

The Unreturned Prodigal

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The Unreturned Prodigal

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

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

Stardate 43322: Kincaid is identified as the likely father of a child recently orphaned on Starbase 214. When the tests come back showing a relation that no one anticipated, Kincaid is forced to confront his past and make decisions about his future. Meanwhile, *Farragut* takes on a new crewmember and Wilson begins to deal with some of the personal fallout his ascension to Chief of Security has caused.

Notes

This story was originally published on 06 May 2013 on the classic Ad Astra site, under a different name than my current nom-de-plume.

Historian's Note: The events in this story take place just before the TNG episode, "The Enemy."

Teaser

Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead

By Lord McCovey Cove and A. J. Gertner

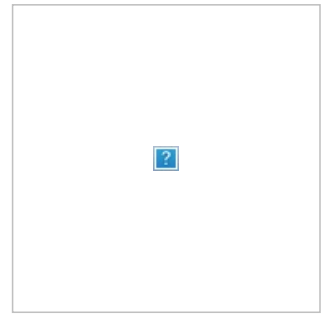
Episode Seven: The Unreturned Prodigal

NCC-65420 (USS *Phoenix*)

Docked at Starbase 310

Stardate 43322

Starboard Airlock



"Permission to come aboard, sir," said Captain Krystine Leone as she strode through the inner airlock door.

"Permission granted, sir. Welcome aboard, Captain. It's a real honor to make your acquaintance." The lieutenant commander standing just within the door brushed back a strand of brunette hair before extending her hand. Her blue eyes sparkled above a light dusting of freckles.

Leone accepted the proffered hand, inwardly taken aback by the warm welcome. "Uh, likewise, Commander...?"

"Oh! Hayes, sir. Olivia Hayes."

"Good to meet you," said Leone with a smile of her own. "I'm Krystine Leone."

"I know."

The handshake continued for a while longer than normal, and the captain looked down. "Can I have my hand back?"

"Sorry!" said Hayes, dropping her hand as though it was on fire. "As I was saying, sir, your reputation precedes you."

Leone shot her an arched glance. "Does it, now?"

"Oh, no! I didn't mean it like that, sir. I just meant that I've been so looking forward to meeting you."

Unable to help the discomfiture presented by the commander's demeanor, Leone gestured toward the corridor. "Er, yes, well... I assume Captain Maxwell is awaiting my arrival?"

"Of course, sir," Hayes calmed herself noticeably. "I'm sorry about gushing like that."

"It's all right, I guess," she said, as they began down the corridor toward the turbolift. "I just wonder what you've been told."

Hayes grinned, as if she had just been waiting for the opening. "My sister is Elisabeth Hayes, class of '49."

The information certainly changed Leone's demeanor, who now regarded her warmly. "You're Lisa's little sister? Wait a minute."

"Sir?"

"She told me that her sister's name was Janna, not Olivia."

A light blush settled upon Hayes' cheeks. "It's Olivia *Sarjanna* Hayes," she explained. "Janna is a nickname Lisa gave me when I was three."

Leone gave Hayes a wider and warmer smile than before. "Oh, well, gosh, you're practically family, then. No wonder I got the full court press back there. "

Hayes held her smile. "I apologize if I startled you, sir."

Leone chuckled. "Think nothing of it." As Hayes led her down the corridor into the ship, she mentioned, "I haven't spoken to Lisa in a long time. How is she doing?"

"Oh, she's doing fine. She's pulling shore duty right now at Starbase 10 for a few years to get some experience under her belt before she pushes for that fourth pip." They made it to the turbolift and entered. "Main Bridge."

As the car moved upward, Leone thought it over. "Last time I saw her, she was shipping out for a four year tour on *Crazy Horse* as their operations officer."

Hayes considered that. "She finished that tour not too long ago, with another solid pip on her collar and wearing red instead of gold."

"Good for her. I'll have to get in touch with her at some point and tell her we ran into each other," promised Leone, just as the doors to the lift opened to present the main bridge of *Phoenix*.

"I'll do the same," grinned Hayes. "This way, please, sir." She led Leone from the rear turbolift onto the bridge. It was nearly exact same module she'd become accustomed to on *Farragut*, with the notable exception that the navy blue trim was replaced with a bright, almost fire engine red.

Leone thought it looked bizarre against the beige tone of the carpet, and absolutely awful against the wood grain of the tactical horseshoe at the rear of the bridge. Nevertheless, she stepped down to the lower half of the bridge and waited for her escort to signal the commanding officer that she arrived.

The doors to the ready room slid open shortly after Hayes pressed the panel to the side. Like the bridge, the captain's ready room's trim matched that of the ship's signature color, and within sat Captain Benjamin Maxwell.

Maxwell, like Leone, served during the Cardassian Wars, although as the commanding officer of the starship *Rutledge*. Leone, on the other hand, served as a junior operations officer aboard *Intrepid*. Maxwell's status as a hero of those wars far outweighed her contributions. She felt like she was meeting a living legend of Starfleet.

Hayes grinned widely. "Captain Benjamin Maxwell, it is my privilege to present Captain Krystine Leone of the starship *Farragut*."

"Thank you, XO. That will be all," said Maxwell tersely, without looking up from the terminal on top of his desk.

"Sir, I beg your indulgence-

Captain Maxwell's eyes lifted to fix his executive officer with a cold stare. The chilling glare did more to interrupt her than his words. "That *will* be all."

Hayes' demeanor changed considerably at his second response. "Aye, aye, sir," she replied, taking a step back before twisting on her heels and exiting. Her abrupt departure seemed to suck all the warmth from the room, as the other captain sat behind his desk.

Leone waited for Maxwell to acknowledge her, let alone offer her a seat. She affected a subordinate stance while in his ready room, as she would expect of a visiting captain to hers. Aboard his or her own ship, the captain was the final authority over all those aboard.

"Thank you," he said finally, "for arriving so quickly."

She inclined her head succinctly, and allowed a smile to spread over her lips. "Of course, sir. I've been looking forward to meeting you."

Maxwell allowed his gaze to meet hers. She searched his eyes for any hint of cordiality, but found none. "Have you?"

Leone bristled at his tone and demeanor. "Yes, sir. I have a friend who served under you aboard *Rutledge*."

"Is that so?" he asked, dispassionately.

"Yes, sir. Lieutenant Commander Ariel Elannis. She's my chief of operations. She served as a third class master-at-arms during the war," supplied Leone, trying to find some way to make a connection with the senior captain. "She speaks very highly of you, sir."

The wrinkles around his eyes softened slightly. "I'm sure she does, though I wish I could say the same. I'm afraid I don't recall making her acquaintance."

"Well, sir, if you'd like, I'm certain she would love the pleasure."

"Perhaps, if there's time."

She nodded. "Of course, sir."

"Now, as you may or may not be aware, Admiral T'Ciryra has assigned your vessel under my command for patrol operations along the Cardassian border."

"Yes, sir. I received my written orders this morning, shortly before receiving your request to see me."

The previous softness disappeared and his tone grew an edge. "It wasn't a request, Captain. It was an order."

In that moment, Leone felt like a first year midshipman once more, standing before the Academy superintendent's desk. She stiffened and stood at attention out of habit. "Yes, sir."

"I understand that you and Rear Admiral T'Ciryra are old friends."

"I served under her command as executive officer of *Potemkin*, and before that aboard *Victory*."

"And you are the daughter of retired Vice Admiral Angelina Leone, the former Chief of Starfleet Tactical."

"Yes, sir."

