

Milk Run

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by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

Season One, Episode Four of Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead

Stardate 43239.47: Following the return of *Farragut* from deep within the Beta Quadrant, Starfleet Command assigns an investigator from the Inspector General's office to determine whether charges should be brought against Captain Leone for her actions during that time. Due to the investigation, Rear Admiral T'Ciryra pulls the ship from border duty as it was originally intended. Meanwhile, the missing members of the crew board *Farragut* from Starbase 310, including Commander Jesse Kincaid, the new executive officer.

Notes

This story was originally published on 26 February 2009, at the original Ad Astra site, under a different name than my current nom-de-plume.

The events of this episode take place between the events of Star Trek: The Next Generation's third season episodes, "Booby Trap" and "The Enemy."

Teaser

Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead

by Lord McCovey Cove and A.J. Gertner

Episode Four: Milk Run

Starbase 310
Near the Cardassian Border
Stardate 43239.47
Observation Deck

FSA Cover #2



With its proximity to the Cardassian border, Starbase 310 served as the way station for civilian and military traffic to all the colony worlds within the sector. The Border Patrol ships operating nearby also used it as either their home port or a port of call. Out here on the frontier, folks were a little more apt to pull out their weapon than to ask questions. The type-two phaser sidearms of all the security officers patrolling the starbase made that absolutely clear to everyone visiting.

Commander Jesse Kincaid folded his arms as he stood on the large observation deck of the starbase, watching the ships dance in a traffic pattern around the station. Since his arrival nearly two weeks ago, he waited for the day that his ship would come in with patience and composure, in spite of the opposing feelings he felt bubbling up inside of him.

How could a ship get lost like that? What the hell kind of captain lets something like that happen aboard her ship? He had not yet met Captain Leone, but he knew that she must be one hell of a captain to earn a captaincy in under fifteen years' service in Starfleet. He had only thirteen years' service and barely made commander less than a year ago, while serving aboard *Valdemar*.

Scuttlebutt on Leone was she'd been born into Starfleet wearing admiral's pips on her collar. Her mother held the rank of vice admiral and considered most of the admiralty family, if not close friends. His appointment as *Farragut's* new executive officer would not be without its opportunities, but also a hell of a lot of pitfalls if he should run afoul of a well-connected captain like Krystine Leone.

A soft, feminine tone brought him out of his thoughts. "Commander Kincaid?"

"Yes?" he turned to look at a strikingly beautiful Starfleet officer wearing a tight, wine red jumpsuit over a lithe, but curvy form. "Lieutenant Commander...?"

"Tricia Hargreaves," she replied with a smile. She offered a pale-skinned hand to him, which he accepted lightly to shake it twice before releasing it. "A pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Likewise, I'm sure." Something about her did not sit well with him, in spite of her curled brown hair and deep blue eyes. "Is there something I can do for you?"

Hargreaves shook her head. "No, sir. I just wanted to come down and introduce myself to you. I'm also waiting for *Farragut* to arrive."

Strange. He didn't recall seeing the name Hargreaves on the list of senior officers serving aboard ship. Certainly, a lieutenant commander would warrant a division officer's position, if not at least a department head. "Forgive me, Commander, if I seem a little confused. Are you also part of the crew?"

"No," she said strongly, almost blanching at the suggestion. "No, sir, I'll just be a passenger for a while."

Kincaid offered no response to that, at first. He tried to read her and failed. She offered him nothing but a pleasant smile and eyes that hid her true intentions from view. "I take it you wanted to introduce yourself to me, because...?"

"I thought it was the kind thing to do, to meet my future beneficiary."

That was a hell of a thing to say. "I beg your pardon?"

She did not say anything to that. Instead, Hargreaves' gaze moved away from him and out toward the stars. "How well do you know Captain Leone, sir?"

"Not very well," he said, honestly. "I was selected by subspace communication. And you, Commander?"

"Oh, I know her very well, sir... *very* well."

Kincaid decided to probe her for a little more information. "I hear she's quite an officer."

Hargreaves' smile lessened only slightly, but enough for him to notice it. "If you say so, sir."

"I take it from your tone, Commander, that you don't like her very much?"

"Far be it for me to speak out of turn about a superior officer, sir."

With a wave of his hand, he affected as magnanimous an air as he could muster, "Consider this permission to speak freely, then. You can start by telling me what you meant by calling me your beneficiary."

Hargreaves winced under his direct scrutiny. "I only meant, sir, that Captain Leone's days in command are numbered. You'll most likely

assume command by the end of my trip."

He chuckled. "Is that so? You planning on staging a mutiny while you're aboard?"

She shook her head and continued to smile. In spite of that smile, she spoke to him seriously, "No, sir. I'm an investigator with the Inspector General's office. I suspect that the moment I file my report, Starfleet Command will have no choice but to relieve her of her command and take her into custody."

Act One

Lieutenant Wilson Nieves grinned. "Thirty-five."

"Crap, I only had twenty," said Lieutenant (jg) Gregory Aspinall in disgust.

"Forty-two," said Lieutenant Petra Bartlet gleefully.

"Forty-seven," added Doctor Sovera.

"Sixty-one," Lieutenant Commander Ariel Elannis said proudly. "Pay up."

Greg shook his head. "What about the captain?"

Ariel frowned. "The captain doesn't count."

"I'm sure she'll think differently," replied Sovera. "After all, this is quite a considerable pool you've generated."

Wilson agreed with a nod.

Ariel considered this briefly, then replied with a pout on her lips. "Fine, but if she trumps sixty-one, then I'm going to scream foul."

"She's going to trump that, guaranteed. She has all ours plus hers."

"That's why I say she doesn't count."

The doors to the observation lounge parted to admit Captain Krystine Leone, who took her customary seat on the side of the table, rather than at the head of it. "Good morning, everyone. We're all set for arrival, I trust?"

With the exception of Sovera, all the other officers fixed a pointed glare at Ariel.

Leone picked up on it instantly, choosing to join them in their scrutiny of her acting executive officer. "Ariel? Something going on?"

Ariel scratched at her neck, looking away from the senior staff and muttering, "Not really."

"Commander," said Wilson sharply.

"All right," she hissed at him quickly. To Leone, she explained, "We've formed a little pool to find out how many questions were transmitted by Starfleet Intelligence upon each of our mission reports."

A slow smile spread on the captain's lips as Ariel spoke. Her tone casual, Leone asked, "Who won?"

"Right now, Ariel has the lead," offered Wilson helpfully. "However, we were waiting on your arrival to determine if she is the winner or not."

Leone arched her eyebrows in the Vulcan's direction. "Sovera, I can't believe that you've consented to gamble."

The doctor inclined her head. "I found the commander's proposition to be logical. Gambling is not without its merit."

Greg snorted.

Everyone turned to look at him.

"What?" he asked with a shrug. "I just find it funny to hear that coming from a Vulcan."

"If you got Sovera to gamble, it must be something worth gambling for," noted Leone. "What's the prize?"

The officers all looked at one another, as though they shared an unspoken conversation. With a pointed glare from Wilson, Ariel relented, "The prize isn't money, per se... and I want to note that I don't condone slavery, but the prize was a set number of hours of work in winner's respective department."

As the Federation didn't pay Starfleet officers, Leone often found herself impressed by the modest economy that emerged on starships. In this case, it seems time was the commodity of choice. "I see," said the captain. "In that case, I believe that I'm the winner and you're all the losers. Since my department is this ship, you're all to give me those hours in the course of your duties."

Wilson let out a held breath. "Oh, thank God! I didn't want to have to be at Ariel's beck and call for eight hours."

"Indeed," said Sovera with a nod. "Although I would have greatly benefited from assistance in my laboratory."

