

Eternal Midnight

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Eternal Midnight

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

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

Stardate 43242: (continued from the previous episode) With the destruction of the freighter *Shoeless Joe*, Captain Leone orders the halt of the convoy begun in "Milk Run" to investigate the cause of the event without placing the other freighters at risk. No signs of attack or other subterfuge leave the crew with a mystery to solve at the same time enduring the constant interrogations of Commander Hargreaves, who is hell-bent on proving the guilt of Captain Leone in order to bring her up on charges of gross violations of regulations.

Notes

This story was originally published on 19 March 2009, at the classic 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 Five: Eternal Midnight

NCC-60597/02 (Shuttle *Komarov*)

Holding position within designated debris zone Gamma.

Stardate 43242

Cockpit

FSA Cover #2



Senior Chief Petty Officer Tallan grimaced at the scattered remains of the freighter *Shoeless Joe* stretched out before them. "You would think they'd have the decency to blow up at impulse."

Ensign Tommy O'Day stared at the Andorian non-commissioned officer, mouth agape. "I'm sorry?"

"You heard me," he replied gruffly.

Tommy gulped. "Yes, sir."

Tallan narrowed his eyes, "Don't you dare call me 'sir,' you sniveling pink puppy. I work for a living."

The ensign immediately nodded, forgetting that he technically outranked the salty, enlisted man. "Sorry, Senior Chief Tallan!"

"Keep a respectful tongue in your head and you might live to see your lieutenantcy. At which point, I may muster up the willingness to call you 'sir.'"

Tommy hid his grin. In spite of the barb-like banter they shared, he had an inkling that Tallan liked him more than he let on. After all, he hardly balked at being volunteered to pair up with the ensign. "Yes, Senior Chief. What did you mean by having the decency to blow up at impulse?"

"At impulse, the debris field would be contained to a relatively smaller area of space," explained Tallan. "At warp, the debris is likely to be scattered across parsecs of space, making this one hell of a mess."

Tommy checked the sensor readings and found that the senior chief's assessment had merit. The fragments of debris ran the length of the range of the shuttle's sensors. "I see what you mean. Do you think we could try to boost the sensor range?"

Tallan's right antenna twitched as Tommy asked his question. "Are you giving me an order, Ensign?"

"Of course not. Merely a helpful suggestion, Senior Chief."

"Good. I wouldn't want to think what would happen to you if you thought you had the size to issue me an order," grunted Tallan as he scowled.

"Me either, Senior Chief."

Tallan smirked, but it dropped just as soon as Tommy looked at him. "You eyeballin' me?"

"No, Senior Chief!"

"Uh huh. I'm going to reroute our reserve energy to the sensor array. Why don't you monitor and perhaps learn something."

Tommy tried to defend himself. "You know, I did graduate with a degree in starship engineering."

Tallan's blue hands stopped moving. "All right, college puppy. You boost the sensor range and I'll make sure you don't accidentally set a warp core breach in motion." He tapped in a new command and their consoles traded configurations.

Tommy grinned, looking down at the shuttle's energy configuration. "I'm going to increase the energy output from the warp core and feed the energy into the sensor array."

"Slowly," warned Tallan. "We're not on *Farragut*. The power node, and I stress the singular use of that noun, will not handle a lot of punishment."

"Yes, Senior Chief. I'm increasing the output at a rate of one-tenth per thirty seconds."

"Very good." Tallan continued to manipulate the shuttle's sensors, and nodded. "Resolution is now at one-hundred-ten percent and rising. I'm reading a field of gases and matter. Deuterium, tritium alloy, and an unstable element the computer is working on identifying."

"Well, the deuterium and the tritium I can understand," said Tommy. "Maybe the unstable element was their cargo?"

"Possibly. I'm raising shields, just to be on the safe side, so I need you to halt your energy increase so I can stabilize the-" He cut himself off, as an alarm caught his attention. "Brace yourself!"

The shuttle rocked under a wave Tommy had never seen before. The shuttle's shields flared brightly under the strain of whatever it was. Sparks

flew to the rear of him and he watched in horror as the power node he had been handling so gingerly began to show signs of failure. "Main energizer is out," he reported, his voice pitch rising with every word.

"Primary power node failure. Shield emitters are offline and we're taking hull damage!"

Tallan snarled, "I know! Get your damned EVA suit on!"

"Warning," announced the computer, "matter stream destabilization in main warp core. Breach is imminent."

Tommy didn't hesitate. He moved to the rear compartment and quickly did a pre-suit check, skipping a few steps along the way. The last time he did an emergency shuttle evacuation, it was in a simulator at Starfleet Academy. "Senior Chief!" he shouted to Tallan, as he remained seated at the console. He carried the other suit to him, handing him the specialized helmet for Andorians.

"Thank you, Tommy. I've polarized the shuttle's hull to give us a little more time to get the hell out of here," said Tallan as he stepped into the legs of it and pulled the front of it closed over his chest.

After fitting the helmet in place and feeling the suit pressurize under its own power, he opened the suit's intakes to exchange air with the shuttle's life support system until the last possible moment. He rushed to the cockpit to keep an eye on the hull status and found the sensors starting to show signs of disrepair. The lateral array decreased until the field was the only thing around them.

He dumped emergency reserve power into the escape transporter and stood by to beam them both out. The coordinates were at the limits of the shuttle's transporter range; some three hundred-seventy five thousand kilometers away. "Senior Chief, you ready?"

Tallan's helmet clicked into place and the eerie blue lighting draped his eyes and forehead in the shadow of the lower half of his face. He nodded and gave the go sign.

Tommy slapped his arm console and locked off his intake valve to repressurize. With the other hand, he pushed up the three slider bars on the transporter console. "Energizing," he called into the intersuit communications system.

But only Tallan disappeared.

Panicked, Tommy looked back down to the energy reserves and saw that only half was available, now. Too much of it bled off into the hull polarization subroutine the senior chief had enabled. His bulky fingers flew over the console, hoping he didn't make a mistake in the timing.

"Computer," he said, without looking up, "stand by to depolarize the hull."

The computer's familiar chime sounded within the suit's helmet. "Standing by."

"Depolarize the hull, now!" He pushed on those sliders again, keeping his eyes on the transporter systems. The moment the hull depolarized, he saw the shuttle's hull start to break up as the small warp nacelles tore off and flew away from the shuttle at a brilliant speed.

Just as the dematerialization effect began to take hold, he could see the forward viewport melt away and opened the cockpit to the dangers of vacuum.

Act One

Captain's Log
Stardate 43242.1

With the destruction of the freighter Shoeless Joe less than a day's travel out of Starbase 310, I have ordered the immediate halt of the convoy to investigate the debris field for analysis. Unfortunately, the matter of the freighter's disintegration at moderate warp means that the debris field covers a large area of space in a long trail, forcing us to resort to deploying a fleet of long-range shuttlecraft to return pertinent portions of the hull to the ship. All of our best pilots, including Lieutenant Aspinall, have been dispatched to carry engineering personnel to designated parts of the debris field, in order to provide as much data as possible.