"I also understand that your command was by order of the current chief of Starfleet Intelligence, Rear Admiral Alynna Nechayev."

"Yes, sir."

"And that you have connections with the family of Vice Admiral Joy Aspinall, the sitting vice-chief of Starfleet Operations."

"Yes, sir. Our families lived next door to one another for years. In fact," she added with mild pride, "her youngest son is my lead flight controller."

The word "controller" hung in the air as Captain Maxwell said nothing in response to that, seemingly content to consider her words in quiet repose. As the moments dragged, Leone felt herself becoming increasingly unsure of her footing within the suddenly cramped ready room.

"I see," he said, slowly. A gentle tap on the control panel of the desktop terminal rewarded him with a soft audio tone. The information that appeared on the screen widened his eyes noticeably. "I've been serving in Starfleet for over thirty years; fourteen as a commanding officer." He gestured at her toward the open seat before his desk.

"Thank you, sir," she said, seating herself accordingly.

Maxwell offered a sly grin that did not touch his eyes. "Your first mission as captain seems to have been placed on classified hold by three different admirals; two of whom I just mentioned. I attempted to access them, and was met with clearance requests above my current level. That level, I might add, that is considerably higher than yours."

She decided to say nothing to that, giving him a blank look in return.

He continued, "In fact, these holds came about due to the fact that you were being investigated by the office of the Inspector General. Coincidence?"

Leone's expression did not change. "I wouldn't dare presume to debate the wisdom of Starfleet Command, sir."

His grin never dropped. "I'm sure you wouldn't, Captain. It's difficult to debate with a decision that works to your favor."

"I'm not certain of what to say to that, sir," she admitted, honestly.

Maxwell rose from his seat and stood before the viewport, looking out at the traffic surrounding the Starbase. "Perhaps it's better for you to say nothing, Captain. However, were our positions reversed, I would concern myself with my growing reputation within Starfleet."

Enough was enough, she thought. Out of respect for Maxwell, she got to her feet and stood behind him. She kept her tone respectful with her reply, "I'm not sure if I catch your meaning. Have I done something wrong?"

"The fact that you're unaware of it only makes it worse, Captain Leone," he said, refusing to face her. "Are you aware that some of your brother and sister officers have taken to calling you 'Princess Krystine'?"

Upon the mention of that nickname, Leone's gaze dropped to the surface of his desk. A ball of tension began to form in the pit of her stomach as the memories of ridicule from her Academy classmates during her first year surfaced at all once. Her hands moved to the small of her back as she clenched them together tightly. "No, sir, I was not."

"I see. Perhaps now that you are aware, Captain, you may take steps to reduce the scope of your political ties and prove yourself to be as capable an officer as the Admiralty believes you to be."

Leone did her best to maintain a stony expression of neutrality. She did not want him to see that he scored a direct hit on her ego, and in turn, she did not need him to perceive any sign of disrespect toward him. "I thank you, sir, for your kind advice."

"It is not kind, Captain," he corrected her sharply. "I have a vested interest in seeing those ships under my command working together as a cohesive unit. Unfortunately, I believe it will take some time for your ship to find its place within our task force."

She inclined her head. "Yes, sir. I understand."

He turned away from the view and reseated himself behind his desk. Maxwell tapped his desktop terminal and turned it around to face her. "Until I can be more certain of your ability to work in a unit with other ships, you will be tasked to patrol commercial traffic between Starbase 211 and Starbase 47."

Leone tilted her head and did nothing to hide her displeasure. "Sir, *Farragut* is a heavy cruiser, not a cutter. I assumed that we would be given an assignment as a command vessel for a region of the border, not for simple picket duty. That's a complete misuse of resources!"

Maxwell's upper lip twitched in response before he raised his voice. "That is for me to decide, Captain! I command this task force, not you."

Leone sat back as though he slapped her in the face. This was practically unheard of! And to have it coming from Benjamin Maxwell, of all people. "Sir, I respectfully request that you reconsider."

He did not hesitate. "My decision stands."

"Aye, sir," replied Leone. She mentally cataloged every word he said for her report to Aunt Alynna.

"There will be no further cover provided by your family and friends. Under my command, your 'royalty,' as it were, means nothing. We work for a living."

"Aye, sir."

"And should I hear that you complained to one of your highly-placed friends or members of your own family, and believe me... I will. It will only serve to reinforce your sub-standard reputation."

Damn. "Understood, sir."

Maxwell reached down for a convenient PADD and offered it to her. "However, for a small bit of respite before you're apparently consigned to your would-be insignificance, your executive officer has a personal matter to attend to on Starbase 310. Until the situation is resolved, you will remain in port."

"Sir?"

Maxwell's tone was cold. "It seems you're not the only officer on board with a reputation. There's an orphaned child on the starbase and his DNA matches that of your Commander Kincaid. I hope you have a replacement for him aboard. The Border Service is no place for a child."

Act One

Act One

Commander Jesse Kincaid stared at the picture of the woman on the viewscreen on the captain's desk. "I've never seen her before, sir. I certainly never slept with her," he vehemently denied. He was standing before her desk, along with Ariel and Doctor Sovera. The latter held a PADD of her own and was reviewing the information upon it.

"Jacob Reardon," read Leone from the desktop terminal. "Mother was Cassandra Reardon, father not identified on his birth record. According to the JAG Officer aboard the starbase, they feel they have sufficient evidence in the DNA match to place him in your custody."

"She's certainly attractive enough," Ariel commented. Cassandra Reardon had been an appealing woman, with long, blonde hair and bright blue eyes.

"I think I'd remember speaking to a woman who looked like that. I certainly would remember sleeping with her," Kincaid bit out.

"The initial analysis provided by Starbase 310 appears accurate," Sovera interjected in a mild tone. "You and the child share a number of genes. Of course, this analysis must be confirmed with a full genescan as the starbase lacked one on file for the commander. The medical team obtained a partial from records."

Kincaid shook his head. "Look, there has to be some mistake. I know I didn't sleep with her so I couldn't be related to this child." He ran a hand through his brown hair nervously, then dropped the hand to his side. "At the time, I was in a serious relationship with someone. I didn't cheat on her." He evaluated the looks he was receiving from the three women and straightened his spine. "Sir, you have to believe me. I never met this Reardon woman, and I am not the father of her child. I'm sorry he's an orphan but he's not mine."

"Jesse, I believe you," assured Leone. She placed her hands with fingers interlaced atop her desk and leaned forward. "The best thing we can do right now is to determine without a doubt this paternity issue."

"Thank you," breathed Kincaid.

"That being said, we have to investigate this fully. Maybe Miss Reardon acquired Jesse's DNA in some untoward fashion," Leone said as she spoke to Sovera.

Sovera nodded. "It's possible, but I would need both the child and the commander to report to sickbay for testing to determine consanguinity."

Leone replied, "Fine. Ariel, contact starbase security and make arrangements for the child to be brought aboard. This will be a short-term visit, and they can send anyone they need to with, uh..." She looked down at the terminal's display to recall the name, "Jacob."

"Will do," said Ariel.

"Should he turn out to be your son," Leone continued, directing her gaze to Jesse, "you know what this will mean, right?"

Kincaid clenched his jaw for a moment before answering, a muscle visibly rippling. "I'll have to transfer off *Farragut*."

"You missed the festival again," said the man on the viewscreen.

Wilson Nieves winced at his words. "I know, I'm sorry. I wanted to be there."

"I know," the man replied with a frown. "But maybe it was better that you weren't. The main plaza was crowded and you get all anxious when you don't have a clear line of sight."