Greg's face contorted into an expression of distaste. "No offense, Doctor, but I'm glad you didn't win."

"I'm sorry to spoil your fun," replied Leone, "but we're docking at Starbase 310 in a few moments and I wanted to get you all in the same room to discuss a few things before we take on the rest of our crew."

The jovial atmosphere within the observation lounge vanished as the captain brought some official business to the table.

"First, I'm making a change to the senior staff. I've already sent word by subspace to Lieutenant Hunter that his services will no longer be

required," said Leone as she settled her gaze upon their acting security chief. "Ariel's made it clear that I would be blind not to realize what an asset you were to us this last week, Wilson. If you want it, the job is yours."

Wilson nodded as soon as she stopped speaking. "Absolutely, sir. Thank you!"

"No, Wilson... thank *you*. You might not have been my first choice, but you are the correct one."

Greg placed a hand on Wilson's back as he spoke with conviction, "I won't let you down, sir."

Leone smiled. "I know you won't. Your transfer is made permanent, effective immediately."

"Congratulations, Willie," Ariel said with a wink.

Wilson chuckled. "Thank you, Commander."

"Now that the good news is out of the way, here's some not-so-good news," said the captain. "As you're aware, the means of our return may have skirted a few violations of Starfleet regulations. Namely, the Prime Directive. As all of our official after-action reports required so many additional queries by Starfleet Intelligence, I have been informed that the Office of the Inspector General of Starfleet has directed one of its officers to come aboard as soon as we dock."

Ariel narrowed her eyes at the news. "You can count on us to protect you, sir."

"No, that's not what I'm asking, Ariel. I want to make it clear to all of you that you are ordered to cooperate with the investigating officer completely," she said quietly. "If I find out that you lied to protect me, then you'll find yourself with a transfer order off my ship. And that'll be the last time we speak to each other."

Everyone seemed surprised by the vehemence of the ultimatum, with the natural exception of Sovera.

Leone continued, "If there are charges to bring against this crew, it needs to be clear that I will answer for them."

"We followed your orders, Captain," said Greg as his hand came to lay flat against the table, almost reaching out for her. "You're not alone."

The captain smiled softly at him. "Thank you, Greg, but the only thing I want to hear from you is acknowledgment of my order." She turned to look at everyone. "From everyone at this table, in fact."

One by one, each officer complied with the order, albeit reluctantly.

Except Ariel. She sat within the chair, staring out at the stars rather than look at her friend.

"Ariel?" prompted Leone.

Ariel still said nothing. Her gaze never left the viewports.

"Ariel," Leone tried again in a sterner tone.

"Krys..." replied Ariel with a shake of her head.

The captain frowned. "Commander Elannis, I require you to acknowledge my order."

Ariel looked as though she'd be slapped by Leone's stern tone. "Captain," she said finally, "I cannot, in good conscience, obey your order."

Leone sighed, defeated. Silence hung within the lounge for long moments as the assembled senior staff traded looks of awkwardness with one another. The captain rose from her seat, seeing the expression of sincerity upon Ariel's face, and did not try to press her order any further. Instead, she left the room with a single word.

"Dismissed."

"What're you working on?" asked Ensign Yvonne Colby, as she tried to read over the shoulder of Ensign Iris Wu. Yvonne finished her shift within the ship's armory, cataloguing the arsenal of weapons for the now-permanent chief of security, Lieutenant Nieves. *Farragut* docked with Starbase 310 an hour ago and already new faces began to show up within the ship's lounge within the forward section of deck ten.

Iris looked up from her table with a grin. "Post-Academy qualifications. I've already completed the first assignment."

Yvonne wrinkled her nose as she took the seat to the left of her. "Qualifications? You know, when we graduated from Starfleet Academy, there was this slim hope that they would stop assigning me homework."

"You can take up to two years to finish them."

"And then what happens if you don't? You just remain an ensign forever?"

"No, they take away your commission," said Iris with a smirk.

"No way!"

"Oh, yes. It's in the handbook. Didn't you read it?"

Yvonne turned away from Iris, to hide her blush. "I was a little busy trying to figure out how to damage a ship made out of crystal."

"I was there. I found time."

"Good for you."

"All I'm saying is, if you don't pass all twelve of them within two years, you'll be calling me 'sir' for the rest of your career," Iris said, entering in her responses on the PADD. "If you pass them before that time, you earn your promotion."

"Just like that?"

"Sort of. The captain and the training officer still have to sign off, but unless you end up before the mast, it's nearly automatic."

Yvonne tsked. "I'd better get on the ball, huh?"

"Good morning, ladies," said engineering Ensign Tommy O'Day as he strode confidently toward them from the entrance. "I see we're finally filling in the ranks around here, eh?"

Yvonne rolled her eyes, but Iris gave the young man a wide smile. The latter gestured toward one of the two open chairs surrounding the table. "Would you care to join us, Tommy?"

"Don't mind if I do."

"And how are things down in engineering?"

"Busy. We had at least five new people report to engineering within the last fifteen minutes of my shift," replied Tommy. "I love meeting new people."

"Oh, yeah?" asked Yvonne slyly. "How many of your new people were women?"

Iris stamped her foot. "Yvonne, be nice!"

On the heels of her words, the lounge's ambient noise lessened noticeably as three new officers entered. One of the them was the captain, while the other was a male commander and a female lieutenant commander. All heads turned in their direction as they entered. The trio walked to an empty table in the corner and occupied it quickly.

"Whoa," breathed Yvonne. "If the hunk is our new XO, I think I'm in love."

Iris agreed with a quiet nod, appreciating the commander's form.

Tommy sat back into his chair, folded his arms and frowned.

Krystine Leone was in hell. Across from her, wearing a sweet expression she knew to be thin, was Tricia Hargreaves. "I have had the... uh, fortune... of knowing Tricia from a previous assignment," explained the captain as Kincaid asked the question into their shared background.

Hargreaves feigned failing to recollect. "Oh, yes... it was aboard... which ship *was* that?"

"The last one you served on," Leone reminded with a grin. "*Victory*."

"Right," replied the lieutenant commander, through gritted teeth. "I remember now."

Kincaid watched the mental tennis match between the two officers with a thin smile on his lips. "Well, I would like to get to my duties, sir," he said to Leone. "Should I check in with your acting exec, Commander Elannis?"

"That would be fine," said Leone with a nod. Her eyes never left Hargreaves, as they stared each other down. "She has the bridge, at present. Please let me know when you've caught up on our mission reports, and-"

"Oh, I've already read through them, sir. At least, the parts that have been declassified by Starfleet Intelligence," said Jesse quickly. "If you'd like, I can relieve her right now."

Leone broke off her eye contact with Hargreaves to shoot him an annoyed glance. It softened immediately as the focus of her eyes changed from someone of displeasure to someone who... wasn't. "Very well. Just try to keep in mind that she's been handling that position with outstanding work. I would appreciate it if you would handle her accordingly."

"I'll keep that in mind, sir. By your leave?"

"Of course, Jesse."

Kincaid froze momentarily at being called by his given name. Then again, he knew Leone kept an informal relationship with her officers through some of the scuttlebutt he picked up. The problem was that his reaction to it left him annoyed more than anything else. "Thank you, sir," he nodded. To Hargreaves, "I'll see you later, Commander."

"Commander," Hargreaves said with a slight inclination of her head.

As soon as he left, Leone fixed her gaze on Hargreaves again. "Cut the shit, Trish. Why'd they send you?"

Hargreaves' expression turned icy, as did her tone, "I prefer to be addressed by my rank, if it's all the same to you."

"I asked you a question, *Lieutenant Commander*. Need I remind you of the difference in our rank?"

"Not at all, *Captain*. A reminder is not necessary," she replied, every word laced with her menace.