I have tasked Commander Kincaid and Lieutenant Bartlet to lead the investigation, and I hope to see results, soon. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Commander Hargreaves remains on board to pursue her investigation of my conduct in the Beta Quadrant, though I fear her progress is hampered by the lessened availability of my senior staff.

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

"Sovera, Lieutenant Commander. Chief Medical Officer, USS *Farragut*."

Tricia Hargreaves nodded as the doctor satisfied the protocol for recording the discussion. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

Sovera raised her left eyebrow. "I was ordered to, Commander."

"Yes, er, well... you were carried on the ship's roster as the chief medical officer on Stardate 43222."

"Correct. I reported in to my assignment at the Antares Ship Yards on Stardate 43220.78. The vessel was under the command of Commander Tennyson, at the time."

"He had temporary command during the refit."

"Correct."

Hargreaves nodded. "When Captain Leone reported aboard ship, did she submit for a medical examination as required by Starfleet regulation?"

Sovera pressed her lips together briefly before answering, "No, she did not."

"And since then, has she done so?"

"No, she has not. However, I do have an appointment with her tomorrow, which I believe is forty-eight hours before the deadline of reporting in."

"Uh-huh. Do you think she will keep that appointment?"

"It is not my place to speculate on what the captain will or will not do. Nor would I attempt to do so."

The doctor said it with a sense of finality to her tone. Tricia did not necessarily dislike Vulcans, but questioning them always proved to be more difficult than any other race she had encountered in her time with the Inspector General's office. "Very well. You performed a complete examination on the two persons who were responsible for the creation of a, and I'm consulting Lieutenant Bartlet's report, here, "the creation of a field of quantum particles that superaccelerated the ship's velocity to beyond the highest rated speed of our fastest starship for a period of more than twenty-five minutes.""

"Your question contained a lot of superfluous information, but the answer is yes. I did perform a full examination on the Tristnor and Kasui individuals. Those records were transmitted to Starfleet Intelligence and have been classified."

"I'm aware of their classification, Doctor." She was denied access to them in the course of her study of the data made available to her. "The male Tristnor opted to remain in his Terran disguise."

"Correct."

"Did the captain allow this?"

"I informed her that I found no reason to disallow it. The ship's internal sensors were aware of the new life signs and were able to track his movements throughout the ship. She came to a decision based on the information I supplied."

"I'm sorry, Doctor, did you say the captain allowed it?"

Sovera raised both brows. "Succinctly put, yes, she did."

"Thank you," said Hargreaves, allowing a little of her frustration to show through in her tone. "Did the captain express any doubts as to the validity of the Tristnor's motives for taking the ship to the Beta Quadrant?"

"At first, I believe her reaction was aggravation. However, over time and given the fact that the ship was placed on a wide-band kill-on-sight order from the Tristnor Hegemony, further passage within their declared territory would have proven problematic, at best."

"Did you find her decision logical?"

"Her pattern of thinking indicated to me that she found the most likeliest chance of survival to be in mounting a direct offensive against the Tristnor."

"Did you agree with that decision?"

"It is not my place to agree or disagree."

"As the chief medical officer, you are responsible for the general health of the commanding officer."

"I am responsible for the general health of all crew, including the commanding officer."

"Did you find Captain Leone fit for duty prior to this little adventure?"

"As I said before, I had not yet completed a full examination of the captain."

Hargreaves grinned. "Since you had no information upon which to base your judgment, Doctor, how would you be able to determine whether or not Captain Leone was fit or unfit for command?"

"Given enough basic evidence to prove her incapacity for command, I would have ordered an immediate examination to eliminate or discover data to base my judgment upon," replied Doctor Sovera. "At the time, however, her last examination was less than six months before she assumed command of *Farragut* and the data provided was more than sufficient."

"That was aboard the starship *Potemkin*, was it not?"

"It was."

"And who was the attending physician?"

"I conducted the examination, during my tour of duty aboard that ship."

"How long have you known Captain Leone?"

"We first met on Stardate 38172.85. She was reporting aboard *Potemkin* as the new executive officer under then-Captain T'Ciryra. I was posted as the assistant chief medical officer."

"How many years did you serve with Captain Leone?"

"Five years."

"In that time, I assume you came to know her very well?"

"As with my service alongside other officers and crew, over time one becomes familiar with them."

"Would you say that you feel a particular loyalty to the captain, though?"

"Feel, Lieutenant Commander?" Sovera asked coldly.

Hargreaves shifted uncomfortably. "Do you have a particular loyalty to the captain?" she rephrased.

"She has demonstrated exceptional skill in her career and I have not found reason to doubt her abilities."

Hargreaves leaned forward. "Is that your professional opinion, Doctor?"

"As a professional Starfleet officer, yes. However, my education lends itself toward medicine and not starship command."

"So you don't speak as a line officer."

"I'm not a line officer, therefore I cannot speak as one, Lieutenant Commander."

"Have you considered applying to take the line officer's examination?"

"My ambitions do not lean toward command. However, if I determine a need to expand my qualifications, I might consider obtaining a line officer's certification."

Hargreaves grinned. "I'm sorry, we seem to have wandered off the point."

"Was that not your intention, Commander?"

"Uh, no, it wasn't."

"Logically, such a line of questioning implies you are attempting to appeal to a friendlier side of my personality. I can save you the trouble of any further attempts by informing you that it will be fruitless."

"Thank you for clearing that up. I don't believe I have any further questions for you, Doctor. But you have been exceedingly helpful."

Sovera inclined her head in acknowledgement but said nothing as she moved out of the conference room, leaving the lieutenant commander

alone.

The shuttle's explosion flashed in the distance as Senior Chief Tallan floated against the void. "Tallan to O'Day," he transmitted, after not seeing any sign of Tommy. "Ensign, are you there?"

He looked down at his arm and saw that his emergency transmitter pulsed once every thirty seconds. The tricorder built into the arm gave him very little information within its limited range, but it at least told him that the ensign was nowhere to be seen or sensed. The suit's communications transmitter, on the other hand, reached a little further than a commbadge would.

"Ensign O'Day, this is Senior Chief Tallan. Please respond."

Again, only silence answered his stern tone. His eyes again moved over the brightly lit display on his arm, informing him of his suit's environmental status. The suit provided enough breathable air for twenty-four Terran hours. He allowed his mind to wander briefly at the inane predilection for Starfleet equipment to be attuned to human time standards. Tallan reconfigured his suit's limited energy stores to boost the transmitter power a little further, hopefully reaching the ensign's suit.

He refused to believe that Tommy would be so stupid as to sacrifice himself. Surely, there had to be another reason why he did not beam out with Tallan. Maybe the transporter's annular confinement beam had only enough energy to transport one at a time as the shuttle took substantial damage from the moment the shield emitters gave out. Perhaps, with the damage to the power node, the escape transporter's imaging scanner failed to provide a complete pattern for the system to process and activated the safety protocol to abort his transport beam.

Tallan sighed, shaking his head. He could float there the entire time and speculate on what might have happened. He needed to ground himself in the present; he was alone in space and with no way to make contact with Tommy or *Farragut*, it might be more than a whole day to be recovered... dead *or* alive.