Wilson looked down at his hands. "Yeah, but I would have not let it bother me if you were there by my side."

The man grinned. "You always say the nicest things to me."

"Well, it's because I love you, Sephon," Wilson's smile widened. "And I miss you, terribly."

"I miss you, too, Wils," Sephon said warmly. He looked at the small screen nearby and asked, "So, when will you be returning? Within a week?"

"Uh, no..." Wilson looked off-screen as well, only to avoid the smiling face of Sephon. "No, I actually have been reassigned."

"Reassigned?" Sephon's tan face contorted slightly in confusion. "I thought you had leave until the end of next month. You promised me we would spend this time together, remember?"

Wilson swallowed visibly. "I didn't forget that I promised, but this amazing assignment came up and there wasn't a lot of time to make a decision..."

"You could've called me."

"I'm sorry."

"Wilson, I took leave from *my* ship so we could spend this time together, and now you're telling me that it was for nothing?"

Wilson weakly replied, "At least you get to see your family on Risa, right?"

Sephon's smile had long departed, replaced with a scowl. "That wasn't the point of me coming home and you know it." He opened his mouth to continue, but stopped. "I'm not going to waste my time on this conversation. You've made your decision, and I'll have to put up with it."

Wilson sighed, feeling worse after the Risian relented than when he was haranguing him. "You're still angry."

"I'll get over it," Sephon promised. "But you have to know something."

"What?"

"There are only so many times I'm going to let you disappoint me and then that's it."

"I know." Wilson raised his hand as though he would reach through the screen. "But, we've talked about this before. Both of us are pursuing our careers and that means we're going to have take our promotions when they're offered. It isn't always going to be convenient."

Sephon sighed. "That's not just it. How long have you known about your reassignment?"

Wilson shifted on his feet and cleared his throat. "A little under a month..."

"A month," Sephon stated coolly. "Well, since that was *before* my leave began, I suppose I can be furious with you for not telling me."

"I didn't know how to tell you. You were so excited about getting some real time off, how long it's been since you've had more than a day or two..."

"I was excited to spend it with you! Not to spend six weeks with my family!"

"You don't make it easy for me to disappoint you, when you act like that every time."

Sephon paused, then shook his head. "Wils, you know you are in the wrong here. You know it. I'm done with this conversation if you're just going to try and somehow make yourself the injured party." He wasted no time in terminating the transmission.

Wilson stared at the blank screen for a brief moment, stunned at the sudden disconnection. He took in a deep breath and felt his stomach knot tightly before turning around to face the interior of his quarters. He spoke aloud a single word that only he could hear:

"Shit."

Lieutenant (jg) Gregory Aspinall's gazed without focus at the ships moving in to dock at the starbase through the window of the lounge. Since the end of his shift on the bridge, he took to sitting at the table that he and Tommy shared daily. His formerly ice cold drink bled droplets of condensation upon the surface, creating a cold puddle around the base of the tall pilsner glass. Though he had every intention of drinking its contents, he never touched it again.

"Is there something wrong with your drink?" asked Caryn Johnson, the civilian manager of Ten-Forward. She stood behind him, holding an empty tray in her arms, flat against her chest.

Greg jumped at unexpected voice, pulled out of his unbroken gaze. "What?" he asked, confused.

"I can get you something else, if you'd like?" she offered with a grin.

"What?" he repeated. He looked down at the drink and put it all together. "No, I'm fine."

Caryn slipped into an empty seat across from him. Tommy's seat. "You're not fine."

"I know," conceded Greg, with a voice barely above a whisper.

"You've been here every day, sitting at this table by yourself, staring out the front of the ship for hours on end," she said. Her blue eyes made contact with his, and he felt unnerved by her scrutiny. "Is it that hard to let go?"

Greg said nothing in response to her question, finding it difficult to speak. Eventually, he forced out a very terse, "Yes."

"Why?"

"What?"

Caryn leaned back in her seat and set her tray atop the table. "Tell me about Tommy. I didn't know him very well. How did you guys meet?"

Greg swallowed hard; forcing the emotions back down long enough to reply. "He was a year behind me at the Academy. I was his unit leader when he was a freshman."

"What kind of midshipman was he?"

"At first? Not a very good one. Naïve, but tenacious," he replied with a wistful smile. "Unless you were lucky, like me, you spend most of your first year trying to decide what you want to do with your career after graduation. You have to declare your major by the end of your first year, and when you finish general education at the end of your second, you spend the last two years studying your specialty."

"You chose command?"

"I chose flight. Which means I wear red, and I'm an unrestricted line officer."

"And Tommy chose engineering."

"Not at first."

"Oh?"

"Tommy chose flight, too. But he was pretty bad," chuckled Greg. "He picked up basic piloting, no problem, but when it came to advanced concepts..."

Caryn smiled. "He failed a lot?"

"He realized his limitations early on," he told her, now meeting her gaze warmly. "He wasn't quite sure what to do. And then there was this one time he and I decided to prank Foxtrot Unit at Kirk Hall."

"Why?"

"Well, Foxtrot Unit and Delta Unit have always had a long traditional rivalry at the Academy. Usually, it was limited to the usual pranks at homecoming, but while we were there, the rivalry tended to escalate, if you know what I mean."

She showed her teeth as she listened to him speak. "It got personal?"

"No, not personal. It got complex, you know?" When she shook her head, he explained, "The first prank is always the theft of the hall's bust. We were housed in April Hall, so there's a bust in the lobby of Commodore April, just as there's one of Captain Kirk in theirs. The night before the homecoming game, both halls go on full alert. Patrols to guard against thieves, and we send out a team to pull off the theft. We got theirs, they didn't get ours."

"How did you do it?"

"It was Tommy's idea, actually. We both set up scattering fields to prevent a transport. Tommy used two commbadges and a tricorder to emit a high-frequency pulse to disable the field. We beamed it into the Superintendent's office!" Greg snickered, "The next morning at assembly, the old man is standing out there with his hand on the head of the statue. He looks at the midshipmen from Kirk Hall and says, "Will you please escort the Captain back to his place of honor?"

Caryn chortled. "Did he punish them?"

"No. I think the embarrassment of being called out was more than enough, but it did set off a chain of events that, shall we say, resulted in a midshipman beamed to a lecture in the nude."

"That's not funny."

"Tommy didn't think so, either," Greg replied as he played with the glass' base, drawing a line with the puddle to the edge of the table. "He was the one who ended up showing off his meager physique to the students of Professor Sobel's Intro to Astrogation lecture."

"Oh, my..."

Greg nodded solemnly. "Naturally, Tommy sought some payback. None of us were about to tell him to back down. If it had been any one of us, we'd be in the same mood. So I did the only thing I could. I helped him."

"When in your years at the Academy was this?"

"Near the end of my sophomore year and his freshman. He was still kind of bent on doing flight, but not quite sure about his chances. The genius part of his payback was how he did it, and this led to his entrance on the engineering track."

"How is that?"

"He spent nearly a week and a half designing and programming a simulation for the entire Foxtrot Unit in one of the Academy's holoreams. He booked it for use for twenty-four hours, then beamed them all into it, which, by the way, consumed all our combined remaining transporter credits for the whole year. I'm not even sure what was even in the program, but all I know is that after that, they left him the hell alone." He paused. "The next day, Tommy signed up for engineering courses. He said he found his calling when he was devising all the little traps and devices he created during our little war."

"And you've been friends ever since?"