Leone folded her arms and leaned back against the padded bulkhead. "I'm waiting."

"I am an investigator with the Inspector General's office, Captain. I am the officer assigned to Starbase 310. I was ordered to conduct this investigation."

"I would think, with your history, that you might consider recusing yourself from this assignment."

"To recuse myself would be to deprive myself of giving you some payback with eleven years' interest."

The captain lowered her voice. "I don't believe this." She sighed loudly. "The board of inquiry was pretty clear. You made a mistake. I corrected it."

"And in doing so, you sunk my career as a starship officer. I had to transfer to a staff assignment in order to stay in the service and I ended up being passed over for promotion along with my classmates," hissed Hargreaves, though her tone matched Leone's. "Everyone in my graduating class at Starfleet Academy is either a captain or a commander. I'm the only lieutenant commander left."

Leone narrowed her eyes. "Sometimes, things work out for the best. You were a shitty starship officer."

"Maybe so, Captain. But it's this shitty officer's hands in which your career now rests. And believe you me, you're in the deepest shit imaginable." Hargreaves shoved herself away from the table forcefully. "If I were you, I'd start packing my things. By the time this ship returns to the Starbase, I will see to it personally that you're dragged off of it in disgrace."

As she turned to leave, Leone called out, "Commander Hargreaves?"

Hargreaves turned around, wearing a self-satisfied smile. "You're going to beg me now?"

"Not at all. I was merely going to point out that you did not request my leave before departing my presence," said Leone calmly. "As befits protocol."

The lieutenant commander's expression changed from shock to one of quiet amusement. "Fine. Enjoy it while it lasts, Captain." She nearly curtsied as she asked, "May I have your permission to leave, now, pretty please?"

Captain Leone stepped out from behind the table to stand toe-to-toe with the woman. She smiled for the benefit of the crew looking in their direction and issued her order through clenched teeth. "Get out of my sight, Commander."

Act Two

Lieutenant Abigail A. Atherton stepped through the airlock leading into the USS *Farragut* from the Starbase, along with many others looking to board for one reason or another. Since the ship departed the Antares Ship Yards with a little over a hundred of its crew, over seven hundred people awaited its arrival. She looked down the long line and idly wondered if all seven hundred were now trying to board at the same time.

"I don't think all of them are trying to get on board." The voice came from behind her, one she found to be soft and comforting. Abbie turned and found herself face to face with another lieutenant, also draped in the peacock blue Starfleet uniform.

The other lieutenant gave her a warm smile and stared at her with large, brown eyes beneath the feathery-looking black bangs of her hair. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant. It was just difficult to stand behind you and not hear your thoughts."

"You're Betazoid?" Abbie asked the obvious.

"Isira Otex, the new ship's counselor," replied the smiling woman. Abbie's eyes drifted down to take in the rest of her, and she noticed that unlike most other Betazoids she'd met in her short career, this one pushed the limits of Starfleet medical regulation. Although her face was lean-looking, her body was so generous as to be nearly out of shape.

She accepted the counselor's proffered hand and shook it gingerly. "Pleasure to meet you. I'm Abigail Atherton, science officer."

"But you prefer Abbie, right?"

Having someone read your mind on a whim became unnerving in record time. With a wary tone, Abbie replied, "Yeah."

Isira offered a guilty expression. "Sorry, it's hard to turn it off."

"No, it's fine."

"And lying doesn't help."

Abbie pressed her lips together and regarded Isira with a sidelong glance. "It's difficult to deal with telepaths."

"Just say what's on your mind. And I'll try to filter out the rest."

"So... are you a doctor?"

Isira nodded. "Of Xenopsychology, yes."

Abbie wondered, "Would you prefer to be called 'Doctor?'"

"If you feel more comfortable with that, sure. But my friends call me 'Isira,'" the counselor said while she gave a wry grin. "Otherwise, 'Counselor' will do. I haven't been called 'Doctor' since I graduated from university."

"You joined Starfleet right out of school?"

"Of course. It was either that or set up private practice on Betazed, or teach, I guess."

"I couldn't wait to join, either," admitted Abbie. "I nearly enlisted, but my father talked me into staying in school and getting my degree so I could become an officer."

Isira smiled wistfully. "I'm sorry," she said, reaching out to grab Abbie's arm gently. "How long ago?"

"Almost a month, now," replied Abbie without thinking, shrugging off the woman's touch. "I was an only child and he was beginning to show signs of Forrester-Trent Syndrome. I've just come back from settling his affairs."

Isira said nothing, but nodded her understanding of the rest of the story.

Abbie recalled the bitter details in a flash, which is how she preferred to think of them. How her father opted to end of his own life, due to the onset of the debilitating disease and its lack of response to treatment. How he matter-of-factly announced his decision to do so and gave her a final list of errands to run. How her mother made sure she knew that she went to great lengths to attend the funeral in the middle of her busy schedule.

"If you need to talk..."

"I'll be sure to call on you," finished Abbie flatly. It was clear to both she had no intention of doing so.

The line for entry began to move a little more briskly as more people were put on the airlock to process visitors to the ship. When Abbie reached the front of the line, she saw that everyone was presenting orders to one of the commissioned officers standing within the *Farragut* side of the airlock.

A security petty officer first class wearing her long blonde hair in a tight French braid nodded to her. "Welcome aboard, Lieutenant. Are you coming aboard to join?"

"I am," replied Abbie, already digging through her personal items for the PADD containing her orders.

"May I check your orders, please, sir?"

As soon as the petty officer said it, Abbie found the PADD and pulled it from the duffel. "Here you are."

The woman accepted it and scanned the display quickly. "Lieutenant Atherton, I have your name flagged by Commander Kincaid, the executive officer. He would like to see you as soon as possible."

"Flagged, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

"I guess I shouldn't be surprised by that. Thank you, Petty Officer...?"

"Master-at-Arms First, sir," corrected the woman. "My name is Laurence."

"Of course," replied Abbie with a grin. "Thank you." Time was of the essence for the both of them. As soon as the conversation deemed over, both women immediately turned back to their duty; the petty officer to receiving the next person and Abbie to find the location of Commander Kincaid.

The Nebula-class multi-mission heavy cruisers exhibited different color schemes. Every ship within Starfleet made use of the full spectrum of color available to the naked eye to give each ship a sense of identity. *Farragut's* navy blue carpets carried the standard Starfleet taupe trim that spread out over the curved corridors of the saucer section. Unlike his previous assignment, the Ambassador-class USS *Valdemar*, the smooth black interface panels ran the length of the corridors in between the upper and lower portions of the bulkhead access covers.

He fought the temptation to play with the LCARS panel and continued on his way toward the turbolift. With all of the new personnel coming aboard, the wait for the turbolift seemed longer than normal. On any other day, the lift might have arrived much sooner than the minute and a half he spent standing before the doors. Once the doors parted, the lift's car presented a full house, though he managed to squeeze himself in amongst the nearly a dozen people standing inside.

"Main Bridge," he ordered, adding his destination to the queue. He could have used his new authority to override the queue and have the lift take him to his destination first. The problem with such selfishness, he decided, would be eleven sour opinions of the new executive officer spread out amongst a crew of eight hundred-fifty people. Even on a ship of this size, gossip traveled faster than warp speed.

Instead, he exercised patience and smiled at the people coming off, giving the departing officers a respectful nod as they came abreast of him. He lost track of time when the doors finally parted to reveal the aft stations on the bridge. The crowd parted for him and he gave them his thanks for doing so before stepping out and leaving them behind.

The design of the Nebula-class provided the sharing of modules with some of the other, newer classes of ship. The Galaxy-class explorers featured a bridge module similar to this, one he had personally seen aboard the starship USS *Odyssey*. Though, *Odyssey's* colors had been a deep sea green with beige trim.