The batteries included within the suit had to be rationed appropriately. Either he could lower the rate that the suit scrubbed the carbon dioxide and conserve it to continue to boost the suit's signal, or he could extend the life of the suit's environmental systems beyond its standard rated limit. Of course, it would be easier if Tommy was there to assist him.

"Ensign O'Day, I'm going to assume that you're still alive, because I know you're not dumb enough to get yourself killed on your first assignment out of the Academy. I'm lowering the rate of my suit's life support systems to conserve energy, but I'm going to record a message and have it retransmit at one minute intervals. Hopefully, you'll lock onto my signal and make contact." Tallan didn't know whether or not the ensign heard him. Maybe Tommy's suit's transmitter was damaged; he had no way to tell. But, talking aloud helped him feel a little better about the situation.

The reconfiguration of the suit's emergency beacon completed quickly and the system was ready to accept his message. As long as the message was less than fifteen seconds long. When the green light flashed to begin recording, he spoke in a clear voice:

"This is Senior Chief Tallan of the Federation starship *Farragut* to any vessel within range. I am transmitting a general distress call..."

Act Two

"Then the Ferengi says to the Vulcan, 'Sounds logical to me!'"

Lieutenant Abigail Atherton did not laugh. Instead, she shook her head. "That's just not that funny."

Lieutenant (jg) Gregory Aspinall frowned, as the chief science officer seemingly dismissed his attempt at humor. "Well, it was funny when I heard it."

"Where was that?"

"In the lounge. Tommy and I were having drinks with the new guys in stellar cartography."

"Yeah. I think that joke was funnier in your head," she muttered. "Are we there yet?"

Greg grinned, having heard her but also having decided that her comment was pretty amusing. "Five minutes until we reach the beginning of the debris field, sir." An alarm flashed on his console and he reacted quickly. He called for the shield emitters to activate. "Shit, hang on!"

"What?"

To answer her, the Type-7 craft rocked under the impacts. The shuttle's shields activated in time and Greg lifted the nose of the shuttle out of the edge of the field. The alarm ceased as soon as they cleared it.

"What was that?" Abbie asked, releasing her hold upon the side of the cockpit.

He sighed, letting out a held breath. "I don't know. Whatever it was, it was tagging the shields something fierce. The emitters were overloading; we nearly lost the power node."

Abbie's fingers flew across the co-pilot's console and she called up the sensor data collected during the impacts. "The computer is not recognizing it, but let's try not to dive down into the field anymore, okay? I'd hate to get stuck out here with nothing to do but listen to your lame jokes."

He winced. "And the lady scores a direct hit to my ego. Yes, sir, I can maintain our current distance. Will that be close enough for you to do what you need to do?"

"You mean, use the shuttle's sensors and hope to hell I can find out what this 'unknown element' is? I hope so." Abbie continued to check her readings but frowned as the computer continued to give her limited data. "I'm running a level four diagnostic on the sensors," she noted. "They may have gotten damaged."

When the diagnostic came back without noting a problem, she shook her head. "The computer is completely flummoxed. All I can tell is that it's unstable and obviously rather volatile. We need to contact the ship."

"Incoming transmission from the shuttle *Garrovick*, Commander," reported Andrew Reynolds from the tactical station.

Jesse Kincaid nodded. "Put it through, Mister Reynolds. On screen."

"Aye, sir," replied the chief warrant officer. The viewscreen switched from the two freighters to the cockpit of the shuttle.

Greg stared back at them wearing a concerned expression. "Commander."

"Report, Lieutenant."

"Actually, sir, Lieutenant Atherton wanted me to transmit some data to you that we picked up on the outskirts of the debris field. Also, I'd like to recommend that all shuttles maintain their distance from the field."

Kincaid furrowed his brow. "Explain."

Atherton's voice carried over the signal. "Sir, it's important that you issue that order, right away. Whatever it is, it nearly took out our shields. According to the sensor data, an unprotected hull has no chance of surviving a direct impact with it."

"Mister Reynolds," called Kincaid sharply. "Pass that order along to all shuttles, now." As he did so, Kincaid nodded. "All right, we've transmitted the order. Did you want to send that data along, now?"

"Transmitting it, now, sir," said Greg with a nod.

Farragut's executive officer walked up toward the tactical station and watched as the information floated over the display. "It's coming through, Lieutenants. Until we know more, maintain your distance."

"Aye, sir."

"XO," said Reynolds. "All but seven shuttles have reported acknowledgement of your order."

"It's possible that this unknown element is interfering with communications, Commander," suggested Atherton.

Kincaid eyed the screen briefly while his arms folded over his chest. "Keep sending the order, Mister Reynolds. And raise the captain. Hopefully, she's through the dessert course by now."

Captain Krystine Leone smiled across the table at Captain Paul Longshore. "Well, you certainly know how to show a couple of girls a good time, Captain."

Lieutenant Commander Ariel Elannis offered a smile of her own, which she noticed had a more desirable effect on the older man. "Absolutely. It's nice to be reminded how good real food tastes every once in a while."

Longshore leaned over and said conspiratorially, "One of the benefits of being a freighter captain is that you always have first crack at the fresh stuff. It sure beats that replicated crap they force down your throats on those big Starfleet cruisers."

"I happen to like the replicated crap," said Ariel, pushing out her lower lip in a small pout.

"Oh, well, I didn't mean to suggest that it was crap, Commander," replied Longshore as he softened his tone.

Leone brought her glass to her lips to obscure the smirk behind it. It never failed to amuse her when her best friend decided to use her skills to her advantage.

Ariel's hand moved over Longshore's. "I'm sure you didn't, Paul. Like I said, it's nice to be reminded of the real thing."

Longshore's mood brightened considerably.

"*Farragut* to Leone," chirped her commbadge.

Without hesitation, Leone touched her fingers to activate it. "Leone, here."

"Sir," called her first officer, "there's been a development in the investigation. Are you in a secure location?"

"One moment, Jesse," she replied. She wiped her mouth and excused herself from the table before moving into the corridor outside the captain's mess. She found a stowage compartment used by the galley staff located a meter away to be empty and entered it after making certain she was alone. "Go ahead."

"Lieutenant Atherton transmitted information about an unknown element discovery that the shuttle's computer failed to identify. However, the computer would not release the information to her, because she lacked security clearance," he informed her. His tone grew dark with every word. "I had to use my alpha-two code to unlock the data."

Leone's brow furrowed. "Spare me the dramatics, please. What did you find out?"

"Sir, if we're reading this data correctly, and Lieutenant Bartlet believes we are, the debris field has bilitrium and trilitium resin scattered across five parsecs of space along our flight path."

"Wonderful," she said, closing her eyes. Leone brought her hand to her brow and winced. "Order all shuttles to keep out of the field and have them collect as much data as possible."

"Already done, sir."

She nodded her approval to no one. "Good. Then upgrade our traffic advisory to the highest possible class. We're going to need to drop buoys to mark off the area."

"We've launched all available craft to picket the debris field," replied Kincaid over the commlink. "None of them are equipped to deploy those buoys, sir."