Greg nodded slowly. "We made it out of April Hall and into the junior/senior residences together. We shared a suite my senior year. When I transferred here for the pre-commissioning unit, I recommended him to Lieutenant Bartlet. I even called in a favor from my mother to make sure his first assignment was *Farragut*. I thought that we'd serve together for years-" His throat tightened, preventing his speech. Again, he swallowed and regained his composure. "If I, uh, hadn't done that..."

"Don't go down that road, Greg," Caryn warned with a finger pointed at him. "He could have declined the assignment and requested another. He accepted the transfer."

"Because of me," Greg replied, allowing a tear to fall from his left eye and down his cheek. "He wanted to serve with me, like we always talked about at the Academy."

"Greg." Caryn softened her tone and moved into the seat nearest him. She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder and told him, "Tommy made his choice, and he knew the risk of serving. This is not your fault."

He lifted his hand to wipe away the cool wetness from his face and gave her a brave smile.

"And I think Tommy would be most unhappy to know that you're beating yourself up over this. Don't you?"

"Yes, he would."

She stood up behind him and embraced his shoulders as he remained seated. He touched her arm with his hands to accept it. "I think you should go and talk to Counselor Otex, Greg. I know she can help you."

Greg stiffened. "No, I'm all right. I mean, you're right. It's not my fault." He stood from his seat, leaving his drink there. "I need to get some shut-eye before my next shift. Thanks for the talk, Caryn. I really appreciate it." He left her behind as quickly as he could without running; he moved briskly through the lounge until the ornate doors slide shut behind him.

Act Two

Act Two

*Captain's Personal Log
Stardate 43224.1*

The treatment by Captain Maxwell aboard Phoenix the previous morning seemed to deliver a singular message to me of how I'm perceived within the fleet. At first, I felt like it was an unjust charge given recent events and I wanted to do nothing more than to march over to Admiral T'Ciryra's office and demand reassignment to another task force. I very nearly did until he told me about Jesse's alleged son aboard the starbase.

While I believe that we need to find out the truth, part of me is very worried that Jesse will have to transfer off the ship. I think that he's just beginning to fit in around here as XO, and although Ariel performed well in that capacity previously, I don't feel she's ready for the position on a permanent basis. I'm concerned that she'll take that news poorly, if I have to tell her that I need someone with more experience in the position.

Leone, out.

Abbie had let it be known to those that she commanded that they were free to come and speak to her about anything if she was having lunch in Ten-Forward. But if she needed to work, as she did today, she sought out the relative privacy of lunch in the wardroom. Large enough to house the entire officer contingent aboard, the wardroom was generally configured with table rounds for at least six people to use at any time.

Her use of one of the tables often went undisturbed by those officers she outranked as she had become adept at projecting an aura which stated, "Leave me alone while I'm eating." It was only those within the senior staff who dared break her quiet enjoyment.

"Good afternoon," said Greg, tray in hand. "I assume everything is going well?"

"Well enough," Abbie answered with a sigh at the interruption. She watched him unamusedly as he took a seat at her table.

"Did you hear about Commander Kincaid?" he asked. Greg drew a steak fry from his tray and held it between his lips as he spoke. "I guess I'm not surprised. He's a pretty good-looking guy. I'm sure he's got women falling all over him."

Abbie snorted. "He's not someone who would take advantage of that situation. Besides, he was in a very serious relationship at the time and is the last man in the quadrant who would be unfaithful."

Before Greg could respond, a pair of security ensigns approached their table with trays. "Hey, Greg," said one of them.

Greg looked up and smiled at the blonde that spoke to him. "Yvonne." He nodded to the quiet one. "Iris."

Both Yvonne Colby and Iris Wu settled in without invitation. Iris greeted them both as she sat down, "Good to see you, Greg, Lieutenant Atherton."

"Ensigns," Abbie greeted them both, then pointedly turned her attention to the PADD beside her tray.

Iris reached out to Greg's upper arm and patted it. "Are you doing okay?"

"Uh..." Greg started, "I'm doing all right. Thanks."

Yvonne added quickly, "If you're not doing anything later, we were going to go down to Holodeck Three and do the new Dorothy Darrington holonovel."

Greg played with his food as he answered. "Nah, I'm just going to go to my quarters and catch up on some sleep. I haven't been sleeping well lately."

The two ensigns merely gave him sympathetic glances. Yvonne changed the subject. "So, I hear that our Exec is a proud papa. Wonder if that means we'll have a replacement coming soon."

That caught Abbie's attention and she gave Yvonne a sharp look.

Iris noticed and cleared her throat conspicuously to get Yvonne's attention, but failed as her friend continued. "Plus, he's so hot, I'm sure he's had his pick of anyone he wants."

"Do you always speculate about the sexual lives of your commanding officers or is this a special case, Ensign?" Abbie asked Yvonne pointedly.

Iris groaned briefly, then tried to help Yvonne. "Sir, I can assure you she meant no disrespect. It's idle talk and nothing more." She shot an angry glance toward Yvonne as she spoke, "I'm sure she will apologize for what she said, won't she?"

"I don't need an apology, Ensign. I'm just curious about how the crew conducts itself. Is the captain's personal life also for open discussion? You see, I've served on ships in Starfleet. This apparently is some other fleet where it's acceptable to speculate about senior officers and their private lives."

Greg lifted a hand. "I think it's safe to say that many other ships indulge in idle speculation from time to time."

"In their missions, sure. I'm not sure how common it is for officers to gossip about their commander possibly having an illicit child based on one inconclusive test. Suspicion is apparently all it takes here." Before Greg could intervene again, Abbie held up her own hand. "It's all fun and games for you, I'm sure, a nice distraction. But right now, the commander is facing an accusation that impunes his character in a way that is deeply insulting, that he was disloyal to his girlfriend at the time and that he negligently moved on without a care for the child he might have created. Which is likely, apparently, because he is very attractive."

"In all fairness, I think that was more of a dig at my gender than anything else," Greg said lamely.

"Oh, yes, because gender stereotypes belong in the twenty-fourth century," Abbie responded acidly. "If you can't respect the man enough to believe him, then respect the uniform he wears. Officers shouldn't automatically believe the worst about each other." She got to her feet, placing her PADD on her tray in preparation for leaving the table.

Alarmed at seeing Abbie prepare to leave, Greg rose from his seat. "Abbie, c'mon... we'll change the subject. Don't leave."

"I came here to work while having my lunch, Greg. I'm going to go back to doing that in a place where people aren't wildly speculating about another's supposed faults." Abbie turned towards the junior officers. "You haven't served with Kincaid for very long. Or at all, really. For future reference, you won't find a more loyal person serving in the Fleet and you shouldn't gossip about senior officers, but especially the XO or the captain, in a public place. The only reputation you'll damage is your own." With that, she lifted her tray and headed across the room to another empty table.

"And the hits just keep on coming."

From her seat within her counseling office, Isira tilted her head toward Kincaid as he spoke. "You feel this is another 'hit'?"

Kincaid did not lift his head up to look at her. "I don't consider this to be a good thing. Do you?"

"I think that remains to be seen."

"Does it? I think either way, my career aboard this ship is coming to an end."

Isira adjusted her seated position by uncrossing and recrossing her legs. She leaned forward to place her interlaced fingers atop her knee and admitted, "I'm not sure that I understand why you think that."

Kincaid lifted himself off the soft chaise lounge and walked around behind the tall arm on the back side. He leaned against it as though he were standing at the tactical station on the bridge, his arms outstretched along the pliant surface. "I'm sure that the rumor mill has gone to warp speed on my past affairs. I could tell them what I told the captain earlier, but I seriously doubt they'd believe me."