The standard watch while in port appeared to be maintained, he noted with approval. Three people at the key consoles, with the officer of the deck within earshot in case their attention was required. What was unusual was the chief warrant officer at the tactical station. There were not a whole lot of warrant officers serving within Starfleet, as many opted to attain commissions. He decided to make himself known to that person, as warrants were highly sought-after experts in their designated fields.

As he stepped down toward the trio of command chairs in the center of the bridge, he noticed a strikingly beautiful woman seated in the center seat. Her two-piece mustard Starfleet uniform managed to diminish a majority of her curves, but not by much. He doubted any garment she'd wear could hide her obvious sexuality from anyone with eyes. The two solid and one hollow pip on the right side of the neck told him that she might be the lieutenant commander he wanted.

"Commander Elannis?" he asked, standing before her.

Her heterochromatic eyes lifted up from the PADD in her hands to peer into his soul. "Yes?"

He momentarily lost his mental balance as the weight of her attractiveness hit him in full force. He recovered himself as quickly as possible, even managing a charming smile of his own. "I'm Commander Jesse Kincaid."

She knew that before he said; he could tell. Her eyes betrayed her recognition of his features before she returned them to her PADD as he introduced himself. "I assume you're here to relieve me of my acting duties?"

Though her tone suggested joviality, it was clear she held a little resentment at his presence. Their most recent incursion might have been classified, but it was clear that Elannis bonded with the position. Remembering the captain's words, he decided to take a gentle approach. "With your approval, of course," Jesse said with a grin. "I was hoping you could bring me up to speed, first."

"I am aware that you accessed the declassified logs," she replied, rising from the captain's chair. "I'm sure you're as up to speed as you're going to get."

No fooling her, he realized. "I suppose that's true."

"Then I'm ready to be relieved, sir," she said, invoking the traditional phrase.

"I relieve you, sir," he responded in kind.

Ariel nodded. "I stand relieved. Computer," she called out, waiting for the acknowledgment sound, "note in the ship's log this stardate,

Commander Kincaid has assumed his position as executive officer."

The computer's soft feminine voice responded, "Acknowledged."

She handed over her PADD. "Starbase Operations is fitting us with a tactical pod for our upcoming mission. Petra's assigned an engineering team to oversee the installation."

As he accepted the PADD, Jesse recalled the data from memory. "A tactical pod gives us eight torpedo tubes and an additional six phaser banks." His eyes drifted down to the latest ship's status report.

"Yeah," she responded.

He bristled at the lack of respect in her tone. There was no 'sir' or even a 'Commander' within her phrase. Captain Leone ran an informal ship, indeed. However, as the executive officer, he would be placed in charge with the overall discipline of the crew. He wouldn't chastise her in front of the other officers, but he made a mental note to bring this up at the next meeting of the senior staff.

"All right. How long until they're finished?"

"Three hours, and then another hour for the tactical systems test."

"Four hours, give or take thirty minutes, I'm sure."

The doors to the forward turbolift opened and out came Lieutenant Abbie Atherton. "I'm sorry I'm late, Commander," she said as soon as she saw him. "I had to wait ages for a turbolift that didn't already have a herd inside." Her eyes drifted over to Ariel in surprise.

Jesse's eyes lit up at the sight of the science officer and he even smiled. "No problem, Lieutenant. I'm glad that you made it at all." He gestured toward Ariel, "This is Lieutenant Commander Elannis, the ship's chief of operations."

"Lieutenant Atherton, sir. A pleasure to be working with you," said Abbie, extending a hand.

"Likewise," replied Ariel. They shook hands briefly.

Abbie continued to look at her with some unreadable expression before Jesse caught her attention by clearing his throat. "When did you return to active duty, Lieutenant?"

The chief warrant officer at the tactical station interrupted to report, "Incoming communication from Starbase Ops, sirs."

Ariel automatically responded, "Thank you, Mister Reynolds. On screen."

The visage of the Vulcan commanding officer of Starbase 310 appeared upon the screen. The sheer size of the screen made Rear Admiral T'Ciryra loom over the bridge as she gave the barest nod and greeted, "Good morning, Commanders."

"Good morning, sir," replied Jesse quickly, hoping to cut off any response from Ariel. He needed to assert himself quickly. "What can we do for you?"

"Your mission to join the starship *Phoenix* on patrol of the border has been rescinded until further notice," T'Ciryra informed them, in what was almost a barely perceived tone of apology. "Complete the installation of the tactical pod and stand by for a new assignment. Please be sure to inform Captain Leone of this change in orders."

"Of course, sir," Kincaid started to say. Ariel's question cut him off, abruptly.

"Admiral, is something wrong?"

Abbie blanched at the lieutenant commander's insertion of herself into the conversation.

"I fear that the preliminary reports from your investigator have prevented any tactical assignments for the time being. I am attempting to find more information from Starfleet Command, but there is a subspace delay with which to contend."

Jesse maintained his composure through his shock at the casual discussion being conducted before him. Admirals usually weren't given to entertaining questions from subordinate officers unless they were ranked captain or higher. Having a third-in-command lieutenant commander question the change in orders from such a senior officer was unheard of from his perspective. "Uh, we've taken enough of the admiral's time, Commander," he tried to end the conversation quickly.

T'Ciryra stared at him. "It's all right, Commander Kincaid," she said in a colder tone. "Commander Elannis' question was valid."

He blanched at the reprisal. "I apologize, sir. I meant no offense."

Ariel again talked over him. "I'll let Krys know, Admiral. Would you happen to know if we'll be utilized in any fashion, or are we to be content with cooling our heels in port?"

"I will find a use for *Farragut*, Commander, rest assured."

"Understood, sir."

The admiral deemed the conversation completed with a simple nod. "T'Ciryra, out."

"I'll go let her know," said Ariel as she started for the turbolift.

"Commander Elannis," called Kincaid quickly. When she turned to look at him, he pointed toward the observation lounge with two of his fingers. "A moment of your time, please." He shared a brief look with Abbie to show her that the situation with Ariel would soon be rectified.

Act Three

"Please state your name, rank, position and assignment for the log."

"Nieves, Wilson. Lieutenant. Chief of Security, USS *Farragut*."

Commander Hargreaves regarded the man seated across from her within the conference room allocated for her investigation. Nieves served as the chief of security on *Potemkin* under then-Captain T'Ciryra. Leone also served aboard *Potemkin*, as the executive officer. Undoubtedly, Nieves' relationship with Leone would cloud his judgment, she determined after sizing him up.

"Lieutenant," she began, "as you may or may not be aware, the Inspector General's office is investigating to determine what, if any, violations of Starfleet regulations occurred while *Farragut* operated within the territory of the Tristnor Hegemony."

"I understand," replied Wilson with a nod.

"I require direct answers to my questions."

"Commander, should I have counsel present?"

"These aren't formal proceedings, but if you feel counsel is warranted, you may request it and we can reconvene when your counsel has had some time to prepare," said Hargreaves. "However, it would be difficult to find counsel with high enough clearance to read the mission reports."

Nieves' expression never wavered, to her dismay. "I take your meaning, sir. I do not require counsel. Please proceed."

Hargreaves' PADD came into view. Her fingers touched it to access some information. "On Stardate 43222, you were listed as being on leave. Why were you aboard *Farragut*?"

"I arrived at the Antares Ship Yards on Stardate 43220, along with Lieutenant Commander Ariel Elannis," answered Nieves evenly. "My purpose was to attend the change of command ceremony for Captain Leone, which I did on Stardate 43222."

"Shortly after, however, the ship was scheduled to conduct warp trials and report for duty here at Starbase 310. Why were you carried on the ship's roster as part of the senior staff rather than as a passenger?"

