."

"My second-in-command, Commodore Mogasu, is aboard his flagship, *Kearsarge*," Essa interjected, her London accent adding a touch of warmth to the sterile environment. "He commands Task Group 17.2."

"From *Kearsarge*? I read the briefing. Why not command from one of the two Excelsior-class ships in the group?"

"He has a penchant for the refitted Constitutions," she explained.

Leo couldn't help but let a smile play across his lips. "I've never served on one, but I know they're magnificent ships."

"In due course, you'll cross paths with him," Essa assured, her tone carrying an implicit promise.

"What's the size of our fleet?" Leo queried, curiosity etching lines on his forehead.

Captain Sakna's crisp, precise voice called his attention to her as she informed, "The task force comprises fourteen ships, divided into two task groups. A support division of four shall act as escort; three repair tenders and a single medical vessel. Eighteen starships in total."

Essa swiveled her gaze towards Aravila. "Ensure he receives a copy of OpPlan Castle Wall."

Leo interjected with a thoughtful furrow on his brow, "I'll also require the task force mission orders from Starfleet Command, and any related directives."

"Right you are," Admiral Essa concurred with a nod. Her dark eyes sparkled with approval as she added, "Grant him full access to everything—orders, briefings, comments, half-formed thoughts... the whole lot."

"Aye, sir," Lieutenant Aravila replied. Her nimble fingers were already dancing across her PADD in swift obedience to the order.

"Admiral, if you will excuse me, I will be in my ready room," Sakna said.

"Thank you, Captain," Essa encouraged.

The captain paused at the threshold to inform the room, "We depart at oh-six-thirty Zulu." Then she left.

Essa then turned to Aravila, her eyes twinkling with mischief. "Go off duty for half an hour, love," she suggested. "I fancy a chinwag with my *Lalito*."

Leo felt his cheeks warm once more. Aravila's perceptive gaze made him flush even deeper before she nodded and followed Sakna's exit path. As soon as the door slid shut behind her, Essa moved to her desk and retrieved a wrapped box.

She carried it to Leo and placed it on the coffee table that sat in front of a long couch hugging the bulkhead beneath an expansive view of Starbase's interior docking facility.

"This little gift comes courtesy of your old man," Essa revealed as she settled onto the couch. She patted the seat next to her, gesturing for Leo to join her. "When I told him about my plans to whisk you away on this mission."

With a grimace etched on his face, Leo eased himself onto the plush cushion next to Essa, giving the gift sitting on the coffee table a careful glance. "I'm not in any immediate danger of it blowing up in my face, am I?" he ventured, a twinkle of mirth dancing in his heterochromatic eyes.

Essa's rich contralto laughter filled the room. "Blimey, no!" She shot him an amused smirk, her dark eyes sparkling with mischief. "What might make you believe that?"

Leo sighed, his shoulders slumping as though carrying an invisible weight. "Since I made the switch to JAG," he began, running a hand through his dark hair streaked with red highlights. "He's been rather... aloof. More so after I was beached following my departure from *Hansen*. Mamá said that it was going to take some time for him to get used to the idea of his son no longer serving on starships."

Essa absorbed Leo's words, her gaze softening as she considered their implications. "Your relationship with your father can be rather complicated," she mused aloud before turning back to Leo, her expression serious yet empathetic. "Your mother and I have spoken at length regarding the rather high expectations your father placed upon you. Being his only son," she continued.

A crease deepened between Leo's brows, though he acknowledged Essa's words with a tight smile.

"You're your own person, and he ought to respect that," she replied with a succinct nod. "I suppose this gift is his roundabout way of expressing his continuing affection for you."

At her words, Leo reached out, fingers brushing the cool surface of the box lid as he lifted it. He set it aside and used his unoccupied hand to grasp at the object nestled within for a closer inspection. "This is... an *interesting* way to show his affection," he murmured with awe, cradling it in both hands as he turned it over, scrutinizing every inch.

A type-two phaser dating back to the 2280s - forty years into Starfleet's past - sat within his hands; its dark silver finish still gleaming like new, after all these years. Unlike otherphasers produced before or after, the grip sat closer to the muzzle; the power pack came to rest atop the hand. The phaser's emitter - wide yet thin - would unleash a ribbon-like beam upon firing.

With safety as the top priority, Leo verified the power pack's setting. His Starfleet training instinctively guided him as he dismantled the weapon, taking his time to scrutinize each component.

"This is beautiful," he admitted aloud, his voice softening as he assessed the weapon. "Exceptionally well-maintained. Like, at a Master Armorer's level."

Essa smiled. "Is that so?"

With a fleeting glance in her direction, Leo redirected his unwavering focus back to the dismantled phaser cradled in his hands. He traced each component with his eyes and fingers as he restored it to operational status.

"Oh, yes," he replied, his baritone voice resonating with nostalgia. "My father keeps a similar phaser on display in his office back home." His nimble fingers danced over the antique weapon, echoing a familiar routine etched into muscle memory.

"He toted this model around until '93." A hint of reverence seeped into his tone, painting the image of a man with an emotional attachment to his sidearm. "Out of all the phasers he's ever carried, he held this design in the highest esteem. He called it the quintessence of refinement." With a soft chuckle at the memory, Leo continued, "He said it was 'elegant.'"

An involuntary smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he lost himself in remembrance. "The first time he entrusted me with it was the month before I started high school." The wistful note in his voice underscored a cherished memory; a poignant reminder of simpler times and childhood fascination with Starfleet legacy.

"See? He still loves you, *Lalito*," Essa assured him. She reached to grip his shoulder.

He sighed and offered a wan smile to her. "I... I mean, it's nice of him to send me one of these. I guess I'm not sure."

"Direct your attention to the serial number of the weapon." She encouraged him with a nod toward the weapon.

Leo realized he didn't inspect the alphanumeric on the phaser's power pack. His eyes skimmed the engraved characters before he looked up in surprise at Essa. "This is *his*."

"He said you would need it more than he would, now," she explained. "And since mission requirements calls for security alert two, you will need a proper, reliable sidearm. He told me that his son should have the best."

Leo kept his eyes on the serial number, reading and rereading it once more in disbelief. "I'm stunned."

"Not yet. Switch on the power pack, first," Essa quipped.

Her witty rejoinder caused him to chuckle softly in response. "I can't accept this."

Essa pushed herself closer to him and embraced her godson. "You should accept it as the gesture he intended. He said he wanted you to have it."

He leaned into her warmth. With an outstretched arm, his hand pointed at the box. "But--"

"You don't have to wear it, if you don't want to," she offered. "In fact, should you prefer, head back to the base now and stow it in your quarters."

They sat together in the compartment; two members of the same family by choice, rather than by blood. Leo contemplated his options for a few moments and then decided. "No, I'll wear it. He'll pepper me with questions about how well it functioned when I get back, anyway, right?"

She giggled. "Quite."

Leo removed the holster from the box and slipped the phaser's muzzle within. He slipped free of his Auntie Neema's embrace and placed the holster on his belt to try it on for size.

