

The First Rule of Command

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The First Rule of Command

by [Pixie](#)

Summary

Katrina Cornwell allows herself to become involved in a cover-up of a Starfleet Academy accident that cost the life of one of her friends.

A retelling of the TNG episode "The First Duty" with my favorite Academy Era Disco Foursome.

Notes

Some dialogue is taken directly from the episode, written by Ronald D. Moore and Naren Shankar.

Commodore Paris was introduced in *Star Trek: Beyond*, played by Shohreh Aghdashloo. Fandom gave her the first name "Afsenah".

Lorca places his hands on her shoulders, to steady and offer support. "The inquiry is scheduled for fifteen hundred hours. Are you ready?"

She pulls her lips in over her teeth, but nods. "I think so."

He gives her shoulders a squeeze. "Don't worry about it, Kat. Everything's going to be all right so long as we stick together."

Gabriel raises his glass to the sky full of stars. "To Nova Squadron!"

"To Nova Squadron," the team echoes, four glasses meeting his in the middle. They clink and bring the tumblers to their lips. Gabriel and Afsenah both drain their drinks in one gulp. Philippa raises an eyebrow in their direction as she sips. Katrina lowers her drink after a quick taste, attention focused on Josh, slowly swirling the rum in his glass.

"What's wrong?"

"Hm? Nothing."

He blushes as the other three all glance his way.

"Nothing! I... I'm just nervous."

"There's nothing to be nervous about." Gabriel slaps him on the back in an attempt at encouragement. Josh coughs into his cup. Katrina touches a hand to his arm.

"You did great in the sim, Josh."

He meets her eyes. *The sim is safe*, he wants to tell her, *the sim is fake*, and *it still caused a stomach ache*.

Gabriel snaps his fingers, the sharp noise causes both to jump. "I know what you need." He fills Josh's barely touched glass to the brim.

"What are you—"

Gabriel raises a hand, his pointer finger wagging, *no*. "Drink."

Josh takes a sip. Gabriel motions for him to keep going. Josh sips again, Gabriel motions again. Josh takes a deep breath and drains the glass. Gabriel flashes a wolfish grin, spins in place, and holds his hand out to the nervous cadet.

"Let's dance."

Josh blinks. "What?"

Gabriel nods to the portable corder on the sand, playing music low. "Turn it up." Kat does as requested, boosting the power so it fills their corner of the otherwise empty beach.

"Come on," Gabriel says, shortly, now waving his hand at Josh, crouched awkwardly on the sand.

Josh stares. At Gabriel, at Katrina beside him, at Philippa and Afsaneh, sharing a look behind them. He blushes and shakes his head. Gabriel shrugs and offers his hand to Kat, who lets him pull her up. They dance, barefoot, in the low light of a half moon, his hands on her waist as she spins in time to the song.

Afsaneh pours herself another glass. "Tell me a secret."

Philippa scrunches her nose. "I don't have any secrets."

Her companion raises an eyebrow. "Everyone has secrets." Pippa shrugs, self-conscious, in the low light of the fire.

"Alright. Tell me a truth." She swirls her drink before taking a sip. "Are you in love with her?"

Pippa frowns. Afsaneh slowly rolls her head to indicate Katrina, now curled into Gabriel's arms, the two swaying along to the music and waves as Josh watches, eyes yearning, a few steps away.

"No?"

"Is it a question?" she asks, smiling over her glass.

Philippa rolls her eyes. "I'm not in love with her."

"Are you in love with him?"

It doesn't even warrant an eyeroll, just a look of candid disdain. Afsaneh giggles. Pippa narrows her eyes.

"Why?"

She takes another sip. "You seem agitated."

Pippa shrugs again and shakes out her hair. "I have a lot of energy."

It was a long day practicing in simulators, going through the steps again and again until it was second nature. Until they all moved as one. Invigorating in some ways—certainly Gabe and Afsaneh and even Kat seem energized—but Josh is jumpy and Pippa, too, if hers is more based in anticipation than anxiety. Maybe that isn't so different from the others. Gabe and Kat certainly seem to be anticipating something. Maybe they have the right idea.