"As a gesture, Captain Leone asked me to stand in as the chief of security. Lieutenant Hunter, the appointed officer, was waiting here for *Farragut* to arrive and assume his duties."

"Which he never did."

There it was. The first crack in the hard shell. He showed a brief sign of discomfort with the question, but recovered quickly. "I regret that Lieutenant Hunter was reassigned, but with all due respect, we were competing for the same job. I do not regret wanting to be here for my colleagues, putting me in a position to usurp the position from him. All things being equal, had I been awarded this berth in the first place, I would not have waited for the ship at Starbase 310."

That answered her next question; whether or not he felt it fair. She moved on. "On Stardate 43224.75, you made contact with the first Tristnor ship. You were ordered to surrender and prepare for boarding, according to the ship's log."

"Yes, sir."

"Captain Leone instead gave the order to fire."

"Not immediately, Commander," replied Nieves with a raise of his hand. "She made several attempts to dissuade them. She stressed that our mission was one of peace. They were unconvinced and maintained their hostile position."

"You exaggerate, Lieutenant. She informed them once prior to giving the order to fire, unless Captain Leone's own recollection is false. Is that what you're telling me?"

Another crack. He sure didn't like the implication of calling his captain a liar, did he? "No, sir," he said, coldly. "I did not say anything of the sort. I respectfully submit that you're drawing your own conclusions instead of searching for fact."

She ignored his barb. "Captain Leone ordered weapons fire upon first contact with a new species, is that correct?"

"Only after they fired, first."

"Their primary weapon had already been determined as useless against Federation technology. You believe that such a fruitless attack warranted a disproportionate response?"

"Their primary weapon was useless, yes, but--"

She interrupted him, hoping to throw him off-balance. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"With all due respect, sir, you're not allowing me to state all the facts."

"You are here to answer my questions, Lieutenant. Your protest is noted." Hargreaves continued, "In your own report, a wide-band

transmission detailed a kill-on-sight order from the Hegemony central command as a result of that action. In short, Captain Leone's actions plunged the Federation into a direct conflict with an alien race it knew very little about."

"With all due respect, Commander, that's not how I see it."

"Did you falsify your report then?"

Nieves glowered. "Is this an investigation or a prosecution, sir?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm a security officer, sir, so I've done my fair share of law enforcement," he replied.

"I do not recall asking for your service record, Lieutenant. Kindly keep your responses to answering my questions directly and refrain from offering your own speculation."

"If only you could do the same."

She narrowed her eyes. "Consider it a direct order, Lieutenant."

Wilson rose from his seat. "I have nothing more to say on this subject, Commander."

Hargreaves did the same, putting her hands flat on the table's surface and leaning forward to address him. "I'll decide when this is over. Sit down."

"If you have a problem with me, I suggest you take it up with my commanding officer." Wilson stopped short of the door and gave a parting shot, "Good luck with your investigation, Commander."

As soon as they entered the observation lounge, Ariel raised her hand. "Before you begin, I want to apologize for shortchanging you like that on the bridge. It won't happen again."

Taken aback by her sudden admission, Kincaid took a moment to rephrase his initial comment. "I appreciate you saying that."

"T'Ciry, Kry, Wilson, and I all served together on *Potemkin*. We're very familiar with one another," she explained, running over anything else he might say. "I realize that might put you in a position of being on the outside looking in and I didn't help matters any by talking over you."

"No, you didn't," he agreed, putting a hand on the back of one of the chairs as she spoke. "I'm very well aware that you and the captain have a long history of shared service, but my position was confirmed by the captain this morning. I intend on carrying out my duties, regardless of whether or not you have a close working relationship with the old lady."

Ariel smirked. "I dare you to call her that to her face."

It was a figure of speech used by many Starfleet officers. Referring to the captain as either the "old man" or the "old lady;" no disrespect was intended. In fact, to some it was a term of endearment under the right circumstances. In spite of the usage, he blushed at her words. "And that's another thing."

"What?"

"I don't know you. But you speak to me with such casual familiarity, I find it very disrespectful."

"I'm Ariel Elannis, you're Jesse Kincaid."

"*Commander* Jesse Kincaid," he emphasized his rank. "I would prefer to be addressed by my rank or title, until such time as we develop a close working relationship. Am I understood?"

"The mating call of the candy-ass," she muttered.

"Excuse me?" His tone was icy.

"When an officer of superior rank underlines his request with 'am I understood' or some other variation, Kry calls that the 'mating call of the candy-ass.' As in a candy-assed officer."

"I know what it means," he said, letting some of his temper flare. "Am I to understand that you're referring to me as such?"

Ariel regarded him with unimpressed eyes. "Permission to speak freely?"

"I think you've already been doing that. That's why we're having this conversation. But go ahead. I find myself curious to hear what you think you would need freedom to say."

"I would say, then, that it remains to be seen. I've served in Starfleet for nearly twenty years, now, include four as enlisted before earning my commission at OCS. Around here, we don't have to rely on our rank to enforce authority. You may think I have contempt for you, but I think you might've forgotten the first rule of command at the Academy, Commander."

Kincaid turned his head, but kept his eyes on her. "And what's that?"

She stepped in close to him, letting her scent fill his nostrils and smirked as she saw him breath in and relax. With her voice barely above a whisper, Ariel leaned in and told him, "Attitude reflects leadership."

He took in a deep breath to steady himself before responding. "You're determined to make this difficult, I see."

She looked down the front of his uniform, before looking back up at his face. "I'm definitely making it pretty hard, apparently."

"Your... heritage..." he started to say, slowly, trying to remain in control of his emotional response.

"Is one of my personal weapons, Commander," she finished for him. "I thought perhaps you needed a demonstration."

Kincaid worked hard to regain control of his senses after the blitzkrieg-like assault. "Stand down, Commander," he ordered.

Ariel shrugged, taking a step back from him.

"If you ever use a weapon, pheromonal or otherwise, against me again, Lieutenant Commander, I'll have you brought up on charges." He straightened and stared at her directly. "If you disrespect me in front of others, I won't hesitate to snap you back in front of the crew. You'll use my rank or the appellation 'sir' when you address me. Maybe one day you'll earn the right to something else, but right now, I don't see that happening. Am I understood?"

Ariel was rigid as she bit out the response, "Yes, sir."

"Excellent. You're dismissed."

Act Four

"Convoy duty," repeated Leone as she spoke to T'Ciryra within her ready room. "You're pulling us off the border to escort freighters to Deep Space Four?" After the news of the reassignment made it to her ears, she had demanded an audience with her.

The rear admiral, seated on the other side of the desk, merely nodded. "That is correct."

"May I ask why?"

"The Inspector General's office."

"I'm not about to go rogue with Starfleet hardware, sir. You, of all people, should know that."

T'Ciryra continued speaking, in spite of Leone's interruption, "-feels that due to the investigation, *Farragut* should be placed on low-priority assignments for the duration. My assessment of the situation is irrelevant. This order came from Starfleet Command, directly, Captain."

The news of Command's involvement in this investigation put the whole matter into perspective for Leone. She would have to investigate things on her own, from her end, and without T'Ciryra's help. She changed the subject, "Who will replace us on the border?"

"I've ordered *Majestic* to take your place for the time being."

Leone frowned, her brow furrowing. "I'll bet Ben Maxwell will be pleased by that."

"He did express his annoyance at having to replace a heavy cruiser with a destroyer, yes. However, as you have your orders, he has his."

"Very well. I will take my heavily-armed cruiser on the milk run, until the investigation is complete."

"Those are your orders," said T'Ciryra, matter-of-factly. "I trust you will cooperate with the investigator."

"I'll do my best, although she seems to have already determined my guilt."