"Let's not worry too much about what others think. I'm more interested in hearing what you think is going to happen."

"That's kind of the problem, though, Counselor. I can't effectively lead unless I have the respect of those serving under my command," he explained while wearing a pained expression on his face.

"I see," Isira replied noncommittally. "Has the captain said anything about replacing you?"

He nodded once. "She mentioned it was a possibility."

"Do you agree with her?"

After a long sigh, Kincaid stood upright. "I think if I were in her shoes, I would be concerned. And yes, if there was a possibility, even slim to none, that this kid might be... you know?"

Isira grinned as she noted he could not bring himself to say it. "Go on."

"... then I suppose that I would have to have some sort of contingency plan, which I assume would be promoting Ariel to Exec."

"I also think that remains to be seen, but do you understand that right now, without a clear answer-"

Exasperated, he raised his voice slightly, "I've already given everyone a clear answer!"

"Think rationally. What constitutes a clear answer for the captain? What would you want to see before making a decision one way or the other?"

"I would want my chief medical officer to run scans to disprove the assertion."

"And what has Captain Leone ordered?"

"I get it." For perhaps the fifth time in this session, Kincaid agitatedly ran a hand through his hair. "Look, you know I've had...difficulty adjusting to Leone's command style. Including her inclusion of the second officer in nearly every meeting we have. I've received reports from department heads that she's been checking in with them as I do, as if that's her responsibility. And that was before this whole mess. She was very quick to name Ariel my successor and it's just one more signal to the crew that she doesn't have confidence in my ability, and soon, with this added on, neither will they."

"That's some complicated thinking," Isira began. "But, again, I'd like to focus on the current problem, not what you see coming from it in regards to your career. Would you like to hazard a guess as to why?"

Kincaid took in a breath and expelled it quickly. "Because there's a child."

"One whom, if I am understanding the current report correctly, does share some genes with you."

"Yeah. Yes. I get it. I'm probably, somehow, related to this kid."

"And?"

Kincaid nodded. "Whatever happens, I've got to make sure he's going to be okay." He sat down again, leaning forward. "Isira, you know me. If he's mine, there's no way I wouldn't take responsibility for him. I just don't see how he could be mine."

"Fortunately, we have technology to answer that question."

"I should probably go meet him, either way," Kincaid allowed, drawing a small smile from Isira. When he noticed her expression, he gave her a rueful one in return. "I can't say I've never thought about having children."

"That's exceptionally true."

"Okay, yes, I thought I'd probably start having kids soon, but that was before when I thought I would be married by now."

"The order of those events is important to you?"

"Well, no. If the kids come first, well... I honestly wouldn't care. My mother did just fine without the marriage part."

Isira nodded, waiting for him to finish the thought.

"I didn't sleep with that woman, but if the kid is mine, or even just related to me, I'm going to take responsibility. I can't do anything else. My career just isn't as important as family."

Wilson paused at the door leading into Isira's office from the corridor. He had every intention of pushing the door annunciator, but had not yet lifted his hand to do so. The cycle of his decision began once more as he changed his mind and headed down the corridor in the opposite direction toward the turbolift. When he reached the lift, however, he did the exact same thing again; turned back around with a determined expression toward the counselor's office door.

But this time, when he turned around to return to the door, he heard the lift doors open and a familiar voice call his name. "Willie!"

Frozen in discomfiture momentarily, he turned around with a forced grin. "Good evening, Ariel." His eyes drifted down toward her civilian attire for the evening and widened. "Wow, hot date tonight?"

Ariel looked down at herself. "Krys invited me to her holodeck program tonight. Opera."

Wilson grimaced. "Opera's never really held my interest."

She began walking along the corridor with a quick gesture of her hand, and Wilson followed along to talk with her. "Me either, but..."

"But it's the captain, and she invited you."

Ariel sighed and lifted the hem of her layered gown up to walk more stridently toward her quarters. "Something like that, yeah." She turned her head to look at him and ask, "Hey, you don't live on this deck. What're you doing wandering around here?"

"Uh, I was kind of looking for you, actually," he extemporized weakly, glancing toward the counselor's office door as they walked past.

Ariel noticed and said so: "Ah, I see. You really suck at lying."

"What?"

"If you want to go see the counselor, then go see her."

Wilson froze once more at the sudden exposure. "I was only going to ask her a question."

Ariel unlocked the doors leading to her quarters and entered. "Have a seat and get comfortable. It'll take me a day to get the hell out of this thing."

He found an empty chair amid the mess within her quarters, but did not sit down. PADDs, clothes, and some used drinking glasses were strewn about the room in a whirlwind fashion. He immediately began cleaning up by putting the glasses back in the replicator for recycling.

By the time Ariel returned to the front compartment, her PADDs were stacked and her clothes folded neatly upon the couch. "Aw, shit. I should've known you were going to do this."

Wilson smirked. "I thought you were using me for this purpose, actually. You know full well that I wasn't going to just sit in a dirty room and let my skin crawl while I waited for you."

"Yeah, well," she stammered quickly, then stepped aside to point back from where she entered. "You know, if you're on a roll, my bedroom could use some tidying up."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Very funny. I thought they taught a modicum of discipline at Starfleet Academy."

"I'm sure they do, but I went through OTS."

"Preceded by boot camp."

"Many many years ago."

"I can't imagine that they would let you get away with being this messy when you're bunking with a bunch of other enlisteds."

Ariel chuckled. "Let's just say that I was waiting for the day when I would get my own set of quarters."

Wilson finished wiping down the glass table and looked around. "Obviously. See, this is much better, right?"

"Absolutely. I should have you drop by every other day to tidy up."

"Very funny."

She sat down on a newly-cleaned armchair and asked, "So, what's up with you? Why're you wandering around the counselor's office?"

The cleaning rag still in his hand, he sat down next to the glass dining table and sighed. "Sephon and I had a big fight. He closed his transmission pretty abruptly."

"Oh."

He looked at her. "That's it?"

"You know I'm not going to pry into your personal life."

Wilson could not hold back a snicker. "Except that you like prying into my personal life for sport."

"Under normal circumstances, yes. I'm the league leader in that," she replied quickly. "But if you're considering seeing the counselor about it, then I'm thinking it's more serious than usual."

He nodded slowly. "I'm pretty sure he's going to break up with me."

"I'm sorry," she said at first. After a brief period of silence, she asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

"It's nothing, really," Wilson said. His eyes did not leave the deck. "I was supposed to be on Risa after the ship launched, remember?"

Ariel nodded. "But you got asked to stay on."

"And you know that's what I had wanted since the captain became a captain. We'd always talked about serving together on the same ship when she got her fourth pip."

"Right. I'm guessing Sephon had other plans?"

"I had told him what happened; that I didn't get the job. He suggested that we both put in for leave and go to Risa so we could spend time together and he could see his family."

"I remember."

"Okay, well... I spent the first few days off to attend the commissioning and launch, and then right after, I would catch a shuttle to meet up

with him. Except... that was like over a month ago."

"Oh, shit. Did you call him?"

"I called him, sure."

"So, then I'm not sure why he would be upset, now."

"Well, I kind of sort of didn't actually speak to him until yesterday."

"What the hell! Of course he's going to be pissed with you."

Wilson blanched. "I know. I'm not saying that I'm not at fault, here. I'm very bad with the long distance thing, but Sephon's been very understanding and very flexible about schedules."

"That's great for you, but don't you think that he deserves the same amount of consideration? You're taking everything he's willing to offer, but it sounds like you're not giving anything in return for it."