Essa leaned back to assess the visual impression and gave him a nod with her lips turned downward. "Brilliant."

"You think so?" He peered down at himself. "I might adjust this, I think it's a little too high to get a quick grip."

"If you slide it more forward so it's just above your hip?" she suggested. When he did so, he lifted the weapon and smiled. "That's got it, I think."

Leo explained the source of his discomfort. "The last time I carried, I wore the combat uniform. The holster position on that is far more comfortable than trying to wear one with your class A's. This is going to take some getting used to."

Essa rose from the couch to stand before Leo. "We're getting close to departure. You should go settle in and meet me in the conference lounge in three hours. We'll go over the mission orders together after we're underway. I'll have some clarifying questions for you."

With her tone conveying that professional undercurrent, Leo acknowledged that he was now receiving commands from his new boss. "Aye, sir," he replied, adopting a formal address. "I'll see you out there."

Her Majesty's Honoured Guests

F-35 (HMS *Proteus*)

Elliptical Patrol Orbit of Sigma Serpentis IX, Nine Knots

Quarterdeck

July 23, 2318 (Stardate 44.1)

As the ship's bell sounded once to mark off the first half hour of the middle watch, Mr. Midshipman Gwendolyn Ballard stepped onto the quarterdeck and approached the port side railing where *Proteus*' Second Officer, Lieutenant Euphemie Castlereagh, stood as she gazed out at the stars.

"Mister Castlereagh, sir," Ballard said, holding a ship's mug out to the lieutenant. "With the Steward's respects."

"Ah, most kind, thankee," Castlereagh said with a wide grin. She inhaled the aromatic scent of black coffee and closed her eyes. "Smells heavenly. My best regards to the Steward, if you please."

Ballard smiled in return, glad to provide a creature-comfort to an officer she held in grand esteem. "My pleasure, sir."

After the steaming quaff passed through her lips, Castlereagh swallowed and then released a happy sigh as her eyes shifted back to the stars. "Thank you for standing watch with me. It's been dreadfully boresome thus far."

"You do me a great kindness with your tutelage, sir," Ballard admitted. "I hope to stand for examination next month."

"If the captain approves," Castlereagh reminded her. Off Ballard's crestfallen expression, she consoled her, "Chin up, now. The captain is firm, but fair. Either way, continue your studies regardless. You'll benefit far beyond a panel of three captains shouting at you."

"I hope to return to *Proteus* a passed midshipman, and hopefully, a commissioned lieutenant into her," Ballard blushed as she admitted her plan.

Castlereagh tempered the midshipman's expectations. "As a passed midshipman, certainly. But once you receive your commission, they may also come with orders to report to another vessel."

Ballard's eyes widened. "I had not thought of that, sir. I always assumed-"

The shrill whistle of the ship's intercom system made both women wince. Castlereagh stabbed the control panel as the frequency sliced through the muted tones of their discussion. "You'd think I'd get used to that," she muttered to Ballard. With a raised tone, she replied to the caller, "Quarterdeck, Lieutenant Castlereagh."

"'Tis the flying bridge, Able Sailor Rimes, here, sir," replied a rough Cockney-accented masculine voice. "Unknown vessels in sight."

"Number and where away, Rimes?"

Rimes hesitated for but a second before responding, "At least fifteen vessels, traveling at middle-speeds from out-system. Relative bearing is four points by fifty-six starboard, sir."

"Thank you, Rimes. Leave it with me." Castlereagh closed the circuit and turned back to Ballard. "My respects to the captain, and please inform her we have strange vessels in sight and request her presence on the quarterdeck."

"Right away, sir," Ballard said, already in motion as soon as the lieutenant spoke the last word of her order. She passed through the doors leading aft to the great-cabin where a pair of marine sentries stood outside. She nodded to the senior marine and said the reason: "Strange vessels in sight."

A quick nod preceded the marine's movement in opening the cabin door, allowing the midshipman entry. Ballard knocked on the interior hatch leading to the captain's private quarters; the compartment almost no one entered without authorization, even in a critical situation. "Captain?"

The familiar contralto voice of Captain the Honourable Dame Stacy Meyn, KCO LV, RN, replied; her tone thick with the effects of interrupted sleep. "Yes, who's there?"

"It's Midshipman Ballard, sir. Mister Castlereagh's respects; there's at least fifteen strange vessels on approach to the home system," the midshipman spoke though the closed hatch.

The midshipman could hear the subtle thump of feet hitting carpeted flooring beyond the hatch. Seconds later, Captain Meyn exited her private quarters, pulling on her uniform coat; space black with the green trim of their national flag.

Their uniform boots clapped down on the harder deck outside of the great-cabins as they traversed the corridor to approach the quarterdeck. Ballard noted with incredulity that the First Officer stood next to Castlereagh, as though he were already on watch. Both lieutenants stood opposite one another at the plotting table, where the ship's position and the tactical display appeared. They straightened their postures upon sighting the Captain.

"Mister Castlereagh," Captain Meyn said sharply, "have we made identification, yet? Are they Kzin?"

The second officer shook her head. "No, sir, distance is still well away. We have minimal sensor resolution, presently."

"Captain," said the First Officer, Lieutenant Andry, as he pointed at the path of the group of ships, "the trajectory of the vessels shows they might be approaching from Kzin territory."

"A boldness from the Kzin we've yet to see since they began their encroachment campaign," Castlereagh pointed out, while turning to Andry. "Fifteen ships? They don't normally skirmish with over three at the most, sir."

While keeping her eyes focused on the plot, Meyn pressed the nearest intercom panel. "Flying bridge, Captain."

The response was immediate. "Flying bridge, Rimes, here, sir."

"Has the strange fleet altered course?"

"No, sir, they've maintained speed and course for our position."

"How long before they make our territory?"

"If they hold, roughly an hour, sir."

"Thank you," Meyn ended the discussion. "*Proteus*," she ordered, "pipe 'All Hands,' if you please?"

The ship's computer answered with a pleasing series of tones. Then, the whistle of a bosun's pipe sounded over all ship's speakers; one long blast to call full attention. "All Hands, report to your stations. All Hands, report to your stations," the ship's computer said in her feminine tones.

"Mister Andry, stations for wear, come about, and put us on an intercept course," Meyn ordered, once the announcement finished. "Mister Ballard, Inform Signals to laser-link to the nearest relay and dispatch a message urgent for the Commodore. Send all our sensor data. Include our current position, course, and speed."

Ballard nodded, taking down notes on a PADD. "Aye, aye, sir." She tucked away her device into her uniform coat and turned away.

Meyn raised her hand and placed it on Ballard's shoulder, stopping the midshipman from running aft with the message. She added one last detail:

"Tell him if it is the enemy, I intend to engage them, forthwith."



Rear Admiral Essa sat in her seat at the head of the conference lounge on the flag deck, with Leo sitting at her left, and Captain Sakna on the right. The viewscreen showed the inscrutable visage of the Saurian commodore, Mogusa, aboard his flagship *Kearsarge*, with his flag captain, a Betazoid male named Yarix.