Leone grinned. "That's not entirely accurate, Jesse. We have one more auxiliary craft that we've not utilized, yet."

"Sir?"

"Prepare to beam me and Ariel back to the ship," she said, leaving the compartment and walking back toward Longshore's mess. "Load a full complement of buoys into my yacht and prepare it for immediate departure."

Freefall happened to be Tommy's least favorite state of being. Since the Zero-G Operations certification required by the Academy, he hoped with all his might that he would never have to test that certification in the field. Of course, being assigned to a starship greatly increased the chances of having to operate in vacuum, but he figured that he might avoid it somehow.

His eyes drifted down toward his feet as he stared into the starry abyss, unable to fix his eyes on anything before feeling a wave of vertigo begin to overtake him. Tommy immediately shut his eyes to prevent the sensation to overwhelm him. His situation being what it was, he could not allow any further obstacle to his survival, especially one that was of his own making.

"Warning," intoned the suit's computer, "pressure suit is damaged."

"Run level-five diagnostic on all systems." His voice sounded hollow within the helmet.

"Working..."

He shivered within the tightness of the suit against his uniform, wondering what else could possibly go wrong. He thought his luck might have

been used up as the shuttle's escape transporter ripped him away from the explosion in time to complete the dematerialization sequence. His fears were confirmed when the diagnostic was completed.

The small display began to show problem areas within the suit. "Life support systems on backup unit. Primary system disengaged due to unit removal or possible unknown unit damage. Subspace transceiver assembly is damaged and offline."

He winced. That was very bad news. "Uh, run a level-three diagnostic on the subspace transceiver assembly."

"Working..."

As the computer ran through the diagnostic, he touched the display to call up the inventory list of the suit. Without the ability to transmit a signal, his chances of being found were lessened pretty dramatically. He hoped that he was wrong, but waited patiently for the computer to complete its task.

"Diagnostic complete. Transmission node severely damaged."

So, he can receive a subspace transmission, but not send one. "Computer, activate the receiver node and use short-range communications to send out broadband distress signal at one minute intervals."

"Acknowledged; distress signal transmitting."

"Ensign O'Day, I'm going to assume that you're still alive..."

He nearly jumped within the suit as Tallan's voice called to him. "I am, Senior Chief," replied Tommy. "Can you hear me?"

"Because I know you're not dumb enough to get yourself killed on your first assignment out of the Academy."

Tommy could not help but curl the corners of his lips upward as he heard the Andorian's terse words over his helmet.

"I'm lowering the rate of my suit's life support systems to conserve energy..."

The ensign's eyes widened as he stared down at his suit's control panel. It was a great idea, and he made the same adjustment.

"... but I'm going to record a message and have it retransmit at one minute intervals."

He grinned. Great minds, he told himself.

"Hopefully, you'll lock onto my signal and make contact."

Could he try to locate him? No, it was a subspace transmission and he was unable to use the suit's computer to that extent. Much in the same way that they would most likely find the Senior Chief before him, since his subspace transceiver was undamaged. They were out of immediate sensor range of one another, it seemed, and without some sort of propulsion system, there was very little chance they would be able to at least pool their resources together in some fashion.

Tommy set the computer to record his voice for the signal, and set it to cycle every sixty seconds. In as clear a voice as he could muster, he spoke, "This is Starfleet Ensign Thomas O'Day of the Federation starship *Farragut* to any vessel within range. I am transmitting a general distress call..."

Act Three

Aboard the captain's yacht, Ensign Yvonne Colby continued to tap on the tactical console as the probe/buoys were loaded aboard the craft's small cargo space. Within minutes, they would be packed to the gills with the devices, ready for offloading at command. "Who do you think will be in charge?"

"Me," said Ensign Iris Wu with confidence.

Yvonne wrinkled her nose. "You?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Because you're just an ensign, that's why. And this is the captain's personal craft. I seriously doubt they would give you command of her gig."

Iris grinned. "All right, then. Who's your guess?"

Yvonne had thought about it. "Not a whole lot of the senior staff are aboard the ship, and we're running way low on pilots. Maybe Commander Elannis?"

"That's what I was thinking," agreed Iris with a nod. She manned the mission operations console located near the aft section of the tiny bridge. Although it was technically referred to as the cockpit of the yacht, the layout belied the name by having a center seat for the yacht's officer-in-command. "Or Commander Kincaid."

With a grin, Yvonne nodded out of sight of her cabinmate. "I would love to be locked up for a while with him."

"Oh, wouldn't we all?" said the voice of Lieutenant Commander Elannis from the door leading out into the corridor. "He's quite attractive, isn't he?"

Iris snickered and Yvonne blushed furiously as Ariel entered and slid into the seat behind the large and curved joint flight controller and operations console. Her fingers grazed the activation sequence and it came to life under her.

"W-Welcome aboard, Commander," stammered Yvonne as she got to her feet. "Are you assuming command?"

A scoff from the door carried into the cockpit. "She wishes."

"Captain!" exclaimed Iris, as she jumped to her feet. Yvonne remained at attention.

Leone smiled. "That's what they tell me. As you were, both of you."

Iris and Yvonne relaxed and returned to their seats.

The captain avoided moving to the command station and stood over Yvonne to peer down at her display. "Status of our buoys, Ensign...?"

Yvonne leaned back to allow Leone a clear look at it. "Colby, sir. We're almost finishing loading a full complement, sir. I'd say another minute."

Leone nodded her approval. "Good." She returned to an upright position. "Ariel, let's wait for our chief engineer to arrive, and then we'll start pre-flight."

"You got it," replied Ariel. "We're still on external power."

"I can see to that for you, Commander." A new voice spoke from the direction of the cockpit door. A small woman wearing the triple slashes of a crewman apprentice on her neck appeared, carrying a padd with her. "Engineer Striker Odessa McComas, reporting as ordered, Captain."

Leone accepted the padd with a smirk. "Welcome aboard, Crewman. You're our chief engineer for this little pleasure cruise. Take your station."

"Aye, sir." McComas nodded and moved to exit the cockpit. "I'll be in the engine compartment."

"That's a little unorthodox, isn't it?" asked Ariel. "Having a non-rate work as an engineer?"

"According to Senior Chief Tallan, she's a bright young woman with a promising enlisted career ahead of her," replied Leone quickly. "I trust his judgment."

The Orion-Terran hybrid grinned at her friend. "Seems like we have ourselves a little Amazonian ship, though. Where's the beef?"

Off of her turn of phrase, Leone held in her laugh for the sake of the junior officers within earshot. "Just a coincidence, I assure you. Next time, I'll do what I can to ensure you have eye candy."

"Thank you, Captain, sir," Ariel replied, not looking back.

Yvonne reported through her smile, "All buoys loaded, sir."

"Bridge to Engineering," called Leone with an unabashed grin.

McComas' voice called back, "Engineering, here, Captain."

"Begin pre-flight, please."

"Beginning my pre-flight checklist, aye, sir."

Leone swiveled around in her chair to face mission operations. "Ensign Wu, signal the bridge we're departing in five minutes."