"Do you want to dance?" Afsaneh asks, seemingly reading her mind. Philippa responds by drawing her into a kiss and pushing her playfully down onto the blanket. She likes to start with dessert.

On the beach, Gabriel spins a laughing Katrina into Josh's arms. He turns red as he falters, and nearly trips into the fire. Kat drops her arms around his shoulders and leans up to kiss his flushed cheek. Gabriel approaches his other side and steps close to whisper. "Don't worry about it, Josh. Everything's going to be all right."

"At this point, we accelerated and executed a starboard turn of twenty seven degrees. We came out of the turn on course for Titan." Lorca stands, hands clasped behind his back, at the far right of the table in the middle of the room. Cornwell, Georgiou, and Paris are seated to his left.

"And you were still in the lead position?"

"Yes, sir," he tells the Admiral conducting the inquiry.

"Continue."

They wake up in a pile at sunrise, feeling rested and rejuvenated, despite the rum, the lumpy beach, and the late, late night activities.

"Salt air is good for the soul," quips Pippa, as she stretches like a cat and shakes the sand out of her hair. Kat passes everyone a juice and a breakfast bar. Josh walks along the drift line looking for a shell to bring home, in memory of their time on the beach.

They leave before 08:00, shower and change at the Academy flight school. Everything from prep to the journey to Jupiter Station goes as smoothly as possible. Pippa and Afsaneh sit in the back of the shuttle, chattering with their heads together. Kat studies for an exam in one of the many courses she takes separately from the other four. Gabriel sits beside her, dozing, one hand resting on her knee. Josh sits opposite, eyes focused out the window, sublight travel still magical after all this time. They arrive in orbit with time to spare, but head to the flight deck immediately. They're ready to go and fortune is smiling on them.

Then everything changes.

"As we entered Titan's gravitational sphere, I gave the signal to tighten up and move into a diamond slot formation. Remaining in the diamond formation, we executed a low apogee turn around Titan then began a z-plus twenty five degree climb in preparation for a Yeager loop." Lorca addresses the room in a clear voice. Matter of fact. "Approximately nine seconds later, Cadet Albert's ship collided with Cadet Georgiou's. We had less than two seconds to activate our emergency transporters and beam to the evac stations at Mimas. Everyone made it except Josh."

"Thank you, Mister Lorca." He sits. "Cadet Georgiou." She stands.

"As team navigator, you filed a flight plan with the Academy Range Officer before the exercise. Correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Nova Squadron deviate from that flight plan after you entered the Saturn range?"

"No, sir." She doesn't hesitate.

"Then how do you explain the fact that the low apogee turn around Titan was at least two thousand kilometers closer to the moon than indicated in your plan?"

Georgiou's eyes darken. "We were still within flight safety parameters, sir."

"That was not my question, Cadet."

"Remember to hug the moon." They go over the plan one final time on the turbolift to the flight deck. "We don't want to be recorded."

"Because we're going outside the authorized flight plan and breaking at least four regulations?" Pippa posits.

Gabriel touches a finger to his lips. "Because we don't want to ruin the surprise."

"Four regulations?" Josh asks, slightly pale around the eyes.

"No one will care," Gabriel assures him. "They'll be too dazzled by the show."

Philippa and Afsaneh share a look. Gabriel lives his life as if rules don't apply to him. The annoying thing is how often everyone goes along with it.

The lift doors open and the five file out towards their ships.

Georgiou takes a breath.

"We had discussed changing our approach after I filed the flight plan," she explains. "The final decision was made en route to Saturn." She turns toward the Admiral's table for the first time. "I didn't consider it significant enough to mention here. I apologize for the confusion, sir. I should have been more precise."

The Admiral nods. "Did you see Mister Albert's ship break formation before it collided with your ship?"

"No, sir." She lowers her eyes. "My first indications of trouble was when my proximity alarm went off."