"We should arrive in the system in under an hour, so let me begin by saying that this has been a very smooth journey since departing Starbase Eight," Essa said, resting her hands in her lap. "Commodore, the plan is to come out of warp at the ninth planet and use our pre-arranged encryption to contact the relay station there. Once we use the code phrase 'Castle Wall,' the First Naval Lord should reply with the counterphrase of 'Tower Tall.' At which point, we'll make our approach inward to Greenwood and form up with the Home Fleet."

Mogusa's translated voice carried over the link, "Will I have leave to take my task group to reinforce the Royal Navy in the outer planets?"

"Erm, no, not yet," Essa sighed. "We'll wait on station until we have our orders from Sir Joseph, or possibly one of his other admirals that will act as liaison. In fact, I hope everyone brought their best dress uniforms. There will probably be a reception at their orbital station. HMSB Hestia, which I'm told was constructed from the lead colony ship that arrived over two hundred years ago, and they so named the base after her."

"Sir, may I ask why the need for code phrases?" asked *Farragut's* Caitian operations officer, Commander M'lissa. "Seems rather an antiquated method for confirmation."

Leo sat up and replied. "It does, but in this case, a pre-arranged method for authentication is paramount for multiple reasons. Greenwood's Royal Navy uses sign/counter-sign as a method of identifying friend or foe; it's worked into their tactical systems. Because the Kzin are increasing their attempts to annex Sigma Serpentis by approaching the outer planets, it's likely if we show up on their long-range sensors, they'll be wary until they identify us. Last, they haven't seen a Federation starship in over fifty years. The Federation has promoted a sphere of influence for the Greenwood colony for their future use and exploitation."

Admiral Essa listened to Leo with a smile on her face, proud of her godson's assessment. "Thank you, Leo. As he said, the Federation Council treats Greenwood as a *de facto* protectorate, though Starfleet observes their sovereignty and allows their Royal Navy to be responsible for national defense. This is going to be an opportunity for us to get a closer look at their innovations, just as much as they will ours."

M'lissa wondered, speaking to the group at large, "So, this will be the first time they'll be seeing an Excelsior-class starship?" With a smirk, she cast a sidelong glance toward Leo and added, "Wow, are they in for a shock."



Proteus stood ready for combat. The order to beat to quarters issued some time ago, while the frigate sped to twenty-five knots in order to

position itself for the intercept. Captain Meyn ascended to the poop deck, leaning over the railing to look down on the doings of the officers below. Several screens sat on a mount extended from just underneath the center of the railing, showing various statuses of the ship's systems.

The ship's surgeon, Doctor Wilhelmina "Billie" Farrell, relaxed in her customary seat aft and to the port of where the captain stood. She drew her teacup of Earl Grey to her lips and took a quick sip.

The captain's steward, Katarina "Kathy" Rau, approached her charge with a tray and offered its contents. "Captain?"

Captain Meyn turned and took the ornate teacup. "Thank you, Rau," she said with a grin. "Perfect timing, as always."

"Cook asks if you'd like breakfast this morning," Rau asked.

With her eyes upon the displays, she sighed. "We might go into battle soon, so no, thank you. You and Cook secure yourselves below, please." After the steward departed the deck, Meyn called down, "Mister Andry, that's far enough. Reduce speed to five knots and hold this course."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Andry replied, then turned to bark orders at the sailing master.

Now on her feet and standing only two feet behind the captain, Doctor Farrell asked, "Something amiss?"

Meyn kept her eyes on the display. She replied in muted tones, "We're approaching the limit of our territory." She touched the intercom control and called, "Signals, Captain."

"Signals. Ballard, here, sir."

"Now that we've reduced speed, laser-link to the relay and update the Commodore on our present position."

"Aye, aye, sir. Sending it now."

Meyn switched off the circuit and *Proteus'* position on the plotter showed its speed at sub-light velocity. Five knots put the frigate's speed north of half impulse power. Among the eighteen vessels in the incoming fleet, three of them had a mass over five times greater than the others and possessed an equivalent level of armaments.

Despite the various strategies in her mind, all of which resulted in near-instantaneous destruction, she still had no confirmation of their would-be aggressors' identity. She drummed her fingers on the railing as she considered the possibilities.

Then, the decision came to her. "Mister Andry, adjust your heading ninety points to starboard and advise the port-side gun captains to run out!"

"Aye, aye, sir!"

At that moment, the intercom whistled for immediate attention. Meyn opened the circuit, and said, "Meyn, here."

Over the small speaker, the same midshipman's voice called for her, "Signals, Ballard, again, sir. I have the Commodore for you on laser-link. He wishes to speak with you *immediately*. His words, sir."

"On this circuit, if you please, Mister Ballard."

"Aye, aye, sir. Patching through, now."

The center screen blinked and showed the emblem of the Royal Navy's Outer Planets Squadron. The stern, lupine visage of the squadron commander, Commodore Sir Timber Lupindo KO RN, appeared. "Dame Stacy," he greeted her with an acknowledging nod.

"Sir Timber," she replied to the male Fenrisal flag officer.

"My sincere apologies for the lateness of this information, but we have word from Starbase Hestia that the Starfleet task force we discussed last week should arrive near your location presently," the commodore's voice took on an apologetic tone. "The First Naval Lord informs me that the Prime Minister deemed the timing of their arrival a national security secret."

Captain Meyn pressed her lips together into the thin line of irritation. She bit back a choice comment, instead offering a tight smile.

"Understood, sir. How are we to identify ourselves to one another?"

"They will use encrypted signal number forty-four, with the code phrase of 'Castle Wall.' Your counter-sign is to be 'Tower Tall.'" Commodore Lupindo repeated the information once more. "Confirm receipt."

The captain nodded. "Information received, sir. We should contact that incoming fleet in less than five minutes, so I sincerely hope I receive the proper phrase, or else we'll go down fighting, sir."

Lupindo offered a small smile. With a nod, he admitted, "I know you will, Captain. Hope to hear news shortly." The screen blinked back to the squadron insignia before returning to show the previous ship's status.

"Signals, Captain," Meyn called out, not bothering to wait for a response, she kept speaking, "monitor signal forty-four for traffic and advise me at once."

As Ballard replied with her acknowledgement of the order, Meyn called down to Andry, "Gunners to hold for my order!"

Doctor Farrell asked from her seat, "Planning on attacking, regardless?" She hid her grin behind the teacup.

"It'll either be an attack or a nine-gun salute," Meyn replied, keeping her voice down. "The briefing materials noted that a rear admiral leads their task force."

As the minutes ticked off, Captain Meyn watched the sensors improve to form blurry silhouettes as they read the return washed through the subspace fields of each ship. "Those do not look like any Kzin ships I've seen before," she admitted. "The circular hull by itself, mayhaps... but those longer hull pieces are most certainly a significant departure from known Kzin designs."

"Federation, then?" asked the doctor, her voice tinged with hope.