Iris nodded. "Aye, sir." She activated a communications link with *Farragut's* bridge and called, "*Farragut*, this is the *Lydia*. Pre-flight checklist has begun. The captain is ordering departure in five minutes."

The screen flickered to show the main bridge, sixteen decks up from their present location. Lieutenant Nieves' face appeared in the center with a smile. "Take care of the captain out there, Ensign. You're cleared for departure."

She returned his smile and chuckled. "Will do, sir. Thanks." The display returned to its former state, showing her the yacht's systems and status. "Captain, the bridge has cleared us for departure."

"Thank you," replied Leone. She moved to stand over Ariel. "Ready to take her out?"

"I've been looking forward to this for a long time," admitted Ariel, lowering her tone to keep it out of earshot of the ensigns. She turned her head to glance at Leone. "All systems are go, Ranger One."

Leone chuckled. "You're such a child. I suddenly regret letting you name this gig."

"You promised."

"Don't remind me."

"So say the words."

The captain's face betrayed her pain. "Do I have to?"

"Yes."

Leone sighed, resigned to her fate. "Okay, fine." She slumped into the command chair and raised her hand, with her index and middle finger extended. "Rangers, away," said the captain, in a bored tone.

The ensigns looked toward the captain. Iris' right eyebrow rose higher, while Yvonne's brow furrowed. "Sir?"

Ariel huffed. "You could get into the spirit of it all, you know."

The captain grumbled. "Just... please, launch the ship? Before I start to lose my mind?"

Lieutenant Petra Bartlet stared hard at the data transmitted from *Garrovick*. Commander Kincaid stood over her, peering at the same display.

"Forgive my inexperience," said Isira, "but as it is explosive, would detonating it resolve the problem?"

Petra's eyes widened at the thought. "That would have catastrophic effects on space traffic within the lane, Counselor."

"What do you mean?"

Kincaid answered, "Trilithium has long-lasting effects on the subspace interfold layer. It's easier to clean-up in its current state, but to incite an explosion would force all ships to travel at sublight within this region."

Lieutenant Nieves manned the tactical console and watched them move across the bridge. "That would put a serious dent in the freighter business between the two starbases," he told them.

Kincaid turned his head. "Eavesdropping on conversations, now, Lieutenant?"

"Rule of Acquisition number seven, sir. Always keep your ears open."

Isira smiled as Petra chuckled. "Are you a Ferengi, now?"

Wilson grinned. "I like to think of myself as a student of the universe."

"Anyway," Kincaid interjected pointedly. "Tell me about the combination of bilitrium and trilithium."

"I defer to the explosives expert," said Petra, folding her arms.

Wilson cleared his throat. "Thank you. Bilitrium is a pretty powerful explosive on its own. It's also stable when stored for transport. It's given the X-Ray One classification because of its destructive nature. The unstable part of this equation is the trilithium resin, and I will pass this back to our engineering expert."

"Trilithium resin," Petra began immediately, "is the highly toxic and incredibly explosive compound that's produced by the newer antimatter/matter reaction chambers all over the Federation. We store ours in a highly contained environment aboard ship, generally in very small quantities. When we dock at Starbases, it has to be offloaded with all the other waste we get rid of, or else it poses a hazard to the ship."

Isira's brow furrowed. "Don't we have safety certifications for such hazardous duty?"

"We certainly do," confirmed Wilson. "No freighter leaves port without a security and safety clearance from a certified Starfleet inspector. According to the information transmitted by Starbase 310, prior to departure, all three freighters were carrying inspection certifications that were completed just before undocking."

"Assuming that everything checked out back at Three-Ten, what happened?" asked Kincaid.

Petra shrugged. "The problem with transporting trillithium resin is the highly unstable nature of it. It's like... uh... help me out, Mister Nieves..."

He smiled. "Nitro-glycerin."

"Exactly! Thank you. It's like transporting metric tons of nitro. Even if you package it in the most carefully-constructed, super-shock-absorbent crates, there's always that outside chance that it'll still go up on you," she continued her thought.

"You're saying this could've been an accident?" asked Isira.

Petra nodded. "The data collected so far by the shuttles points that way. The biggest problem we're facing here is that the explosive neatly vaporized that freighter into particles. It's really hard to piece together the ship to try and analyze the accident and determine fault. I'm surprised the shuttles were able to collect as much as they have so far."

Wilson tilted his head. "I'm not so sure we should write it off as an accident so quickly."

Kincaid made eye contact with the chief of security. "I tend to agree."

"Gentlemen, no matter how strong a containment field you might have set up on the resin, it only decreases the chance of detonation. It doesn't eliminate it. I think maybe our friends over there got a little too sloppy with their handling, in spite of the inspection, and this is the result."

Petra sat on the bench next to Isira, crossing her legs at the knees and putting her hands flat against the plush seat.

Isira looked at Kincaid with a smile. "She's very sure of herself, Commander."

Petra beamed. "Thank you, Counselor."

In the face of Betazoid certainty, Kincaid's resolve faltered briefly within his words. "I'm... reluctant to put the word 'accident' down on the report, just yet."

"I'm putting it down on mine," replied the chief engineer.

Kincaid told her, sharply, "That's your prerogative."

Isira's brow furrowed at Kincaid, while Wilson blanched at the response from their new executive officer. "Commander..."

"Mind your station, Mister Nieves." He settled into the center seat and nodded. "Thank you, Lieutenant Bartlet. You may return to your station."

Petra rose from her seat, wearing a blank expression on her face. "Aye, aye, sir," she replied, before moving into the nearest turbolift and asking it to whisk her back to main engineering.

"A moment of your time, please, Commander?" asked Isira, as she stood up and walked toward the ready room.

"Counselor, I really don't have a lot of time to spare."

She did not stop her progress as she replied, "I think you need to make the time, sir." The doors to the ready room parted and closed as soon as she moved inside.

With a heavy sigh, Kincaid's eyes drifted over to Wilson. "You have the bridge, Lieutenant."

"I have the bridge, aye, sir," noted Wilson.

When he arrived within the ready room, Isira sat behind the captain's desk and gestured toward him to sit down. He was immediately annoyed by her presumption to sit there and not allow him the courtesy as the senior officer.

"I sat here to make a point, Commander. In this conversation, you're not in charge," she told him evenly. "Sit down."

"Sir," he prompted her. "You say 'sir' when you talk to me, Lieutenant."

"If I am to address you as 'sir' in an informal private conversation, then you will address me as 'Counselor,'" she replied. "But I don't think that will be conducive to what I want to convey to you."

Kincaid narrowed his eyes at her. "Which is?"

"I sense from you that your response to the Chief Engineer was not typical, that you snapped at her because you're upset about something else. Or was that not regret I sensed from you the moment the words left your mouth?"

He bit back his first response and reformed it before saying, "I have the full confidence of the captain to handle my subordinates as I see fit and that is occasionally going to entail snapping at them. Counselor."

"No doubt but even you know that response on the bridge just now wasn't warranted. I agree, she seemed to rush to judgement, even if an accident is the most likely probability but I don't think it warranted a rebuke. So why don't we talk about what is actually bothering you so you can make a better impression on the folks you mean to lead?" Isira related this in a calm tone and gave him an expectant look.