"You may be seated." Georgiou sits as the Admiral addresses the others. "Did any of you see the collision take place?"

"No, sir," Lorca answers for them.

The second Admiral, a Vulcan, leans forward. "Cadet Paris, you were in the tail position."

"Yes, sir."

"You should have seen any sign of trouble from Cadet Albert. Yet, you saw nothing?"

Gabriel makes a point to clap each of them on the shoulder before heading to his ship. Kat last, and he brushes her lips with a quick kiss.

"Are they...?" Josh asks Afsaneh.

All five have been close from the beginning, but they date, or whatever Gabe does that passes for dating, outside the group. Because they are *too* close, she thinks. "They're them," she answers with a small smile. She hopes his crush, on whichever one it is, doesn't cause him too much pain. She's not sure Gabriel and Katrina will ever be together, but she's near certain they'll never be apart. "Good luck, Josh."

He gives her a salute and climbs into his cockpit.

It's the last time she sees him.

"That is correct, sir."

The Admiral's eyes narrow. "Did your attention falter?"

"No, sir." She raises her chin, resolute. "Everything happened so fast, sir."

Gabriel gives the order to switch from diamond formation to circle, the first step in the Koolvord Starburst, a maneuver never completed in competition before being banned by the Academy, deemed too dangerous when a third attempt killed an entire team. The five ships move into position as one, exactly as they had in the simulation.

On my mark, Gabriel's voice fills her cockpit. Afsaneh tightens her hands on the throttle. *Three, two, mark*. She accelerates into the turn, flipping the ship toward the center and the other four fighters. Josh is a split second off the pace. That's all it takes.

"What *do* you recall cadet? What was Cadet Albert's orientation?"

"I don't know, sir," she lies. Josh's plane, upside down as it collides into Pippa's and both explode is seared into her memory forever.

"You were flying a ship, traveling eighty thousand KPH, with Cadet Albert's ship less than ten meters away... and you don't know what his orientation was?"

She stares ahead, shoulders squared, unblinking. "I don't remember, sir."

Lorca stands. "Sir, may I?"

"Go ahead." She waves a hand. Paris sits as all eyes turn to Lorca.

"Admiral, Josh was a good pilot but lately he'd been having difficulties. He'd get nervous during close fly-bys and pull away in the final seconds. His formation flying was a little erratic."

A quiet stir goes through the room.

"And you didn't report this to anyone?"

"No, sir, I didn't." He glances at the others briefly. "We'd flown together a long time. I thought he could handle it if I gave him a chance. I was wrong."

"Then you are saying that the accident was Cadet Albert's fault?" the Vulcan asks.

Lorca takes a breath. "I think Josh got frightened and tried to pull out of the turn prematurely, and then crashed into Cadet Georgiou. Josh was our friend. We didn't want him to be remembered as someone who panicked."

The Admirals share a look. "Please be seated." Lorca sits as the Admiral folds her hands on the table. "I'm very disturbed by what I've heard here today. By your own admission, you allowed your teammate to fly when you knew he was having difficulties maintaining formation. That demonstrates a serious lack of judgment."

Lorca brushes his fingers against Cornwell's, on the table beside him. Georgiou looks at the floor. Paris continues to stare straight ahead.

"I am also disturbed by the fact that you did not come forward with this information immediately. We should have the first data from Ms. Cornwell's flight recorder tonight. We will reconvene at thirteen hundred hours tomorrow."

As the Admirals and spectators file out of the room, Gabriel closes his hand over Katrina's. "Everything's fine. Trust me."

She wakes to a shooting pain in her right arm.

"Kat."

She looks up at the voice, meets Gabriel's eyes, wide with concern and affection.

"What..."

"We crashed," he tells her.

She nods. She remembers. "Are you hurt?"

"Scratches," he dismisses, but the hand stroking her cheek is bandaged and there's a burn over his eye.

"The others?"

"Pippa and Afsaneh are fine."

He nods to the biobed next to hers. Afsaneh's arm is draped over Philippa's shoulders, holding her close as she blinks at tears. Katrina frowns.