As though in response to her question, the ships crossed over into Greenwood's sovereign space to exit from subspace in rapid succession. The gleaming white hulls of each ship stood out like beacons against the darkness of space, a stark contrast to the sleek, black hulls in use by the Royal Navy. Three of the eighteen ships at the fore of the fleet loomed large enough on the plotting screen to dwarf the seventy meter-long frigate.

From her position, Captain Meyn looked upwards through the transparent aluminum bulkhead and read the words, "STARSHIP U.S.S. FARRAGUT - UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS," along the side of the lower hull amidst a delta and two red lines running aft.

She took a step back from the view and in a breathy and shaky voice, she exclaimed, "Mine arse on a bandbox!"

Her First Officer, along with the rest of the crew on the quarterdeck, all expressed gasps and words of amazement at the sight of the show of military might. Lieutenant Andry shouted, "Merciful heavens!"

The signals screen emitted an attention-getting tri-tone. Meyn glanced at the screen, which showed an incoming message patched through from her specified channel. Two words with gold lettering displayed alone on a field of black:

CASTLE WALL

Her Majesty & The Commander

The Royal Naval Academy
The Royal City of the Great Nore, The Sovereign Realm of Greenwood
Exmouth Auditorium
July 30, 2318 (Stardate 62.94)

"It is undeniable that Queen Victoria stands as a beacon of wisdom, and selflessness in the annals of our shared history. Her pivotal role during the Earth-Valdori conflict contributed significantly to United Earth's reputation and resolve that led to the eventual formation of the United Federation of Planets. And later, the colonists of the fledgling Greenwood settlement could not have asked for a better leader to navigate the challenges of those tumultuous times. Queen Victoria's unwavering dedication to her people and her steadfast commitment to the ideals of peace and unity serve as an enduring inspiration for us all. I feel that if she were alive today, she would be touched to witness this joyful reunion of her ancestral family and her descendents... coming together as friends and allies. With her legacy in mind, and her spirit living within the hearts of her subjects, I stand here today before the next generation of Royal Naval officers with the fervent hope that we will continue to uphold her fine example in the centuries to come, as cousins born to the same shared tradition, united in those tenants of service, duty, honor, and loyalty to our respective nations. Thank you."

Leo smiled with appreciation at the thunderous applause he received as he concluded his lecture to the assembled corps of midshipmen. "Thank you," he repeated into the audio pickup field atop the lectern on the stage. He smiled at the Academy's Superintendent, a vice-admiral in the green division. They joined hands and swapped positions, so the admiral could claim the lectern.

As he moved down the line of the other academy dignitaries - the provost, the commandant of midshipmen, department heads, and other senior instructors - the Superintendent called out to the assemblage and reminded them, "Commander Verde will continue with his lecture series next month, the topic will cover Earth's history from the end of the Valdori conflict to the signing of the Articles of the Federation. Seating for the next lecture will be limited. Signups shall begin tomorrow morning on the central hub. Thank you for attending. Dismissed."

"Good show, sir," said the final instructor in the line. Leo thanked him and continued to exit the stage on the far side where his assigned naval liaison, Lieutenant Maria Egelston, awaited him.



Two hundred kilometers away, near the River Isis, the Queen sat within her private study, this time at her official residence: Westminster Palace in the Realm's capital city of Victoria. She stared at the viewscreen, unable to move after hearing Commander Verde's lecture a little more than halfway through. The subject close to her heart captivated her, along with the man's voice and charm.

"Who is he?" she muttered to herself. Something about him piqued more than her curiosity. She watched him accepting the congratulations of the academy's leadership team; his gratified expression touched her as genuine.

Sir Robert's voice cut through her thoughts. "Majesty?"

Queen Amelia did not look over, unable to tear her eyes away as the screen continued to show him moving through the line in his smart-looking maroon uniform. "Yes, Robert?" she said with a distracted tone. "What is it?"

He bowed slightly. "You wished for me to remind you when it was time for luncheon. Would you like to take it in here or in the dining room?"

"In here, please," she replied, still distracted. When the feed completed and the screen blinked to show the coat of arms of the Royal Naval Academy, she scrubbed the video back to the start of the lecture, when the superintendent introduced him. She let the recording play and heard the voice of Vice-Admiral Dame Laura Lochen speaking.

"-has served as a commissioned officer in Starfleet for over twelve years, six of them with the Border Service patrolling the Romulan and Cardassian borders. He is a graduate of Starfleet Academy in Pre-Law. He subsequently attended Starfleet Law, where he earned his Juris Doctorate and his Master of Legal Letters, with a focus in Starfleet Justice and Administrative Law. Presently, he is seconded with the visiting Starfleet Task Force Seventeen as their Judge Advocate, but his permanent billet is the executive officer of the Sector JAG Office at Starbase Eight, in orbit of Memory Alpha. He is here today at my personal invitation to be our Honoured Guest Lecturer. This is the first of a series of six planned lectures beginning now during the Summer Term and through the end of Michaelmas. Please give welcome to Commander Leo Verde." She cast her open hand to stage right as she spoke that last.

So deafening was the applause within Exmouth Auditorium that the audio adjusted as Commander Verde walked onto the stage to approach the lectern to take Dame Laura's offered hand while wearing a wide grin. The Queen noticed his cheeks flushed under the attention; she wondered why. He did not seem to mind when she arrived partway through the stream.

He waited until the applause died down enough to where he could speak. "Thank you, all, for that warm welcome. And thank you, Dame Laura, for that gracious introduction."

The Queen felt the commander's voice deeply. Despite not understanding the reason, listening brought her comfort. The tension of her day floated away, leaving her feeling relieved. With closed eyes, she waited for him to speak once more.

He did so, continuing his opening remarks, "It's truly an honor to be here today among such esteemed company and eager minds. Now, I must confess, when I was first asked to deliver this lecture, I couldn't help but wonder if they'd picked the wrong man for the job. After all, I'm just a

humble lawyer from Starbase Eight, not exactly known for my expertise in historical matters. But then I remembered something my dear Auntie Neema told me: 'Darling, if you can't dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with charm.' And the reason I remember those words so clearly, is because she told me right before she sent me here. She's my CO, sitting on her flagship, probably laughing maniacally as she's watching this. Hello, Auntie!"

When he waved toward the cameras and offered a dramatic grimace, the icebreaker worked to perfection. The audience chuckled. He added, extemporizing, "The legacies in this building are all wearing those knowing smiles. I see you." He lifted a hand, and with an open-palmed gesture, swept the auditorium to acknowledge them. That brought some cheers. "I'm a legacy, as well. My family joins all of yours in embracing service to our respective countries."

That brought another round of applause, which he joined in to celebrate their mutual dedication.

He proceeded; smoothly transitioning back into the topic that she did not notice, he returned to his written remarks. "So, here I am, ready to dazzle, baffle, and hopefully entertain you all with a little tale of history, heroism, and perhaps a dash of humor along the way."

Commander Verde shot a quick grin toward the audience and the camera's position caught his eyes as though he could see her. Queen Amelia stared back, mesmerized. When he broke eye contact to look over the audience, she blinked, curious about her behavior.