Rage swirled within him, just as it had with Commander Elannis, the first time they'd met. He knew she sensed it with her Betazoid intuition and tried his best to calm down. Finally, he asked, "A better impression?"

"Yes. I can assure you that you have definite room for improvement, though having Lieutenant Atherton's approval is helping your cause in the Science Department."

"Abbie's good at convincing people of things," Kincaid allowed, relaxing slightly at the mention of a friend. "I don't have a lot of time right now, so is there some way to distill this into five or ten minutes?"

Isira gave him a wide. "Sure, I'll get right to the point. I'd like to discuss why you've been perpetually angry since I've known you."

"I'm not."

"And I thought we were done with the pretense."

"I'm angry, now, because you're wasting my time."

"I'd rather waste your time than watch you throw hostility around when people are trying to do their jobs. Please, answer my question."

He sighed, shaking his head, hoping that a quick admission to a woman who already knew what he was thinking would get him back to the bridge faster. "Ever since I got here, I've felt like I'm trespassing on someone else's lawn and the dog's barking his head off."

"That's a start, I guess. Why do you feel that way?"

"This was not the assignment I wanted."

Act Four

When he felt his helmet tear away from his head, his hands flew around him with his eyes closed while he held his breath. It went against his training, he knew, but the panic within him overwhelmed his training without hesitation. In his panic, he neglected to realize that the freefall sensation no longer existed and someone else's hands were upon him.

"It's okay, calm down," he heard a man's voice. Wait, he knew that voice.

"Lieutenant?" he croaked out. He managed to open his eyes and saw the lighted interior of the shuttle around him.

Greg smiled down at him. "Good to see you, Senior Chief. We've found your signal while we were on our way back to the ship."

To his left, Lieutenant Atherton ran a medical tricorder over him. "For the most part, he's okay. His lungs are going to have to adjust, though."

Tallan waved her off, not caring about the diagnosis. There were more important matters to attend to. "Did you find Ensign O'Day?"

The two lieutenants shared a surprised expression. "He was with you?" asked Greg.

"I'm not sure if he made it off the shuttle," admitted Tallan. "We were taking massive damage because of the field, and the shield emitters overloaded. He rigged the escape transporter while I polarized the hull to give us a little more time to get out of there." He stopped talking to cough as his lungs began to take in a thicker atmosphere than the one he was breathing.

"Easy, Senior," said Atherton. She and Greg propped him up to lean against the couch as the Tallan hacked violently. "You were breathing more CO2 than air in that suit."

Greg pushed for more information, trying to keep the urgency out of his voice. "When was the last time you saw Tommy?"

His voice was ragged, but the coughing died down long enough to allow him to answer. "He beamed me out of the shuttle first. There wasn't enough power for both of us to go." Tallan resumed another coughing fit on the edge of his last word.

"We found you floating quite some distance away from the debris field," admitted Greg worriedly. "If his distress beacon was active, it would have been picked up on our sensors as we found yours."

"Don't you give up, Lieutenant," coughed Tallan. "Don't you dare." The Andorian pulled himself up from the floor of the shuttle and moved to sit at the co-pilot's console. "Maybe his transceiver was damaged in the transport. It's not outside the realm of possibility."

Greg frowned. "I wasn't saying we give up. Just saying we couldn't find his beacon, is all. I'm not going to give up on Tommy." He sat in the seat next to the senior chief and programmed in a flight pattern.

Atherton reached for the communications controls to the right side of Tallan and opened a channel to *Farragut*.

Isira shook her head. "I don't understand. What makes this the wrong assignment?"

Kincaid sighed. "This captain has a reputation. She's well-connected."

"I know."

"So, then you understand."

"Not yet, but keep talking."

He ran his hand along the edge of the desk. "I... want my own command, someday. Soon."

"Surprise, surprise."

"Are you going to let me talk, or what?"

She raised her hand and bade him continue. "Sorry."

"As I was saying, my intention is to seek a command of my own. I moved from ship to ship, to gain as much experience as I possibly could, and on each ship, I served under captains who recognized my potential and did what they could to give me every opportunity."

"And Captain Leone won't?"

"Well, I'm not sure. But I get the sense that I'm not wanted, here. I see how she and Commander Elannis work together, and I feel like I'm the jerk who took the commander's seat from her." Kincaid checked to see her expression. "At least, that's the impression I'm getting."

"You got all that from two days of service?"

"Actually, it took a lot less than that to figure it out. Plus, with Commander Hargreaves on board, my thinking is that there's more to this classified mission of theirs than they're letting on. I'm not sure I'd want my career to be tied to a captain that's about to be court-martialed."

Isira narrowed her eyes toward the executive officer. "So the answer was to act like an ass? I'm sorry, but I don't follow. I'm not saying you're wrong, mind you. Your response just shouldn't be to act like the jerk they might think you are."

Kincaid's head snapped up. "What?" He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I don't usually use psychobabble on patients. I speak plainly because it gets my point across more effectively. Whatever your reasons are for having accepted this assignment, you're here for the long haul. Because you and I both know that you don't have it in you to seek a transfer so soon after reporting in," she replied calmly.

He grudgingly agreed with a nod.

"So why do you think that Captain Leone is about to be court-martialed?"

"Because the IG officer told me so before I stepped aboard."

"So it's not your impression of the captain, but hers," Isira noted pointedly.

"Well, honestly, I haven't seen anything that would warrant a court-martial from her though I'm the one who's supposed to lead the teams out there while she's the one who's supposed to stay on the bridge. I'm not sure why she's acting like the XO but it can't be because she wants me here."

Isira nodded in understanding. "You see a captain who is not used to being a captain, an officer who thought she was going to have your position but doesn't, and your response is not to talk to either officer but to snap at a fourth party. Do you see why I asked you to come in here?"

Again, Kincaid agreed with a resigned exhalation of breath. "Yeah."

"But, I think this is something you and I can work on. In addition to my recommendation that you speak to the captain when time permits to address this issue, I also want to recommend that you begin to see a counselor. I can set you up with a schedule and I'd like you to agree to it as your duties permit."

She didn't need her Betazoid abilities to see the look of surprise on his face. "What?"

"You know, I'm the ship's executive officer. I'm not sure it's a good idea-"

"Bridge to Commander Kincaid."

He did not hesitate. His hand reached up to open the channel, immediately. "Kincaid, here."

"Sir, incoming transmission from the shuttle *Garrovick*. Lieutenant Atherton is reporting the destruction of *Komarov*. They have Senior Chief Tallan aboard."

"Patch them through to the ready room, Lieutenant." He reached for the captain's desktop terminal and swivelled it around to face him. The screen powered up to show the Starfleet insignia before switching to Abbie's face. "Report."

"Sir, we found Senior Chief Tallan in an EVA suit floating away from the debris field. He's reported that his shuttle was destroyed by the combination of the bilitrium and trilithium resin. At this time, we do not have a location on Ensign O'Day, though the senior chief is unable to confirm whether or not the ensign made it out in time."