"The reason it took me so long to call is because I knew he would react like this, even if it had been the day after. Every time our service gets in the way of us, basically, he throws a fit but especially if it's my service or opportunity."

"Probably because it's clear to him that your career is the most important thing to you."

He closed his eyes, unwilling to admit that she was right. "I, uh... maybe I should go."

As he got up to depart, Ariel followed him toward the door. "Willie... you're not going to be happy unless you're honest with yourself."

He paused, but did not turn around. He nodded a couple of times. "I know. I mean, you're right... but I don't want to talk about it. I need to go think some more."

Ariel reached out with her right hand to touch his left shoulder and squeezed gently. "I'm here if you need me."

The large cabins typically assigned to guests of the starbase are located along the outer edge of the top, giving them all a spectacular view of the incoming and outgoing traffic to the massive orbital docking facility. From within the one of those cabins, a woman stood with arms folded, watching the ships travelling at sublight speed nearby.

The familiar alert tone and the subsequent soft alto feminine voice of the starbase computer broke the silence of the cabin, "Incoming encrypted transmission from Starfleet Intelligence."

The woman replied, "Acknowledged. Computer, route that transmission to this terminal."

"That file is restricted to Alpha-Two clearance and above."

She reached into her pocket and played a recording of a voice. The recording played, "Computer, voiceprint analysis requested for Alpha-Two clearance."

"Voiceprint verified. Alpha-Two clearance granted." The files contents appeared on a screen on the desktop terminal.

"Computer," she used her own voice, "using previously established clearance, display subfile Variable One."

"Variable One access granted." The screen shifted to display the insignia of Starfleet Intelligence before changing to the outline of an adjacent operation.

She scanned the contents and began to make changes to the plan. The change did not alter the file much, only to add a name to the department to which she would "assigned." The name and accompanying record were saved to the starbase's computer and transmitted back to Starfleet Intelligence, using the authority granted to her by the computer.

"Record stored and uploaded to *Farragut* personnel manifest," replied the computer. "Starfleet Intelligence acknowledges the revision as verified."

"Disconnect uplink and erase any record of revision from *Farragut*'s main computer."

"Acknowledged. Logs modified."

"Put this terminal in stand by."

The screen dimmed as the computer carried out the order. She moved into the restroom and peered at herself in the mirror before lifting a wand-like tool from an open kit. With a wave of the wand over her head, she altered the color of her hair from black to a deep auburn. Satisfied with the result, she reached into a pouch within the kit and pulled out a set of lenses that she placed over her eyes. Next came a small

circular object that went inside the roof of her mouth.

The formerly contralto voice she used with the computer now spoke in a higher range with a different timbre and a now-clipped British accent. With her now soprano voice, she called out, "Computer, confirm my identity using voiceprint verification."

"Voiceprint verified as Lieutenant Victoria Waltham, USS *Farragut*."

The woman smiled at her reflection and spoke to it: "Good day, sir. I'm Leftenant Waltham."

Act Three

Act Three

As was their habit on *Valdemar*, Abbie and Kincaid got together at least two or three times a week for dinner on *Farragut*. Given the scuttlebutt in most of the public mess areas of the ship, they had mutually agreed that it would be better to eat in the privacy of Kincaid's quarters, if only so they wouldn't have to deal with overhearing any whispers.

"Are you seriously going to eat that?" Kincaid asked doubtfully, eyeing her chosen meal with distaste. He had opted for a simple meal of baked salmon, asparagus and rice.

"I didn't order it just to look at it, Jess," Abbie replied with a snort. She lifted her spoon in preparation for another sip of her plomeek soup.

"It smells bad."

"Some people don't like fish either for the same reason. Are we really having this conversation again? Every time I eat something Vulcan..."

"All right, all right," Kincaid relented, but still seemed discomforted by her choice of dinner.

"I heard that the child is being brought aboard tomorrow so Sovera can run the gene scan," Abbie mentioned after a few moments of silence while they both ate. "Are you going to be there for that?"

"I think so. I should probably meet him, either way. We have some genes in common, after all," Kincaid allowed, though he spoke as if he was choosing his words carefully.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Abbie offered. "You know, for moral support?"

"Uh, actually, I was thinking of asking Isira to go with me. No offense, but I think she's actually been trained to deal with children and family situations, so it makes sense that she'd be there."

Abbie paused in spooning up some more of her soup to give him a surprised look. "You're already that comfortable with her? It usually takes you months to warm up to someone completely."

"Gee, thanks."

"You know what I mean."

"She's a full Betazoid. She's been probably rifling through my head enough times by now it's ridiculous to think she doesn't know me."

"Uh, point of fact, I'm pretty sure she doesn't do that."

"You know what I mean. You're always saying that you know exactly what I'm thinking by the look on my face."

"Yes, I don't recommend you play poker again."

"Right. So if you know me by my looks, I'm pretty sure she knows me by my actual thoughts."

Abbie shrugged a shoulder, conceding the point. "Logical," she teased him.

"Anyway," Kincaid said pointedly. "She knows me, and she's at the very least had training with children. Whereas you.."

"Had trouble relating to children when I was a child. I take your point."

"It's not your fault, Abbie."

Abbie waved that away to show she wasn't hurt. "Yes, I know it's my father's fault. But you are right; Isira's a better choice."

"If he is mine," Kincaid began slowly, stressing the first word. "She'll probably have a good idea of what the best steps are for me to get to know him. I don't want to make this any harder for him than necessary."

"And if he isn't?" Abbie asked.

"She'll still know how best to deal with the fallout. I don't know what they've been telling him about what's going to happen. For all I know, he could've already been told that his father's coming to get him by some overzealous social worker."

"You don't think someone's actually done that, do you?"

"I don't know. I looked into it, and civilians on starbases don't have the full social services available to them on most planets. There's probably one, maybe two social workers for the whole base. I'm sure they look for the simplest solutions because they don't have the resources to really

do what's best for the child."

"You looked into it? As in researched the situation?"

"Of course." Kincaid gave her a questioning look. "Why?"

"It's just a much more rational response than yesterday, when you were just... I don't know, upset that someone could think that about you. You don't usually turn away from an implied insult so quickly."

Kincaid nodded slowly, in agreement, while he cut into the fish on his plate. "I think that's accurate, but Isira helped me see that the primary issue is the child. Is Jacob," he corrected himself. "He's a four year old boy who just lost his mother and the only parent he's ever known. Mine or not, it's his life we're talking about, not just my reputation."

Abbie smiled in response. "That's...great, Jess."

"Yeah, well. Just eat your stinky soup, please. The smell is getting to me," he teased her.

Kincaid walked down the corridor, on his way to the turbolift with Isira by his side. "Has Jacob already been tested?" he asked her.

"Yes. He came aboard about an hour ago. The father of the family with whom he is staying on the starbase is with him. Right now, they're in a room off Sickbay with Lieutenant Commander Okugo, the station's JAG officer."

Kincaid nodded slowly, reaching for the button to call for the lift. "Can I meet him?"

Isira inclined her head in contemplation. "Jacob? Before the test?"

"Yes. I want to see him."

"Even though you're positive you're not his father?"

"Well, yes. But he's probably related to me somehow, so I should meet him anyway."

Isira shook her head slowly as she stepped into the turbolift. "Unless you're definitely going to become a part of the child's life, it's not a good idea to introduce yourself to him. He needs to be eased into a transition to the new parental figures in his life."

"Oh. I didn't think about that," Kincaid admitted as he joined her. "Sickbay," he ordered the computer.