"The Federation has much in common with our cousins here on this verdant world, and in the spirit of that declaration, I'd like to devote this first discussion to a woman of singular courage who not only impacted the history of my homeworld and the United Federation of Planets, but also brought her vision and leadership to found and guide the thriving society known as the Sovereign Realm of Greenwood. I, of course, am speaking of retired Starfleet Rear Admiral Victoria Fitzwilliam, your first Queen."

The Queen almost didn't notice her food tray settled on the side of her desk until she opened her eyes at that moment. As she enjoyed the finger sandwiches alone, she watched, listened, laughed, and reacted to the lecture until Sir Robert returned to see to her daily schedule.

When he interrupted her, she turned to her private secretary and asked, "Could we invite this Commander Verde to tonight's reception?"



Rear Admiral Essa beamed at Leo when he returned to *Farragut*. He reported in to her office and as soon as he entered, she said, "Well done, you!" she said with a clap or two of her hands. "I just received word from Dame Laura; she said you were marvelous with her students. It's precisely what we needed you to do."

Leo blushed under the praise. "Thanks. I'll be honest, my heart was pounding during the beginning. I found my footing about ten minutes in."

She said, not bothering to hide her amusement, "I saw and I'm much obliged for that shout out. Glad my advice worked to your advantage."

He snorted and folded his arms. "She says, not admitting that she dropped this on me with little more than a days' notice."

"Although she does not like being referred to in the third person, she will point out that you handled it with your usual flair and aplomb."

Leo frowned at her pointed rejoinder. "I suppose I work well under pressure."

"As a Starfleet officer should. But, you were wonderful, *Lalito*," Essa replied, though she rose from behind her desk and carried a PADD. "You don't have to take my word for it. Apparently, you impressed Her Majesty enough to garner an invitation to tonight's reception at the Palace."

"What?" he asked, both toneless and stunned.

Essa grinned at his discomfiture. "You need to go find your best dress uniform, Commander. Polish those boots, too. Find those dress gloves. They'll love the full kit, trust me."

Leo shook his head. "I can't go to that. I'm not even a captain."

She turned the PADD around and countered by reading it aloud. "'The Master of the Household has received Her Majesty's command to invite Commander Rainerio Eulalio Verde of Starfleet Task Force Seventeen dot dot dot...'" she let her voice trail off. "It's an official state function, *Lalito*."

"But-"

"Did you leave your dress uniform back on the base?"

"N-No... but, I wouldn't even know what to say to a *Queen*!"

Essa sighed, shooting her godson a lopsided grin. "Just keep your elbows off the table, remember which fork to use, and smile a lot. They taught you about forks at the Academy, right?"

"I, uh... forks?" Leo stammered.

"Utensils you use to shovel food into your mouth?"

He stared at Essa, unamused. "I *know* what they are. I just- y'know... I was kind of looking forward to a quiet evening in after making it through a terrifying experience on stage in front of eight hundred midshipmen." When Leo finished speaking, he placed a finger on the bridge

of his nose.

"What's the matter?" she asked with genuine concern. "You've been to receptions before."

"Back home, sure. This is a little different."

"It's not. Study up on protocol and if you're feeling overwhelmed, just go outside and get some fresh air or something," she told him as she squeezed his shoulder. "You'll do fine."

He let out a held breath with his eyes closed and relaxed. "It'll be okay. I'm a nobody, right? I'm just there because I mentioned you're my Auntie, and it would be rude of her to invite you and not invite me." Leo looked at Essa for reassurance.

She tilted her head. "I think it had more to do with how brilliant you were on the dais."

He shook his in response. "She's just being polite. It's fine."

"If that's how you want to see it, and we beam down together, then I'll take it," Essa said. "Head to your quarters and break out all your ribbons."



The massive entry hall to Westminster Palace made Leo feel insignificant as he stood just inside the huge entrance doors, seeing the end of the long line of dignitaries waiting to be received by the Queen. Overriding his nervousness, he fought the urge to look down at his uniform where his commissioned officer's badge, JAG badge, and an array of his awards, decorations, and service medals sat. The mess dress version of the maroon uniform required the use of the Federation blue and white shoulder aiguillette, with the two extra white braids showing that he served on the staff of a rear admiral, in his role as the task force's judge advocate.

At the tip of those extra braids were ornate white metallic tips. Each step Leo took, a faint tinkle came from the tips clinking against one another. Though not loud enough in the cacophony of overlapping conversations to draw attention to himself, but loud enough to irritate him as he moved.

He remained near the entrance to await other Starfleet personnel, as he appeared to be the first to arrive. Just before beaming down from *Farragut*, Admiral Essa and Commodore Mogasu decided to delay their arrival for a briefing from the starships *Trial* and *Amazon*. Whatever news they brought with them was enough to force Leo to arrive solo.

"I'll be down as soon as I can," Essa had promised him. "Keep the Queen entertained until I do? Kiss the hand; they love that down there."

He sighed until he caught sight of one of the Royal Navy officers in full dress uniform, complete with a ceremonial naval cutlass, a green sash, and two stars. "Holy Kolker," Leo breathed, hoping that no one else heard him.

Unfortunately, the officer did, and she turned to approach him. "May I help you, sir?" she asked as her eyes scanned his uniform.

He blushed under the unexpected attention and cleared his throat as he felt it constrict. "Uh, my apologies. I meant nothing by that."

She wore an amused smile on her lips and introduced herself. "Not at all. Allow me to name myself to you. I am Captain Stacy Meyn, of the *Proteus* frigate." She bowed and added, "Your servant, sir."

Both officers shook gloved hands as they made each other's acquaintance. Hearing her rank, he deferred in a respectful tone, "Oh, well, it's I who should be your servant, sir. I am *Commander* Leo Verde, Starfleet Task Force Seventeen. I'm on staff to Rear Admiral Neema Essa." His eyes returned the favor, noticing the additional full medals stacked in a row on her left side. "This is the first time I'm seeing the dress uniform for the Royal Navy. It's... impressive."

The captain shot him a genuine smile, with all of her teeth showing this time. She leaned in and admitted in a low tone, "I hate the damned thing. But when you're commanded to attend an event like this, you're required to wear all the *accouterment* that the Queen's seen fit to give you." She raised her palm and gestured toward the line. "I'm attending stag, as they say. If you'd like some conversation while we await our turn in line, I'd be most grateful."

He turned back toward the doors and sighed. "I hoped my admiral would be along, but I suppose I shouldn't block the way for others." Leo joked as the hall's width prevented that possibility.

Captain Meyn smirked. "Indeed." She guided him down the hall toward the security checkpoint; armed personnel ran the waiting guests through a weapons scanner to ensure the safety of the Queen.

"Thank you for the kind company, sir," Leo said as he kept abreast of the captain in approaching the end of the line and taking up their position. "Might I start the conversation with an explanation of your sash and stars? They're quite exquisite."

Meyn glanced down before speaking. "This old thing, sir? You wear the sash of the highest order of knighthood you belong to. In this case, it's for The Most Distinguished Order of the Oak, where I hold the rank of Dame Commander."