"...Josh?"

Gabriel meets her eyes, his own full of pain. "He didn't make it."

"You shouldn't have said it, Gabe." Pippa glares over crossed arms. "Josh wasn't responsible for what happened."

"I had to do something," he argues.

"You said we wouldn't have to lie to them." Kat clutches at her sides as if she's freezing, as if it's all she can do to hold together. "We all agreed not to lie to them."

"I didn't lie." He meets her eyes. "Everything I said was the truth."

"The accident was not Josh's fault," Pippa repeats.

Gabriel shakes his head. "Look, he was my friend too. I worked to get him on this team. But the truth is, he panicked."

"We don't know that," Pippa counters.

"Of course we do!" he shouts. She turns away in anger. "None of us has wanted to say it out loud, but we've all had the same thought. Haven't we?"

He looks at each in turn. Pippa stares at the floor in frustration. Kat pulls her lips in over her teeth. Afsaneh is quietly watching, and nods in response.

"He pulled away too soon," she murmurs. "I think he got scared."

Gabriel moves closer to Kat, still closed in on herself, like a fan, and places a hand on her shoulder.

"We have to look out for ourselves now." He holds up a small disc. "This is the preliminary report from your flight recorder. It was so badly damaged in the crash, that the lab could only retrieve a third of the total telemetry on the recorder." He nods to include Afsaneh and Pippa as they step closer, too. "And all of it is before the collision. There's no problem here."

Kat raises her eyes to his. "I don't know if I can do this."

"You don't have to lie," Afsaneh consoles, "Just don't volunteer any new information."

Gabriel nods. "We made a promise to each other right in the beginning, that we'd stick together." He looks at Pippa's still angry eyes. "We were Nova Squadron. Nobody else could say that. And even after we graduated, we'd try to get posted to the same duty." His voice is husky with emotion, and he briefly looks at the floor. "We were going to be a team for a long time." He raises his eyes to each of the other three in turn. "Josh can't be a part of those plans anymore, but I think he would still want us to be a team. What do you think?"

"What are we going to tell them?" Kat asks in a low, worried, voice.

"The truth," Pippa responds.

Afsaneh frowns. "We'll be kicked out. If not prosecuted."

"We tell them what happened," Gabriel answers. "We were practicing and we crashed."

Afsaneh nods. Kat bites her lip.

"It was an accident," Gabriel continues. "It was a terrible accident."

"Are you ready, Ms. Cornwell?"

"Yes, sir." The Admiral nods for the recording to begin. "This is the beginning of our run toward Titan," she narrates the action. "I'm on the right wing."

"Where is Mister Albert at this point?"

"He was on my port quarter, approximately fifty meters away. We've just received the signal to begin the diamond slot formation." She nods at

the screen. "That's Cadet Lorca coming into view. We're in a twenty degree turn around Titan. We should be coming out of Titan's gravity well about now."

The recording turns suddenly to static and then goes black. The Vulcan Admiral nods.

"That is the extent of the data we were able to recover from the flight recorder. Ms. Cornwell, would you describe what happened after you left orbit of Titan?"

She nods. "Once we cleared the moon, Mister Lorca led us into a Yeager loop. Approximately nine seconds later, my proximity alarm went off. I tried to veer away, but it was too late and I was hit. I lost control of my ship." She takes a quick breath. "A power coupling exploded in my cockpit. I don't know how, but I managed to activate my escape transporter, and the next thing I remember is finding myself on the emergency evac station on Mimas with the rest of the squadron." Another breath. "Except Josh."

"Do you have anything to add to your testimony?"

She swallows. "No, sir."

The Admiral holds a hand up to her colleague. "Would you care to comment on Mr. Albert's frame of mind?"

Cornwell frowns. "Sir?"

"You're a medical student, are you not? Psychiatry?"

The frown deepens. "Yes, sir."

"Would you care to comment on Mr. Albert's frame of mind?"

Cornwell's eyes flicker around the room. Her chest feels tight. "I would prefer not to, sir."