"I am aware of Commander Hargreaves' service record. I brought her record to the attention of Starfleet Command and they stressed that she be placed on the investigation team."

Leone's eyes widened. "What?"

"There was no room for interpretation in their response and I attempted to contact the Inspector General himself to no avail."

That was T'Ciryra's way of trying to help her out. Leone nodded, but did not smile. "I appreciate that, sir."

"Unnecessary," replied the admiral as she stood from her seat. "I was merely attempting to assure you an impartial analysis of your wayward mission."

Leone rose along with her. "Sir, I..."

T'Ciryra raised her hand and inclined her head. "You're welcome, Captain."

The captain took in a deep breath and released it. "We'll leave in the morning, then, sir."

"Very well. I will take my leave, then."

"I appreciate you taking the time to see me, sir," said the captain as she escorted the admiral onto the bridge. Mister Reynolds still manned the tactical station, while Greg had the conn.

T'Ciryra's features remained unchanged, but the eyes betrayed their mirth. "I would not pass up the opportunity to tour your new command, Captain."

Leone grinned. "Of course."

"Hargreaves to Lieutenant Aspinall," called the investigator from below decks.

Both the captain and the admiral turned their heads to Greg as he responded with a furtive sigh and slap of his commbadge. "Aspinall, here."

"Please report to conference room two. Hargreaves, out."

Leone tilted her head toward the turbolift. "Go ahead, Greg. I'll take the conn."

"One of the most difficult aspects of fitting in on a new ship is reaching out and making new friends," began Isira. "I'm very glad to see you have no difficulty in that respect, Lieutenant."

"You can call me Abbie when we're not on duty, Counselor," Abbie responded. "Like I said, I didn't want to leave it like how it was in the receiving line. I'm not looking for any counseling, but I wouldn't mind getting to know you better."

Isira smiled warmly. "Thank you, Abbie." She leaned in and in a voice barely above a whisper, she admitted, "It's even more difficult for

counselors."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Everyone's probably thinking you're taking mental notes about their reactions." Abbie scanned the dining area and pointed out a spot near the windows. "How about that table?" she suggested.

"Lead on." After taking their seats, Isira glanced briefly at the exterior of the docking port before turning her attention to her dining companion. "And who's to say that I'm not taking mental notes about everyone. I mean, it's..." She cut herself off. "Incoming."

One of the lounge's wait staff approached the table with an empty tray and a PADD. "Welcome to Ten-Forward, ladies. Can I get you something to drink?"

"That's handy, knowing someone's coming without having to see," Abbie noted with a half-smile of amusement. To the waiter, she smiled more fully. "While I'd love a real beer, I know that's not possible and I'd rather not sully my tastebuds with a fake. How about some unsweetened iced tea, not too cold and no ice cubes, please."

Isira added quickly, "Altair water for me. At room temperature, thanks."

When the waiter moved off, Abbie returned to the conversation as if they were not interrupted. "Everyone's always taking mental notes of each other. But few of us get to take as much direct action as you. Of course, they don't realize you're probably more likely to keep their confidences and not less."

The counselor frowned deeply and then appeared completely distracted by her midsection; her hands rubbed at it briefly before she realized she was calling attention to herself. "Uh, yeah, right."

Abbie looked at the counselor closely for a moment, then back at the waiter who was already approaching again. "Did he think you were fat?" she asked bluntly.

Isira waved her hand back and forth to indicate she did not wish to discuss it right then. She looked up at the waiter and smiled sweetly as he laid out their drinks. "Thank you very much."

Abbie waited until he left again before noting, "If he did, he's a jerk. I love to eat, honestly. If I didn't eat primarily replicated food, I'm pretty sure I'd be thirty kilos heavier."

"No one can help their surface thoughts, Abbie. I try not to hold it against them too much," Isira said plainly. "And I try to workout when I can, but I love to eat, too. But I think your metabolism is treating you better than mine is."

"If his first thought was about your weight, then yeah, you can hold it against him," Abbie disagreed. "And it took forever for my metabolism to do its job, trust me. When I turned eleven, I got the boobs and hips I have now and my stomach was trying desperately to keep up. Even now, it's harder for me than it might appear. Don't feel like you have to curb your appetite or anything like that around me. Believe me, I understand."

Isira reached over to touch Abbie's hand. "Thank you. I skipped breakfast this morning and I'm starving!"

"Let's chow down then," Abbie invited with a grin. She looked to find the waiter again to signal him back over to take their orders.

Isira's eyes moved toward where the waiter returned, but stopped half-way when the doors opened to admit a new visitor to the lounge. "Speaking of surface impressions..." she let her words trail off. "Is that our new executive officer?"

Abbie looked in that direction and chuckled. "To you, he's new," she confirmed before standing and waving to get his attention. "Come join us, sir," she called out.

Her grin was pasted to her face as Abbie made the invitation, but Isira's eyes betrayed her panic when the two women made contact. Through her smile, she managed to get out a quick, "Holy crap."

"He was raised by a single mother on a frontier colony world. Very deferential to women, very nice. Don't worry," Abbie reassured her, *sotto voce*.

"Yeah, how many psych courses did you take?" Isira replied in kind before Kincaid approached earshot. "Hi, Commander. Welcome."

"Jesse, this is Counselor Isira Otex. Isira, this is Commander Jesse Kincaid," Abbie made the introductions. "I was just telling her that you're like an older brother to me. You know, if I had to call my older brother 'sir'," she added jokingly.

Kincaid nodded a silent greeting to Abbie, before turning his attention to Isira, "A pleasure to meet you, Counselor. I hope I'm not interrupting anything?"

"Likewise," Isira said quietly, holding her smile. "If you don't have any plans, sir, you're more than welcome to join us."

"More than welcome?" Kincaid laughed, then turned to Abbie. "Glad to see *some* people aboard are happy to see me. Thank you, I'll accept."

"It's a new assignment. We're all still working the kinks out," Abbie replied sympathetically as she retook her seat.

Kincaid waited for both women to sit down before he took his. "Funny you should mention 'kink,' Abbie. I'll tell you about it later."

Isira pressed her lips together pensively, then shook her head. "Anyway, let's order some food, shall we?"

After their food orders were taken down by their waiter, Kincaid asked Abbie, "I hope you don't mind me asking, but how did everything go?"

How are you doing?" He tilted his head away from Isira slightly, in case Abbie did not want to discuss it in front of her.

"She knows," Abbie mentioned quickly, giving Isira a tight smile.

"Oh, sorry," he amended. He offered Isira a sheepish grin. "I wasn't sure."

"But it went fine, I guess. Everything's all wrapped up, the house is handed off. Thank you for the bouquet, by the way. The tulips were lovely."

Kincaid leaned in slightly. "It was the least I could do."

Abbie shrugged. "Honestly, like I told you, I don't think your presence would have helped. My mother showed up and it was all I could do to handle her without her trying to impress my friends." She changed the subject slightly. "Abernathy sent me a bouquet too. Tiger lilies and regular ones. And later, he sent me a delivery order from the best burger place in town. Made me laugh."

Kincaid gave her a grin. "Still giving you the full court press, huh?"

"If we were ever in the same star system, I might give him a chance," Abbie replied with a chuckle. "Ugh, that's such a lie," she added. "But I like the attention," she revealed freely to Isira.

"Who doesn't like to be wooed?" Isira agreed quickly with a shrug.

"Forgive me for prying, but have you two served together someplace before now?" Kincaid wondered. "You seem unusually open with each other."

Abbie shook her head. "No, but she got a good read on me in the line to get on the ship because I was thinking about those things, and so it seems silly to pretend she's not aware of them. She's the ship's counselor; she's not going to go and talk about it with anyone."