Leo blinked. "Then that would make you... *Dame* Stacy?"

She chuckled. "Yes, but in all honesty, I only break out the sash and stars if I'm ordered to, or if they'll impress some boorish flag officer that needs reminding that I'm notable. You can call me Stacy."

"Only if you call me Leo," he replied, breathing a sigh of relief.

Stacy nodded once and then slapped a hand on Leo's shoulder. "Agreed!"

He kept his eyes on her stars. "I take it then that one star is for the Order of the Oak?" Leo could see the Latin writing on the outer edge of the star's design.

The star upon the sash she touched. "This one is. The other is my Leftenancy in the Order of Queen Victoria," she explained, while showing the four-point star in red and white.

As they spoke, the line kept moving at a slow pace. Sometimes, it would stop altogether, as likely someone of import had more than a passing greeting with the monarch. The pause stalled the line before it moved again. All the while, the enlightening conversation prevented Leo's boredom and assuaged his nervousness.

"You mentioned *Proteus* was a frigate. What class is she, if you don't mind the question?"

"The First Naval Lord has ordered that we cooperate with your admiral, so I'm most happy to brag about my command," Meyn could not contain her beaming smile. "She is a Sutherland-class frigate, twenty-two guns, seventy meters, carries two hundred eleven souls on board."

Leo took in the information and smiled. "Sounds like a beautiful ship. I served on Chandley-class frigates my entire time in the Border Service. I loved my time on those ships, though it was cut short due to circumstances outside my control."

"If you there is any opportunity, I'd be honoured to host you for a time on my *Proteus*," she offered. Then, she quickly added, "Should your duty and admiral permit, of course."

He tilted his head and embraced that notion within the second before his reply. "That's a great idea. Y'know, part of our mission *is* cultural and professional exchanges. We've already invited several Royal Naval officers aboard some of our ships on patrol. I think it's critical that both our organizations learn from each other. I've only been on Greenwood for less than a week, and it's been enlightening."

While he spoke, Captain Meyn's expression transformed from sincere interest with a focused gaze to utter amusement as she glanced behind him.

Leo opened his mouth to ask her what was wrong, instead he followed the direction of her eyes as they stared past him. In order to offer the captain his full attention as they continued their animated discussion, he had been facing backward in the line rather than forward. When he turned around, he realized he hadn't paid attention to his place in line.

Dumbfounded, he stared into the dark brown eyes of Amelia, the Sovereign Queen.

The Commander's Memorable Introduction

Westminster Palace
The Royal City of Victoria, The Sovereign Realm of Greenwood
Grand Hall
July 30, 2318 (Stardate 63.48)

"Commander Rainerio Eulalio Verde of Starfleet's Task Force Seventeen," the uniformed attendant said to Queen Amelia as they stared at one another in the receiving line. He noticed Leo did not react or do anything; he stood frozen before the Crown. Clearing his throat loudly, Leo's eyes darted over to him and saw the motion he was making to remind him of the proper courtesy and respect.

Leo's eyes widened in surprise. "Oh! Apologies, Your Majesty." He finally bowed his head and heard Dame Stacy's amused giggle next to him. "It is my honor to meet you, ma'am."

The Queen extended her hand to him in greeting, which Leo lightly gripped and leaned down to apply his lips chastely to the back. She smirked at the act and chuckled. "Erm, it is a pleasure to meet you, Commander," she said in a tight voice as her lips pulled back in an amused grin. "Though, only my subjects kiss my hand. Is it your intention to switch allegiances?"

He released her hand quickly and flushed crimson under her scrutiny. "I, uh... well, no, ma'am. I was told that it was part of the greeting," Leo stammered out. He closed his eyes and remembered Essa's advice. "I only meant-

Amelia giggled and interrupted him with her response. "I know you meant well. Please, do forgive my sense of humour. I rarely meet with foreign dignitaries, but after listening to your lecture today, I felt you might be a kindred spirit in that regard."

"O-Of course, Your Majesty," Leo said, suddenly unable to meet her eyes. "I am at your disposal for any future attempts," he offered, meeting the whimsical stare of her eyes with one of his own. As soon as the words left his mouth, he inwardly admonished himself for trying to be witty.

She tilted her head at his offer, widening her grin. "I shall be mindful of that in the future. Please enjoy yourself this evening. It's our privilege to host such a gifted speaker."

"I look forward to it. Thank you, ma'am," Leo replied, finding his footing after the recovery. He followed the guidance of the other attendant, who guided him further into the palace until he entered a massive ballroom where a long table resided, complete with place settings and place-cards.

He waited for Captain Meyn to find her way into the room after him and when they made eye contact, she could not help but laugh. "Well, Her Majesty definitely shan't forget that greeting. You make an indelible impression, Leo."

Once again, Leo blushed. "I sincerely hope I didn't do any damage to Starfleet's honor."

"I doubt very much that was the case. She is quite the card, herself, as legend has it," Meyn confessed. "I believe you did main-well." Then, she informed him, "She couldn't stop staring after you when you left to come here."

Now, that surprised him, but he hedged. "Well, hopefully not to make a mental note to speak to my admiral after that showing."



To his delight, the placard bearing Leo's name put him in the seat next to Dame Stacy because of the adjacent nature of their ranks. Across from him were the other post-captains of various stripes, but as the pair of fast friends continued their discussion from before his embarrassing episode earlier in the evening, they learned they had much in common.

"What's always been fascinating to me about patrolling territorial borders is that in between the fire-fighting, there's plenty of opportunity to train your crew," Meyn said. "For example, conducting drills every third day after an engagement keeps the gun crews in top condition."

"Ah, well..." Leo said after drawing the cup of tea from his lips. "I've always wanted to learn of why the Royal Navy opts for manual weapon operations when the computer could be programmed to automate that function."

"Oh, there're plenty of functions that the computer could take on as its duty." Meyn leaned back to accept the refilling of her teacup. "Limiting the luxury of computer operations ensures you build proper teamwork within the crew. An officer leads each gun crew and teaches them how to handle management of their resources and personnel. Should that officer be a midshipman, it factors into their preparation to stand for examination."

Leo leaned forward. "Interesting. In Starfleet, a typical midshipman enters at eighteen or older. They train for four years and earn a bachelor's degree and a commission at the first paygrade of their chosen service or branch. The weeks' long examination process is part of their final year."

Meyn flavored her refreshed cup and replied, "All midshipmen in the Royal Navy attend the Academy for two years before they're graduate with a certification that declares them as a midshipman ordinary, then assigned to a ship or shore billet. In those two years, they're trained on the basics. Mostly math starting at various levels, but they all must pass trigonometry in order to seek a berth."

"What about other disciplines? History, leadership philosophy, command ethics?"

"History, yes. Leadership philosophy only at a basic understanding. Command ethics is typically folded into the leadership tract," she explained. "However, I felt I learned more under the direct tutelage of a proper captain aboard a fifth rate. I served there until I passed examination and then they sent me to another ship as a lieutenant."