The Admiral purses her lips. "I understand he's your friend, but we need to know what happened."

"Josh... Cadet Albert was..." She meets Lorca's eyes and takes another breath. "He panicked, sir." She turns back to the Admirals, continuing in a clear, if shaky, voice. "He was anxious the night before. I thought we'd..." She flashes back to dancing, kissing his cheek, letting him pull her top over her head. "He seemed okay in the morning. I thought he was ready." Her eyes are full of tears she refuses to let fall. "But I was wrong. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"He has a crush on you."

Kat glances to Josh, sleeping peacefully on the blanket about four feet away, one hand outstretched toward them. Toward her. "He's sweet," she murmurs, turning back to Gabriel. "But I don't have time for that."

"Mmmhmm," he answers, drawing a finger down her bare stomach.

She smiles. "He seems the type to fall in love," she whispers, then his fingers find their destination and all thoughts of Josh fly out of her head.

His hands press into her shoulders. "Katrina, we have to hang on just a little longer, then this will all be over."

She shakes her head and pushes away. "I feel sick." She steps out of reach and pulls at her collar. The uniform feels too tight. Everything feels too tight. "Please, I need." She holds out a hand to stop them following her. "I can't breathe, I need a minute. I need space." She walks away to a bench and sits with her head between her knees.

Pippa rounds on Gabe as soon as she's out of earshot. "This is wrong."

"We agreed—"

"I don't care!" she seethes through her teeth. "Kat's on record lying. In a medical capacity. If anyone finds out, she's the one who goes down."

Gabriel's eyes flash. "I would never let that happen. Not to her. Not to any of you."

She shakes her head. It's not good enough. He's not all powerful, can't control everything no matter how hard he tries. "If we come forward together—" she starts.

"We don't want to come forward," he interrupts, angry. "You don't get to make the decision for the rest of us."

"But you do?" she spits.

"We *agreed*," he states again. "All of us. If you can't live with it, withdraw and walk away." He waves a hand in the general direction of the Academy building behind them, where the inquiry is taking place. "Don't drag us along with you."

He stomps away after Katrina, sits beside her on the bench. Pippa and Afsaneh watch as he says something they can't hear and pulls her into his arms.

"He's right," Afsaneh offers, quietly.

Pippa's eyes go wide. "How can you say that?"

"The first rule of command." Pippa shakes her head, confused, and tired. "Risk assessment."

"Risk... Josh *died*." Why is this happening, these are her best friends.

Afsaneh nods with sorrowful eyes. "Josh knew the risks."

"Did he?"

"I believe he did. But it also doesn't matter."

Pippa starts to walk away in anger. Afsaneh reaches for her arm to keep her close.

"You can't save him," she says, quiet, forthright. "But we're still here." She nods to the couple on the bench. "If you're worried about her, protect her."

"We have a duty to the truth."

Afsaneh squares her shoulders. "The truth is we are Nova Squadron for a reason. Gabriel is a born leader. Katrina is the smartest person I've ever met. Your insights never cease to amaze me. And I intend to make my family proud."

Pippa shakes her head. "By lying?"

"By living my best life." Her eyes are bright, clear, and unafraid. "This accident can ruin five lives, or one."

Pippa looks at the ground, sighing. The wind is quiet, and the sun is blinding, but she feels cold. Afsaneh squeezes her arm, once, and lets go.

"Whatever you choose, I will support you."

Pippa nods and walks back inside the building.

"If no further evidence is presented, I have no choice but to close this investigation."

The Admiral waits a beat, but the four cadets are quiet.

"For filing an inaccurate flight plan, and for allowing Cadet Albert to fly when you knew he was having difficulties, I am ordering a formal reprimand placed on each of your permanent records." Cornwell bites her lip. "I am also revoking your flight privileges for one year." Paris closes her eyes. Georgiou's hands flutter. "This inquiry is closed."

The Admiral hits a bell and the room slowly empties.

As one the four cadets grasp hands under the table.

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