"Having to deal with children is new for you. You aren't expected to know everything right away," Isira assured him with a slight smile.

"Right," he answered, his expression settling into a thoughtful frown.

Isira considered the silent executive officer beside her for a long moment but did not speak until the lift arrived at deck eight. "You could still see him, without meeting him," she noted. "He's in the observation room. You could see him through the window."

Kincaid nodded quickly. "I'll take that."

Isira led the way towards Sickbay, where they were greeted by an expectant Doctor Sovera. "Commander, Lieutenant," she greeted them. "If you would please step to one of the biobeds for a scan, sir," she began.

"Just a moment, Doctor. If you would, please escort the Commander to the observation window to see the boy, Jacob Reardon. He wishes to see him," Isira explained. However, Kincaid did not wait to be escorted, but instead merely mumbled an, "Excuse me," and headed towards the window himself.

Isira could feel his startled reaction and hurried to the window herself to see what might have surprised him. Inside the room was the JAG officer, sitting in a chair, as well as a human man of about forty who was crouched down by a low table where a small, dark haired child of four was playing with a PADD. The older man was showing him how to play a game upon it and the child was frowning in concentration.

"What do you see, Commander?" Isira asked, unable to discern his thoughts clearly in the swirl of his emotions.

"Jacob. He...looks like I did when I was his age. I'd have trouble picking out the differences if I had a picture of me to show you," Kincaid replied, shaking his head in wonder.

"Jesse...," Isira began quickly, her eyes growing wide with realization.

"That child is definitely related to me, Isira. It doesn't matter what the tests show; he's my family. I know it."

By this time, the doctor had joined them and it was to the Vulcan that Kincaid directed his next question. "Is he healthy? Where is he staying on the station now?"

Sovera gave Isira a questioning look but responded succinctly. "The boy is completely healthy, within the top quartile for height for his age. He is currently residing with the Paxton family, with Michael Paxton, the man in there with him, and his wife and two children, one of whom is the child's age."

"I don't know how he came to be, but he looks like me. I can't deny what the test and my own eyes are telling me. He's family and I have to take care of him," Kincaid announced with finality.

Sovera raised an eyebrow but it was Isira who replied. "I know you're ready to take custody of him right now, Commander, but you'll need to establish paternity to do so," she pointed out.

He nodded again and turned towards the doctor. "Right. Let's get this done, then."

By the time Kincaid was on the biobed, they had been joined by the JAG officer. Now, they were all waiting in silence while Sovera completed her analysis.

Kincaid felt strangely at peace. Unlike the past twenty-four hours, he felt better knowing what was going to happen and how the future would play out. He knew he had enough leave time accrued to take a few weeks to get to know Jacob while Starfleet sorted out his next assignment. He briefly considered how to break the news his mother, but figured that a woman who had chosen to raise a son by herself wouldn't be so surprised at his decision.

He watched as Isira gave him a half-smile. He supposed she was tracking all his thoughts even now and could probably give him a few good recommendations about the next steps.

"I do have a few suggestions, yes, Commander, including the name of a colleague in Starfleet who specializes in families in the service," Isira noted dryly. "But perhaps you should wait before giving him a call."

"Oh, absolutely," Kincaid replied, giving her a grin.

"For a man who denied paternity earlier, Commander, you seem almost pleased at the thought now," Lieutenant Commander Okugo noted. "Can I ask what has changed?" he wondered.

"I... he looks like me, is all. And, well, once upon a time, I figured this was about the time I'd be having children anyway. Not quite in this manner, however it happened, but either way, this was once in the plan."

"Life has a way of intruding on plans," Isira mentioned.

"Absolutely," Kincaid agreed.

"I'm glad you're approaching this in a new frame of mind, Commander. It will make the whole process much easier. Our first recommendation will be for you to come aboard the station, so you can get to know Jacob before he lives with you."

Kincaid was nodding sagely at this when Sovera joined them. "Sirs, I have the results of the scan." Each of the officers turned to her.

"Jacob Reardon is not your son, Commander," Sovera announced without preamble.

"What?" Both Kincaid and Okugo asked in unison.

"Jacob Reardon is not the commander's son," the doctor repeated herself. She went to the display panel behind them and pulled up her analysis. "As you can see here, less than fifty percent of the child's genes match the commander's, far less than we would see if he was in fact the father."

"But there's quite a few genes that do match," the JAG officer stated.

"Yes, there is a familial relation, but it is not one of paternity. Or rather, not your paternity of the child. The commonality of the genes suggests a common parent. However, your mitochondrial DNA does not match, which indicates you have different mothers. Your Y-chromosomes, on the other hand are nearly a perfect match. You have the same father," Sovera pronounced her findings matter-of-factly.

Okugo and Isira were stunned into silence. Kincaid was not.

"Mother-fucking piece of shit."

Sovera raised an eyebrow. "Interesting colloquialism, Commander."

"You wouldn't say so if you met him, Doctor," Kincaid replied, his mouth setting in a grim line.

"Ah...," Okugo cleared his throat. "Your father, sir, is..."

"Master Chief Petty Officer Miguel Montoya. He lives in Petaluma, California. He's never told his wife about his indiscretions, and I don't expect that to change now."

"I can contact him and inform him of his son's existence," Sovera offered.

"No, I'll contact him," Kincaid declined, though he did nod his head in thanks to the Vulcan. He glanced at the JAG officer, noting, "I'll let you know the substance of the conversation." He slid off the biobed and started towards the doors.

Isira hurried to catch up with him but did not speak until they were in the corridor. "Behind all that anger, I know you're disappointed," she mentioned quietly. "You convinced yourself that he was yours despite never having met his mother. I was worried about that."

Kincaid gave her a questioning look as he signaled for the turbolift.

"You're an honorable man, Commander, and family is the most important thing to you. Even if you had no relation to him, I think you'd have a hard time walking away from a child in need," she explained.

"I..." Kincaid took a deep breath and looked back towards sickbay. "I really thought I was going to be a father," he admitted softly.

"Almost certainly that's still true. It's just not going to be today," Isira assured him.

Act Four

Act Four

Ariel kicked her feet and brought her arms over the top of her head, one at a time in a windmill fashion as her body cut through the water of ship's swimming pool. She placed her hands above her in an apex shortly before touching the side of the pool and somersaulting under the water to move in the opposite direction.

She continued this motion until the number of times she touched the wall reached two hundred, and then lifted herself out of the pool so someone else could use the lane. The moment she reached for her towel, she knew most of the eyes were on her. In the middle of the day, the number of personnel using the pool and the surrounding area topped at just over fifty, with people coming and going. Unlike the other swimmers, however, the one-piece swimsuit she wore did very little to conceal the genetic gifts of her Orion mother; even in spite of being tempered by the genes of her human father.

As she peeled off the thin cap and allowed her hair to flow freely over her shoulders, she heard a voice speak to her from her right.

"How's the water?"

She turned to see the lean, muscular physique of Wilson. His dark skin contrasted against his light blue swim briefs. Ariel smiled. "Warm, as usual. Are you going to do a few laps?"

"I was thinking about it, but then I saw you pull yourself out of the pool, and about half the heads in this place snapped around so fast, I thought I might have to call sickbay..."

Ariel's lower lip stuck out in a pout. "Only half?"

Wilson smirked. "I didn't want to give you a big head or anything."

"I haven't had a big head in quite some time," muttered Ariel, as her hands moved the towel around her suit to dry it. "In spite of the rumors alluding to the contrary."

He sat down on the bench next to her. "Yeah, you have been unusually... uh, celibate, lately."