"Fascinating," Leo replied. "Our ensigns undergo a similar routine of on-the-job training after graduation. Though, not all ensigns will find themselves a starship billet; some are assigned to bases or planets for shore duty."

Meyn nodded while listening. "That is not too dissimilar from our practice. Once graduated from our Naval Academy, they are expected to promote to the training grade of midshipman within the first two years through practical training. Some have obtained promotion within six months depending on their abilities. A passed midshipman wouldn't receive their orders as a commissioned lieutenant until there's a proper billet for them to attain. My own commission was not confirmed until four months after I passed."

"Interesting," Leo said, his tone thoughtful. "I think I'd definitely like to see life aboard a Royal Naval ship while I'm on this assignment."

"How long do you have?"

He sighed. "Six months. My assignment to the task force is a temporary secondment. They will remain here in-system for eighteen months minimum."

"Minimum?"

"Uh, well, the admiral has some latitude to extend the task force's stay, if she deems it necessary."

"I see." Meyn's eyes lit up as she caught sight of someone else. "Leo, would you pardon me? As much as I would rather speak to you, it would be nigh catastrophically impolitic of me not to pay my respects to some of the flag officers before they depart for the evening."

"By all means," he said, rising from his seat. "I should locate the head, myself. If we don't meet up later, please contact me on *Farragut*."

She held out her hand. "Absolutely. It's been a real pleasure to speak with you. You've made what would've been a dull evening most delightful."

"Likewise, Dame Stacy. Hope to hear from you soon." They shook hands, and she left him as the crowd thinned.

The Queen had already left once the desert course completed, escorted by an entourage of people. Everyone stood up briefly out of respect before it felt like the atmosphere thinned considerably without her presence. Leo could see Admiral Essa and Commodore Mogasu with their gold-trimmed dress uniforms standing out in the crowd. He would join them, but biological urgency demanded he tend to other business, first.

He noticed people leaving the Marble Hall and hoped to find a bathroom. With the rising pressure he found himself at the junction leading back to the Great Hall, where a pair of uniformed sentries stood. As he drew nearer, both of them tensed and Leo raised his hands to show his lack of malicious intent. "Sorry to bother you both while you're on duty. I don't suppose I could trouble you for directions to the, uh... damn, you don't call it a restroom, do you? The toilet?"

The guard on the right pointed back the way he came. "Other end of the Hall, left side, last door, sir."

"Thank *you*, sir," Leo said as he continued onward to the right side from the junction. He continued until he came to another pair of sentries guarding an alcove leading beyond; both of them eyeing him in the distance until he drew closer. Once more, he set them at ease with a gesture. "Your colleagues pointed me here for the toilet, and I'm in dire need."

The sentries snapped to attention as softened footfalls approached the alcove.

"Please, Commander," said a feminine soprano voice he had heard once before, "if you're in need, you may walk this way and use my facility."

When he cast a glance back, both guards were bowing their heads at the presence of the Crown standing at the threshold of the alcove to what Leo guessed was the more private area of the palace.

Leo bowed his head as he had before. "Your Majesty. I apologize for the disturbance."

"Not at all," she replied. "I happened nearby and heard your voice. It's rather distinctive."

"I appreciate the offer, but-"

She cut him off with a curt gesture. "But nothing. Follow me, please." She muttered something to the nearest guard, and they stepped clear to grant Leo a clear passage into the wing.

After he moved into the smaller ante-corridor, he followed the Queen as she moved inward to another room and then gestured to a door. "That door, there. Take your time, please. I'm in no hurry to return," she admitted that last in a quieter tone.

He heard her, given the lack of anyone else but the two of them in that room. Leo nodded his thanks and made a beeline for the offered door. He entered and returned after washing his hands like his life depended on it. Leo turned around to close the door with a soft click and then opened his mouth to thank her.

She interrupted him once more. "Do you have other duties this evening, by chance? Is your admiral expecting your return straightaway?"

"Uh, no?" he said softly. Then realizing he left off the respect, he added, "Ma'am."

The Queen waved him off. "I think you've 'ma'am'ed me quite enough for one night, Commander. Given you've just availed yourself of my personal loo, perhaps that earns me a little casual conversation?"

He nodded once. "If... Your Majesty won't find it disrespectful...?"

"Not at all. It would be refreshing to be seen as a *woman* rather than as a sovereign for a few minutes." She added softly, "And I feel as though perhaps someone well outside my circle might afford that?"

He smirked, the nodded again. The longer they spoke, the more he found her alluring. But, as much as he wanted to flirt with the Queen in that moment, he kept his tone respectful and told her, "If you would, please call me Leo, that's my preference."

"Leo," she tried with a toothy grin. "Not 'Rainerio?'"

"No one calls me that, not even my parents."

"Then... might I ask how you came to called 'Leo?'"

He looked down at his hands. "That's... uh... well, I guess I should start with my mother. She and my friends have always called me 'Leo.' Rainerio is my late uncle's name. My middle name comes from my grandfather, Eulalio. In my mother's family, almost all of them adopt a diminutive of their middle name, and so it was an easy jump. The other members of my family call me '*Lalito*.'"

"Interesting. Might I ask what your father, the famous fighting Admiral Rey Verde, calls you?"

Leo did not hide his astonished expression as the Queen admitted she knew who his father was. "He uses *Lalito* when we're amongst company." He added, "In private, he shortens it to '*Lito*.'"

She smiled at that disclosure. "I understand. I'm sure that you're already aware, my given name is Amelia. However, my parents and older brother called me 'Amy' since I could remember."

Leo knew all three perished in the same shuttle flight; a successful assassination of King Edward II, the Queen, and the Crown Prince, carried out by a revolutionary faction seventeen years prior. "I read what happened. I'm very sorry about the loss of your family."

"Thank you," she replied politely. "It happened long ago, but there are days when the memories come rushing back." The Queen settled into a comfortable overstuffed chair in front of a small circular table. Another chair just like it sat across from her. "Could I offer you something to drink while we talk?"

He took the seat as soon as her hand waved over it. "Thank you, but I'm sure I downed two whole pots of tea during the meal, hence my haste for a, uh..." He trailed off, considering his choice of words. He snapped his fingers as he realized. "Water-closet! That's the term I was looking for earlier."

"I saw you were well-engaged in conversation with Dame Stacy most of the evening," she said, leaving the question unspoken.

"Oh, well... we just met in the Great Hall. She helped pass the time while we waited to be received."

The memory of their initial meeting played out on both of their faces; hers settled on an amused expression with a twinkle in her eyes, while he blushed once more. "I recall you were so engrossed that you did not realize a queen was waiting on you."

"I am so sorry for that, ma'am. Er-! I mean..." He sighed. "I don't rightly know how to address you..."

She smiled, amused at his obvious discomfort.

He stressed, "I really don't want to end this evening having destroyed a relationship with a sovereign nation. Could you help me out?"

She giggled. "For tonight, Leo... you may call me Amel- no, wait." She looked at her feet briefly. "Would you call me 'Amy?'"