Isira moved from around the desk to look at the terminal screen, but remained out of view of the visual pickups.

Kincaid asked, "I assume you've begun search operations for the ensign?"

"Yes, sir. Lieutenant Aspinall and the senior chief have come up with a flight path that will make sure of our limited sensor range," replied Abbie. Her eyes kept drifting off-screen as she spoke.

"Something wrong, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. We're just coming really close to the edge of the field, now," she told him, though the last three words of her sentence contained interference.

Kincaid's voice hardened. "Maintain a minimum safe distance from the field."

As Abbie made her reply, the visual image on the screen showed severe interference until the signal was lost altogether. The display now exhibited the same insignia as before and a note saying that the transmission ended at the source.

"Damn it," he spat. "Mister Nieves, I want to speak to Starbase 310."

"*Starship Rangers*?" repeated Iris. "I remember that show. I used to watch it as a little kid."

Yvonne nodded. "My parents wouldn't let me watch it. It was a little too violent for their liking, so I had to wait until I was older."

"Well," said the captain as she relaxed in her seat, "Ariel grew up on *Starship Rangers* and is a huge fan of the show. She's actually been to conventions when she has leave."

"I've been to fifty-two," Ariel said proudly. "I've met all the actors, and I have one of the original helmets with all of their autographs in storage back home."

Leone chuckled. "She's a nutty fangirl. Anyway, when we were both serving on *Victory*, she predicted I would make captain someday, and

made me promise that when that happened, she would get to name one of the auxiliary craft after the ship."

Yvonne could not hold in her snort. "*That's* where you got the name *Lydia*? That's hilarious!"

Ariel smiled, showing off her teeth. "I've always wanted to serve on a ship named *Lydia*. It's the reason I joined Starfleet."

"No, it's *not*," retorted Leone. "Stop making shit up. She wanted Starfleet because she wanted to get away from her mother. She got denied an appointment to the Academy--"

"Hey!" said Ariel defensively.

"She got denied and joined as an enlisted, instead."

"Are we just going to spill out my entire life's history?"

Leone ignored her, "She got her degree by correspondence when she made third class petty officer and then applied to the officer candidate's school and got her commission."

Iris and Yvonne now looked at Ariel with more respect. "Wow," said Iris. "I'm not sure if I would have had the tenacity."

"You would if you had her mother."

Ariel frowned. "I really wanted to be an officer. No offense, Crewman."

McComas shook her head. "None taken, Commander. We in the enlisted ranks do not look down on the commissioned folk. We just know that they need a little more hand-holding than we do."

All eyes were on the captain. She wore a smirk on her lips and levied a pointed glare at Ariel. "Some more than others."

Everyone shared in a relaxed chuckle as a signal caught the attention of Ensign Colby. "Incoming transmission from *Farragut*, Captain," reported Yvonne.

"On screen."

The face of Commander Kincaid appeared. "Captain."

She recognized the interior of her ready room, but decided not to say anything about it. "Jesse, what's up?"

"Sir, Lieutenant Atherton is reporting the loss of the shuttle *Komarov*. They were able to retrieve Senior Chief Tallan, but Ensign O'Day is still missing."

"And they're not equipped for a search and rescue. Contact Starbase 310--"

"I already have, sir."

Leone grinned. "Good. What did the admiral tell you?"

"They're dispatching *Excalibur* and *Sutherland* to assist us. They will arrive shortly."

"We've only finished deploying about a quarter of the hazard buoys, but we can lend a hand as soon as we're done," she said, adjusting her seated position. "Ensign Colby, deploy this next buoy."

"Aye, sir. Buoy is away."

Kincaid added, "I've ordered five of the other shuttles to converge on the *Garrovick's* present location to aid in the search. That should allow you to finish dropping buoys. Maybe we'll have found him by then."

"I can only hope so, Jesse. Keep us apprised of their efforts, and let us know if they find him."

"Aye, sir."

"Thank you. *Lydia*, out."

Ariel had the presence of mind to speak after the transmission ended. "Our new XO takes the initiative, doesn't he?"

The captain grinned. "It's only fair. I left him in command of the ship, while we're out here sifting the debris. Let's get this done and then join the search."

"Aye, Captain. Coming about."

"Where could he be?" wondered Greg as he brought the shuttle's nose around for a third pass of the same search pattern. It had been over two hours since they brought the senior chief aboard. In that time, they covered the range a suit could make adrift without any thrust. "He couldn't have drifted off too far away from you."

Tallan pushed his lips together with concern while his hands continued to work the console in front of him. "I've done what I can with the shuttle's sensors, sir. But, we might have to face the fact that he did not make it off the shuttle in time."

Greg turn on him, and in a sharp tone, he told him, "You don't know that! His suit could have been damaged."

"If that's true," said Abbie, "then it's possible he's already dead. It's also just as likely that he was beamed to a different location because the transporter was damaged mid-transport." She did not elaborate on all of the injuries such an issue could cause.

Clearly, Greg did not want to admit that. The expression on his face betrayed the thin layer of composure he was struggling to maintain. "I'm not going to give up on him. Not until I see the body. I say we expand the search pattern a bit more."

Tallan nodded. "Agreed."

Greg's hand moved quickly to enter in the new ranges into the flight controls. "I'm expanding the range another fifty kilometers."

Abbie asserted herself, "I'm the senior officer, here."

Both men turned to look up at her in askance.

"I *am*," she assured them.

Tallan glanced over to Greg briefly before returning his gaze to her. "I don't doubt it, it's just... you're a science officer."

"And a department head, Senior Chief."

Greg blew a puff of air toward his forehead. "So, what're you saying? We give up?"

"No, I didn't say that. I just mean, there's a protocol to carrying out orders."

"Fine," Greg replied, throwing his hands up. "What are your orders, Lieutenant, sir?"

"We need to do more than just expand the size of the search parameters, we need to change the search pattern to focus on the most likely transport areas." Abbie tapped a new pattern into the console in front of her. "This one is going allow us to cover more area in a shorter amount of time while also..."

Tallan interrupted her. "We have some incoming ships showing up on long-range sensors, sir."

"Identify them," said Abbie.

"One moment, Lieutenant," replied the senior chief. "Ah, they're ours. I'm reading the shuttles *Pythagoras* and *Scobee* on approach."

Greg sighed with relief. "The more, the merrier."

Even Abbie managed a smile. "Assign each shuttle a piece of the pattern and let's get to work. First person to find Ensign O'Day gets a corned-beef sandwich."

Tallan wrinkled his nose. "A *what*?"

Greg chuckled. "It's an expression. A small prize for completing the task. It gives you incentive."

"Yes, but couldn't you just get one from the replicator?"

"I suppose, yes, you could... but..." Greg's voice trailed off as gazed back at Abbie for assistance. When she offered none, he shrugged. "To be honest, it's from before my time. "

When the senior chief shot a glance at Abbie, she offered no help, either. "Don't look at me; it's something my father used to say all the time."

Tallan scoffed. With a shake of his head, he addressed the console, "Stupid Terran expressions. If you're going to offer me some incentive, get me a date with the dabo girl on Starbase 310."