"Oh, of course," Kincaid said. "Any telepathic friend of Abbie's..."

Isira merely raised her water in a mock toast toward him and continued to listen to the conversation.

Kincaid added, "And I might say that making friends so quickly after signing on is a trademark Atherton move. I'm just happy to be along for the ride."

"Actually, I get it from the maternal side, so it's a Mercer move. Except there was no cleavage flashing or back-handed compliments," Abbie replied dryly. "I don't really get along with my mom," she added for Isira's benefit.

Kincaid chuckled. "Now you've got the counselor's attention, talking about the parents like that."

Isira blinked a few times before realizing that she was listening a bit harder than she intended. "Sorry. Occupational hazard. Parent-child relationships are like chocolate to us; completely irresistible."

"Oh, here's a primer on my to wet your appetite," Abbie replied blithely. "Emotionally distant father, absent self-absorbed mother, no siblings," she ticked off and finished just as the waiter arrived with a tray of food. "Let's eat!"

"That sounds like a hell of an interrogation to me."

Later that evening, within the lounge on deck ten, four of the nine senior officers sat around a table in one of the dark corners of the dimly-lit room. Three of them looked toward Greg, who just finished recounting his experience with Commander Hargreaves within the conference room.

The helmsman chuckled. "Yeah, I thought I did very well, but I'm sure I'm going to be called at any moment for round two."

"As amusing a story as that is, I do not find anything illogical about this investigation," said Doctor Sovera, sipping at a glass of water while the other enjoyed something stronger. "The Inspector General's office is entitled to discover whether the captain acted improperly."

Wilson looked at the doctor with an accusatory glare. "You think there's merit to their case?"

"Not at all. I was merely pointing out that they are acting within their province. I found the captain's actions to be laudable under the mitigating circumstances of the predicament, though perhaps trending toward the unconventional."

Ariel snorted. "Perhaps, yes. Anyway, I can't wait for her to get to me."

"I'd love to sell tickets to that show," muttered Greg. "Maybe Wilson can make the popcorn or--"

"Let's talk about something else. I don't want to think about the investigation anymore tonight," Wilson interrupted. "Anyone seen the new senior officers and had more than two minutes to speak to them?" he wondered.

Ariel smirked, but said nothing.

Greg mentioned, "I saw the new science officer. She has a nice--"

Wilson sputtered, "Whoa!"

"Voice, Wilson... I was going to say voice, thank you."

"I'm just saying you need to take a look at people beyond what they look like. Scuttlebutt says that she's got a high decoration for valor during the Tzenkethi War. As a science officer."

"I was going by what she sounds like, but I get what you're saying," Greg retorted. "She is pretty easy on the eyes, though."

Sovera informed them, "I have spoken with the new counselor. She is highly qualified."

"That's it?" asked Greg. He turned his head back toward Wilson, "By the way, she's another one who's easy on the eyes."

Ariel scoffed. "Keep it in your pants, Greg."

Greg was mid-sip as she spoke, and managed to point his finger at her incredulously before he finally swallowed. "Look who's talking!"

"You're lucky your last name is Aspinall," Ariel riposted. "Otherwise, I'd have you scrubbing my toilet for a month."

Greg grimaced. "In that case, my middle name is Aspinall, too."

"The new XO seems to be pretty straight-laced, huh?" Wilson noted quickly. He looked at Ariel. "I heard from Andy Reynolds that you two had a little bit of a tiff on the bridge earlier."

Ariel's jovial mood ended at the mention of the altercation, and she set her drink down on the table. "It's fine. We had a chat in private and cleared up some misunderstandings."

"That is an unusual result for you, Commander," Sovera said, her tone very dry. "The typical outcome of such a conversation generally involves a visit to sickbay." It was clear that neither Wilson nor Greg were buying the explanation, as they peered at Ariel from their seats.

In response, Ariel shrugged. "Kincaid's not your typical officer. Life in a new assignment isn't always smooth, at first."

Wilson turned to Sovera and deadpanned, "Our little girl is growing up."

As she stepped out from her ready room the next morning, Leone regarded the bridge with a smile as everyone manned their stations for the first time since the ship completed its refit. "Listen up," she announced. "We're escorting a convoy of three freighters from Starbase 310 to Deep Space Four. They're already in formation near the inner marker, where we'll join with them and provide protection. Jesse?"

Commander Kincaid sat in the executive officer's position and visibly stiffened at the use of his first name. "Sir?"

"Is that new pod attached to our hull for real or is it just decoration?"

"It is online, sir," he replied as he stood to address Petra. "Mister Bartlet?"

"I'm finishing up the last of the diagnostic cycles, now, sir," said Petra, from the engineering console. "It will be fully operational before we reach the outer marker."

Wilson grunted, "It's too bad we won't be able to test it on something."

"The pod's staying with us for a good long while, Willie. I'm sure we'll be able to find something to shoot at, eventually," noted Ariel as she turned around to face him.

Leone moved toward the empty center seat and sat down. "Let's not get all trigger-happy, people. Jesse, would you please take us out of dock and into formation with the freighters?"

He expelled a breath and then nodded. "Aye, sir. I have the conn. Mister Nieves, signal Starbase Operations for clearance to depart."

"Aye, Commander," replied Wilson quickly. He began to speak quietly to his console.

"Mister Elannis, signal all decks to make preparations for departure and clear the airlock for sealing."

As Ariel acknowledged the order, Wilson announced, "Departure clearance granted, Commander."

"Lieutenant Bartlet, bring all shipboard energy outputs to condition green status and stand by to switch us over to internal power."

"Airlock cleared," reported Ariel. "Standing by to seal airlock and clear all mooring beams."

Bartlet added, "Warp core and fusion reactor energy at normal levels, Commander."

Kincaid nodded, relaxing slightly. "Seal the airlock and switch us over to internal power."

"Airlock sealed," Ariel told him, immediately.

The overhead illumination gave the barest of flickers before Petra announced that they had switched from the Starbase's power feed to the energy generated by the ship's fusion generators.

"Clear all moorings."

"Moorings cleared."

"Helm, take us to one hundred meters from the port and then reverse thrust toward the spacedoors."

Greg keyed in the commands as quickly as possible, since their new first officer had taken to putting his left foot on the base of his console and stood over him. "One hundred meters, aye, sir. Engaging reverse thrusters, now."

"Rear angle on main viewer."

The viewscreen flashed briefly to show the one of the sets of massive doors. They began to open as *Farragut* approached under its maneuvering thrusters rather than the impulse drive. By the time they reached the departure lane both doors slid open to rest flush against the outer hull of the base.

"We're in the lane," reported Greg. "Thirty seconds to outer perimeter."

Kincaid pushed away from the flight controller's station to return to his seat next to Captain Leone. "Stand by to engage impulse drive."

"Standing by."

"Mister Nieves, secure from condition blue and set condition green for cruising mode."

Wilson nodded from above him. "Aye, sir." The alert status indicator on the main bridge ceased its cobalt flash and quieted. "Ship secured from condition blue, Commander."

Open space greeted them as they passed through the doors. "Helm, come to relative bearing one-eight-zero Mark zero and take us to the outer marker at one-half impulse power."

"Making my course one-eight-zero Mark zero relative, aye, sir," replied Greg. The screen showed the stars angling around as the ship's bow and stern traded places. "Speed is now one-half impulse power."

The Starbase on the main view loomed for a moment before retreating as the ship sped away from it. "Forward angle on main viewer," ordered Kincaid.

"The lead freighter is the SS *Cat's Meow*," Captain Leone informed them, "Captain Paul Longshore is the owner and operator."

The scan readings on Ariel's console returned immediately. She noted, "Looks like three *Puma*-class carriers."

"Lead ship is hailing," reported Wilson.

Kincaid nodded. "On screen."