"Of course," he said with a warm smile. "Amy."

Pointing to her ear as though she did not hear him, she asked, "I'm sorry, could I trouble you to say that once more?"

"I said, 'of course... Amy.'" He raised his tone only slightly, under the impression that he did not announce himself properly.

The effects of hearing his deep baritone voice use that name had a visible effect on her demeanor. She closed her eyes. Her dark complexion did well to hide the deep blush she felt surface on her cheeks, ears, and neck. Listening to him addressing the corps of midshipmen earlier in the day caused her to experience an autonomous sensory median response to the smooth timbre. Now that he was sitting a mere meter away, his presence confirmed her earlier reaction.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes closed. "It is gratifying to hear that name, once more. It makes me feel... *seen*."

He chuckled. "Forgive me, but I have a difficult time with the concept of you not being seen."

Amy grinned. "That's because you only know me as 'The Queen.' Capital tee and capital que."

"Very true, but we've only just met this evening, so my experience is severely limited," Leo admitted nervously.

She swallowed a few times before telling him, "I listened to your lecture at the Naval Academy earlier. It seem overly familiar with you it's because your words touched me."

Leo blinked. "I'm... very pleased to hear that... uh, Amy."

"I'm sure you know that the House of Fitzwilliam has a famous lineage. From childhoods, we're taught all about Queen Victoria and hold her in reverence for her accomplishments in founding this Realm. To hear someone from the Federation speak so highly of her felt as though... it felt like... official recognition. It was quite moving."

He picked up the change in Amy's tone as she spoke. Her body language and tone betrayed her emotions, though she kept a tight hold on her facial expression. He told her, "My mission here is to strengthen the bonds of a common lineage between the Federation and the Realm. I accomplished that by calling attention to Queen Victoria's achievements in her time as a Starfleet officer and as founder and monarch of the Realm."

"Thank you," she said earnestly.

He nodded. "You're quite welcome. Though, I will admit it was a rush job."

"I'm not sure what you mean by a 'rush job.'"

Leo smirked. "I had little more than a day to write that lecture. I had to do a lot of research of our own records and Dame Laura granted me access to the Academy library system so I could source information."

"However the means, you did most admirably."

"Thank you... um, Amy." He turned his head to look around the private study and missed her reaction once more to his use of her nickname. "I hope you don't find this question rude, but am I keeping you from the banquet or other duties?"

She shook her head. "Sir Robert will come find me if there's something I need to attend to. For the moment, my intention is to speak with you without the trappings of pomp and protocol."

"I see. Who is Sir Robert?"

"My private secretary. He ensures everything runs smoothly."

Leo lifted his chin and said, "Ah. I have someone similar working for me back on Starbase Eight. He's a lieutenant named Barzel Timel, and he's very efficient. My office runs like a Swiss watch thanks to him."

"Fascinating," she said. After a short pause, she glided closer to him and in a quieter, almost conspiratorial tone, she asked, "Can I tell you something?"

Leo grinned. "Amy, you can tell me anything you like, as long as you're not divulging state secrets."

Despite his permission, she hesitated briefly, giving in to her insecurities. Finally, she said, "I love listening to you speak. That was the real reason I dragged you away from the banquet. I listened to your lecture twice today. You could read from a boring technical manual and I would still be captivated."

He blushed deeply under her admission, but felt he could not look away from her gaze. Under the sudden realization that she continued to give him her full attention, Leo blinked a few times and felt the heat of his face. "I... uh... um... is it getting hot in here?"

"The palace's private apartments are climate controlled," Amy said with lopsided grin. "You should know that I meant every word."

Leo recovered enough to give her a grin, locate his composure, and lean into his experience in court. "Well, I-I'm pleased to hear that. In my profession, to hold a jury's attention is a tool necessary to a successful attorney; in or out of Starfleet."

"If I'm honest, I sit here and I feel as though I've known you forever," she told him. "I must admit to being a little bewit-"

Her words were pre-empted by a courtesy knock at the door before it opened and in walked the aforementioned Sir Robert. "Majesty, your guests are awaiting your return to the ballroom." The private secretary locked eyes with Leo briefly before casting his glance downward out of respect to the Crown.

Amy sighed. "Of course. I shall return presently. Thank you, Sir Robert."

The older gentleman nodded his compliance. "Might I escort your guest back to the ballroom in advance of your return, ma'am?"

Leo rose from the chair. "Leo Verde, sir," he introduced himself. "My apologies for monopolizing the Queen's time. She did me a personal service, and I felt it was the least I could do to indulge her request for conversation." He turned to Amy before she could speak and winked. "My eternal thanks for your hospitality, Your Majesty."

Her face fell as he returned to calling her by title. "Thank you for you allowing me to show my gratitude for your thoughtful lecture today, Commander." Queen Amelia nodded to Sir Robert. "Thank you, Sir Robert, for showing him the way."

"Ma'am," Sir Robert replied, bowing his head. He raised an arm and gestured to the door, "After you, Commander."

Leo followed suit and bowed his head in the same fashion, recalling a modicum of protocol in retreating backwards. Once he was appropriately removed from her immediate presence, he turned on his heels and preceded Sir Robert out of the study.

Once beyond the door, Sir Robert closed the door, then turned to shoot Leo a tight smile. "Commander, if you will follow me, please?"

As they walked back the same way she led him in, Leo offered, "If I erred, Sir Robert, my sincere apologies."

The gentleman did not turn his head, instead intoning, "Not at all, Commander. Her Majesty merely used you as an excuse to hide herself from the tiring nature of public events such as this. However, she appeared to be in good spirits, so I imagine your discussion with her was uplifting."

"I found it rather... enlightening," he said as they turned the corner to the main chamber. "Certainly not how I envisioned the evening would progress when I first arrived."

"It should go without saying that if she mentioned or spoke on any subject that might compromise her status as Monarch, she has your full and *unyielding* confidence," Sir Robert cautioned him.

Leo confirmed with a nod. "Yes, sir."

They paused before making the final turn back out into the Marble Hall, where the attendees spilled out of the ballroom and made use of the many benches and chairs there for their use. Leo spotted the maroon uniforms and recognized Essa and Mogasu.

Sir Robert held his hand to touch Leo's shoulder. "I hope you will be mindful of Her Majesty's position in the future and understand that the Queen's kindness expressed her feelings toward your words earlier today, and *nothing more*."

Leo's affable smile disappeared, replaced with a serious expression. He assured him with equal timbre, "Sir Robert, I give you my word as a Starfleet officer that I shall not take advantage of the Queen."

That mollified the man, who nodded with satisfaction. "On your word, then, sir." Sir Robert added, "I make no apologies for my protection of Her Majesty. It is my duty. I shall ensure no harm comes to her, by any means necessary."

With an offered hand, Leo replied, "Then the measure of your loyalty to Her Majesty is reflected in the quality of her leadership, Sir Robert."

After releasing the handshake, an unimpressed Sir Robert gestured to the Marble Hall.

"As we now understand one another, please enjoy the rest of tonight's entertainment, Commander. Good evening."

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