Act Five

Captain's Log Supplemental

The arrival of Excalibur and Sutherland within the sector has made it easier to ward off traffic until the volatile nature of the field has time to dissipate and prove less of a major hazard to ships passing between Starbase 310 and Deep Space Four. Unfortunately, this will cause a major delay to many shipping and passenger liners that operate this close to the Cardassian border.

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

"My name is Ariel Ivanda Etsuko Katayama Elannis. My rank is Lieutenant Commander. My title is chief of operations. My present assignment is the starship USS *Farragut*."

Tricia Hargreaves smiled at Ariel. "Thank you for appearing, Commander."

"Oh, it's your pleasure, I'm sure," replied Ariel mockingly.

"I assume, for the record, that you don't want to be here?"

"You assume correctly. For the record, I think this investigation is a complete waste of everyone's time."

Tricia's pleasure at Ariel's disdain for the investigation was clear by her smile. "You were carried on the crew roster as the ship's chief of operations as of Stardate 4322-"

"I was carried as the ship's chief of operations and the acting executive officer," corrected Ariel quickly. "I also supported Captain Leone's actions completely. Are we done, now?"

"No, Commander, I'm afraid we're not," Hargreaves said with a satisfied smirk. Her fingers tapped against the surface of the padd, but nothing changed on the PADD's display. She merely tapped in a refresh command over and over to give the appearance of recalling information. "On Stardate 43224.3, Captain Leone gave the order to alter the ship's heading to rendezvous with the Kasui fortress. According to the reports gathered from the logs and reports, you were in conference with the captain prior to her order."

"So?"

"Were you included in the discussion regarding that change?"

"Yes, I was."

"Could you tell me about it?"

"Sure."

They sat in silence for a moment, before Hargreaves sighed. "What did you and the captain discuss in her ready room, prior to her issuing the order to alter course?"

"The captain was intent on withdrawing the ship from Tristnor space at the best possible speed."

Hargreaves' jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"The captain," she repeated, as though she were speaking to a person of lesser intelligence, "was intent on withdrawing the ship from Tristnor space at the best possible speed."

"Thank you," came the very dry reply. "What I meant to ask was, why was this information not included in the official report?"

"Because the conversation was conducted in private, and Captain Leone stands by her orders. She is a woman of conviction and great passion." Ariel leaned forward and a smirk appeared on her lips. "As you well know."

Tricia cleared her throat. "What did you and the captain discuss prior to the change in her orders?"

"A lot of things."

"Be specific."

"I don't think that's relevant to your investigation."

"I determine what's relevant and what's not. Answer the question."

Ariel rolled her eyes as Tricia postured. She folded her arms and looked up at the bulkhead as though she were trying to recall the salient details of the conversation. "We discussed the situation and how the Prime Directive applied. She was certain that the Prime Directive did apply in this situation, and I played devil's advocate. We often do that when we're trying to dissect the circumstances."

"I'm sure that you do. In this case, it seems that your advocacy of an evil agenda worked on the captain."

"I dare say that it did."

"Pardon me?"

"You heard me. I was the one who convinced the captain to change her mind. If there's any blame to be laid, I think I should be the one to-"

"Hold it right there, Commander. The captain ultimately made the decision to alter course and join the conflict with clear disregard toward Federation law."

"Then I'm an accessory. I supported her orders and I never questioned them once."

"That's nice, but-"

"Furthermore, I led the assault on the facility and was the principal liaison officer coordinating the joint efforts between-"

"Commander, that much is a matter of record, and I have to caution you that by admitting your guilt, you may open yourself up to charges-"

Ariel scoffed, "Where you're concerned, Trish, I'm fucking counting on charges being brought."

"*Lieutenant Commander* Hargreaves, please. I don't recall giving you permission to refer to me by my first-"

"Oh, shove it up your ass, Trish. We go way back, you and I. All the way back to *Victory*, remember? I was there, and I know what happened when Kry's found out about your little problem."

Hargreaves shut off the log and fumed. "I would have fixed it, until she went and blabbed to Captain Wainwright-"

"As her duty entailed..."

"God damn you!" thundered Hargreaves, feeling her emotional control vanish. "Both of you! You both think you're so smug, sitting here on your very own ship, handed to you-"

"To me?"

"To *her*!"

"That's what this is about, isn't it?" asked Ariel, leaning back with her voice level. "You're here for revenge."

Trish slammed her fist onto the table. "I'm here for justice! That slimy bitch weaseled her way up the ranks and managed to use her mommy's influence to gain a starship command she had no business in accepting in the first place!"

Ariel got to her feet so quickly, the chair jumped out from under her and skidded on its wheels until the momentum carried it too far and it toppled to the ground. By the time it did, Ariel had already risen to lean menacingly over the conference table. "Because we go way back," she said, softly but furiously, "I'm going to give you a few seconds to revise your statement."

Seeing her move as quickly as she did caused a tsunami of fear to well up inside of Hargreaves. "A-Are you threatening me?"

"Not at all," said Ariel with a Cheshire grin on her face. "I'm stating fact. And your time is nearly up, Trish. What's it going to be?"

Hargreaves swallowed visibly. "I believe I have everything I need from you, Commander. You may leave."

Ariel stood upright with a self-satisfied smirk. "Coward to the last."

The field of stars beneath his feet reminded him of the story his father used to tell him about walking in the Land of Eternal Midnight. As the story went, a guard that lived on a moon in orbit of a world that had a single occupant; a princess for whom he was to watch over and protect from any harm that space might bring. One day, after years of maintaining his vigilant watch over her, he decides to abandon his post to meet her. In order to make the journey from the moon to the planet, he walks within the Land of Eternal Midnight and has many adventures among the stars.

Of course, he felt like the guard, but no adventure other than the obvious one of survival met him as he floated with his limbs outstretched. Vertigo claimed him long ago, as he lost his sense of up and down or left and right. For a moment, he almost reveled in the feeling of being within the hold of nothing, but that moment flew away from him just as soon as it had come.

He looked down at the panel on his arm to check the status of the suit's life support system. The numbers on the display reinforced the notion of keeping his breathing as steady as possible to prevent the hoards of panic waiting to bust down his training-instilled control. He knew that his short-range radio call was not likely to reach anyone. He knew that there was a real possibility of dying of asphyxiation before any other demise he could think of. At least, the other kinds would require a ship to drop in, and he hoped that they would have the presence of mind to save him rather than shoot at him.

No matter how hard he tried, sleep did not seem to come to him. The tight fist of freefall clenched at his stomach, preventing the natural desire to blissfully carry him off so that he could at least let the time pass by faster than simply waiting in the void for a rescue that may or may not come. He wished he could sleep. His eyelids felt heavy, so he closed them, trying to imagine floating on his back in a pool of warm water and it began to work.

That's right, he thought. That's where I am. I'm in the pool at the Academy, just floating on my back when the days got really rough and I couldn't deal with it anymore. Well, this is one of the rougher days of your life and you could surely use that pool right now, couldn't you?

As Tommy O'Day floated in the Land of Eternal Midnight, he spoke aloud to himself with a slow nod:

"Yes, I sure could."

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