The trio of ships disappeared to give way to the view of a human male wearing civilian clothing. His shaggy mop of blonde hair covered the tops of his eyes and he had to tilt his head back slightly to get a good look at them. "Captain Leone, I presume?"

Leone slipped from her chair and onto her feet as she replied with a smile, "You presume correctly. Is this Captain Longshore?"

"In the flesh, ma'am," he replied with a nod. "Paul Manfield Longshore, owner and operator of the Crazy Eights Transport Company and master and commander of the *Cat's Meow*, at your service."

Leone decided to forgo the correction of the honorific; he meant well by it. "Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Captain."

"Likewise, ma'am," he grinned. "We've been contracted by the Federation for a shipment of hazardous materials to Deep Space Four. We're mighty glad you decided to join us."

"Your HazMat code?"

"Code X-Ray-One."

With the exception of Captain Leone, everyone tensed at the mention of the worst kind of hazardous material the Federation classified. X-Ray level one indicated that whatever his cargo was, it was highly volatile and posed a dangerous threat to Federation citizens. Leone simply nodded; Admiral T'Ciryra made her aware of the danger in the mission briefing, but she wanted her crew to know as well. Better they heard it from the horse's mouth directly.

"All of your freighters are classified similarly?" she asked.

"Correct, Captain. Due to the instability of our cargo, we recommend warp five for the convoy speed."

Leone sighed, but gave her assent with an inclination of her head. "Agreed. As soon as we clear the Starbase's outer marker, we will proceed at warp five." She approached Ariel's seated position and declared, "Lieutenant Commander Elannis will be the convoy liaison officer. Please contact her should you require anything."

Longshore's eyes drifted toward Ariel, then back up at the captain. "Will do. We'll await your signal to proceed."

"You'll have it momentarily, Captain. *Farragut*, out." As soon as the viewscreen blinked to show the freighters, she turned around to return to her seat. "Jesse, let's get underway."

"Aye, sir. Helm?"

Greg nodded. "We're now in formation with the freighters, Commander."

"Signal the convoy we're approaching the outer marker at full impulse power."

Wilson reported, "Signal sent, sir."

"The freighters are moving to maintain their distance." Ariel tapped in a few more commands. "Recommend diamond formation for maximum coverage."

Kincaid stood from his seat again. "Agreed. Mister Nieves?"

"Updating the convoy, sir." Wilson waited patiently for their response. "They're moving into position, now."

"Confirmed," replied Ariel.

Greg announced, "We're clearing the outer marker."

"Stand by for warp speed, Mister Bartlet."

Petra called from the rear of the bridge, "Aye, sir. Warp speed available on all modes."

"Lay in a course for Deep Space Four at warp five."

"Course laid in, sir."

"Execute."

Greg replied, "Engaging. Speed is now warp five, sir."

Leone leaned over and smiled, "Well done, Jesse."

Kincaid lowered his voice, but did not return the smile. "Thank you, sir. And might I ask a favor?"

"What is it?" asked the captain, keeping her voice low.

"I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't use my first name in front of the crew, sir."

"Yeah..." replied Leone with a half-smirk. "We haven't really had The Talk, have we?"

"No, sir."

"Ariel, you have the bridge."

Act Five

Within the privacy of the ready room, Captain Leone had the service record of her new executive officer in front of her as he sat across from her with a expectant expression upon his face. As they moved into the room from the bridge, she said nothing to him. And as she suspected, he was a good enough of an officer not to speak out of turn, especially since his captain requested his presence in the first place.

"Let's get the most pressing matter out of the way, first," Leone began. "You don't like being called by your first name? What would you prefer?"

"I don't mean any disrespect, sir-"

Leone interrupted, "Neither do I."

"I just... I mean, no one's ever called me by that name since I left home for the Academy."

"Do you prefer Miguel?"

"My middle name? Uh, no, sir... I've always been referred to as my rank and last name."

The captain tilted her head. "And your friends?"

"They call me Jess."

"So, you prefer me to call you Jess?"

A brief look of consternation flashed on his features before he composed himself. "With all due respect, sir..."

"Speak freely, Jess. You're my XO, so I'm going to expect some straightforwardness from you."

"Thank you, sir. As I was saying... with all due respect, I would rather you refer to me as my rank and last name."

"Am I not a friend to you, Jess?"

"I didn't mean that, sir."

"But you said that only friends call you by your first name and now you're telling me otherwise."

Her executive officer's face seemed the definition of the word perplexed. "Sir, I don't mean to imply that you... I mean, I apologize if you read any impropriety into my statement, I just meant to say that I'm a little more formal than you might be used to."

She said nothing, instead fixing her most severe glare upon him.

He tried not to squirm under her scrutiny, but the long pause in the conversation eventually began to wear him thin. "Sir?"

Enough was enough. Leone's lips broke into a smile. "I apologize, Commander. I was having a little fun at your expense."

Kincaid let out a held breath and sighed. "I see."

"I think the first thing you need to do is head down to the ship's stores and requisition yourself a sense of humor."

"I'm not used to this type of command style, I guess."

"No, you're not," she replied, dropping any pretense of humor. "I don't hide behind the trappings of titles. I may be the master and commander of this starship, but this crew operates as a team."

"I agree, sir, wholeheartedly. However, I do observe standard Starfleet protocol when addressing my subordinates. Aboard *Valdemar*, I enforced the wishes of Captain Masterson, and he allowed me a wide latitude when it came to handling the crew," said Kincaid. "I'm used to that style of leadership."

Leone nodded. "I'm a little more hands-on with the crew than your typical starship captain."

He snorted, "I noticed."

"That's more like it," she said with a grin. "You need to unclench a little. Sounds like Captain Masterson ran a tight ship."

"Yes, sir. He sure did," he said with an edge to his tone. "I believe that I left a ship in excellent discipline."

"Discipline can be maintained under many circumstances, Commander. I don't subscribe to the notion that it can only be achieved through distance and formality."

"I will submit myself to your instruction, sir."

"Don't do that."

"Sir?"

"Don't couch your responses in clichés. Don't fall back on the formality when you think you need to say something bluntly."

He sighed. "Maybe you need someone else for the job, sir."

Leone leaned forward. "You're going to run away, now?"

"No, sir, but it seems to me that you'd prefer someone a little more..." he trailed off, searching for the right word to use.

She helpfully filled in, "Loose?"

"Liberal."

"Liberal?"

"Yes."

"No," she replied with a short exhalation. "I don't think so."

"Sir?"

"I know I've made the right choice." She grinned. "Unless you're telling me that you're presuming to second guess my judgment."

"No, sir, I wouldn't want to presume anything."

"Good, then it's settled. Your presence here is serendipitous. It's a decree from on high."

Kincaid chuckled, "Yes, sir." The chuckle settled into a wide smile. "I suppose it is."

"Then given that we're both in the right place at the right time, do you think that perhaps you would let me call you 'Jess?'"

He took his time in responding. His eyes fell down to the desk for a long time before he lifted them back up to her. Permitting her this one indulgence, he told her, "Actually, sir, I would prefer it if you called me Jesse."

The ship shuddered underneath them and the red alert klaxon wailed. As the ship noticeably slowed to impulse speeds outside the forward viewport, Ariel's voice called out over the ship's public address. "Red alert. All senior officers report to the bridge."

Within seconds, Leone and Kincaid had returned to the bridge. Ariel brought them up to speed, quickly. "One of the freighters has just been destroyed with all hands. There was no warning and no signs of trouble beforehand."

Leone nodded as she returned to her seat, confirming the report from the small screen on the arm of her chair. "Greg, bring us to all stop. Wilson, contact Starbase 310 and update them on our status. We're not moving a damned inch until we find out what happened."

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