"I didn't know you were keeping that close an eye on my sex life, Willie."

"I usually don't, but it's hard not to notice when you go from your usual activity to none at all."

Her gaze lifted from him and away toward the pool. "I can see how that would surprise some people." Ariel turned her head back toward Wilson and smirked. "It's not by choice, I assure you."

Wilson's eyebrows moved up to wrinkle his forehead. "Orders?"

"No," she sighed in reply. "Some friendly nudging by those close to me made me reconsider things."

"Ah. The captain, I assume?"

"Actually, no. Our new executive officer."

"Really," he replied, matter-of-factly.

"Really," she confirmed with a nod.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She placed the damp towel over the bench and sat down upon it while crossing her legs. "It was when he first came aboard and tried to show me how big his dick was." Before Wilson could open his mouth, she put up a hand and cut him off, "Not literally, of course. But... I tried to put him at ease when we were speaking in private."

The weight of Ariel's admission altered his facial expression to one of shock. "You used your special little power on him?" Wilson admonished her with his tone, "Ariel..."

"Before you get up on your high horse, you should know that he was being an asshole to me in front of Admiral T'Ciry; in front of the bridge crew, no less."

Wilson looked at her in askance. "Come on, I know you're not that naïve, Ariel."

"I could be," she flippantly replied.

"Ariel, be serious."

She puffed air at her bangs. "Fine, yes. I know he what he was trying to do. That doesn't mean there weren't better ways to go about it."

"Uhm, we seemed to have wandered off the point a little bit, here. What did he say to you?"

"He didn't say anything to me. He called me on my behavior and took me to task for it," she replied with a wave of her hand. "I kept it up before he got upset, and made it clear he wasn't going to put up with it. First man to ever keep a tight control on his own hormones when I really press my advantage."

Wilson whistled, then enunciated each syllable of his explicative: "Holy shit."

"Exactly."

"Makes me think that he's telling the truth when he says he didn't sleep with that woman on the starbase."

"Yeah. I saw a picture and she was something of a looker herself."

"So... what? You hit a brick wall and all of a sudden you're a nun?"

"Of course not. When you experience a limit, you become very aware of it. Let's just say I'm not looking to press my luck where Commander Kincaid is concerned."

"Especially since he's not really your target."

Ariel fixed him with an angry glare. "You want to go down that path, right here and now?"

Wilson sincerely replied, "I apologize."

"You're forgiven."

"But."

"What?"

He dropped his tone and leaned in so only she could hear him. "Eventually, you're going to need to tell her how you feel."

"Just like you're going to have a frank conversation with Sephon about the importance of your career eventually," Ariel retorted, only to instantly feel remorse. She gave him an apologetic half-smile. "Sorry."

All he could do to respond was simply give her a nod. They spent the rest of their time at the pool in silence; Wilson watched the divers while Ariel had nothing left to say.

Kincaid waited patiently for the communication to be accepted from the other end. Within the privacy of his office on deck two, he stared into the Starfleet insignia on the small screen atop his desk. The screen flashed the words, "transmission connected," twice before the screen blinked to show a young woman in her late teens staring back at him.

"Hello," she said. A wisp of her black hair fell into her eyes. "Commander...?"

"Kincaid," he replied immediately. "I apologize for disturbing you, but it's urgent that I speak to Master Chief Montoya as quickly as possible. Official business."

"Official business?" The girl turned her head and called, "Daddy! Starfleet is on the comms for you!" She turned back to him and smiled. "He's on his way, sir."

Before he could utter his thanks, she departed from view. The living room of the Montoya home fell into his focus, now, and he could see the framed holographs of the family on a partial view of the wall on the right side. To the left, a bay window looked out onto a green mountain range.

Master Chief Montoya's midsection entered suddenly, and then he sat down. His salt-and-pepper hair framed a weather face; a deep scar ran down the length of his left cheek from the tip of his eyebrow down to the jawline. The wrinkles around his eyes formed as he gave him a genuine smile. "What can I do for you-?" He stopped speaking and his eyes betrayed their recognition of the caller. "I thought I told you never to call me," Montoya said in a voice tinged with anger.

Kincaid felt the taste of bile in the back of his throat. "I'm afraid it was unavoidable. This isn't my idea of a fun afternoon."

"What do you want?"

"I'm the executive officer aboard the starship *Farragut*."

"Good for you," snarled Montoya as his head swiveled from side to side to ensure their privacy.

"We're presently docked at Starbase 310, and there's a four year-old boy named Jacob Reardon aboard."

"Reardon?" Montoya's voice lost its edge and his eyeline moved away from Kincaid's. "He's... Cassie's son?"

"That much wasn't in doubt," Kincaid ignored the change in demeanor. "However, given that Cassandra Reardon died-"

"She *died*?" Montoya's hand went to his forehead in surprise.

"Yes, approximately two weeks ago. Her son was left in the care of the starbase's personnel, and there was a question as to his father."

Montoya gave Kincaid his full attention. "Oh, you're loving this, aren't you?"

Kincaid exhaled through his nostrils, making them flare. "I can honestly say that I'm not happy about any of this. Except to say that it's pretty clear you don't give a damn about Jacob and only care about what's going to happen to you."

"I already told you. I have a wife and a family, here." Montoya lowered his voice considerably. "I cannot have this conversation, right now. He's not my responsibility."

Kincaid scoffed as he averted his eyes to the bulkhead, "What a piece of work you are."

That drew a furious response from Montoya. "Hey, you can't talk to me like that!"

"No, Master Chief. It is you who cannot talk to *me* like that," Kincaid replied menacingly. "You forget that you're addressing a full Commander. I'm not that timid midshipman you turned away at your front door seventeen years ago."

Montoya leaned back. "Hiding behind your rank? You're definitely no Montoya."

"Forgive me if I'm not crushed by that thought. You really think I want your name?" Kincaid dropped any further pretense of courtesy. "You're a fucking disgrace to the uniform, Master Chief!"

"I'm a medal of honor winner," Montoya fought back. His scowl accented the fury in his angry whisper. "Have some respect!"

"Then I assume that as a medal of honor winner, you'll do the right thing and take in Jacob," Kincaid said with a decisive nod. "I can have the base's JAG officer make arrangements to transfer him by shuttle."

"Wait!" Montoya barked in his full-throated voice.

Kincaid narrowed his eyes. "I beg your pardon, Master Chief. What did you just tell me?"

Montoya cleared his throat. "If you would please wait one moment, *sir*."

"Better." Kincaid looked down at a PADD that he brought into view. "I can only presume that you're going to weasel your way out of custody."

"I cannot possibly provide him with a home. It's out of the question."

Kincaid made a show of entering in information on the PADD. "You're unable to provide for him?"

"That's not it."

"Oh... your current posting does not allow you to have your family with you?"

"I'm assigned to Starfleet Headquarters. You know that, already."

"Yes, I do. So, I'm having a hard time coming up with a good reason why you can't assume your proper custodial rights as his confirmed biological father."

"*Confirmed*? When the hell did that happen?"

Kincaid raised a finger and wagged it, then tapped his three pips. "Watch it." He returned to his PADD. "Jacob's father was originally thought to be me, given that we share consanguinity. A full scan revealed that we were related, but I'm not his father. I'm his half-brother."

"Oh..."

"Yes. Starfleet has transmitted their findings to the United Earth government and I'm sure you'll be contacted by someone, soon."

Montoya's eyes widened at the thought. "Uh, hold on a minute. They can't come here... what happens when they tell my wife...?"

"You have me confused with someone who gives a shit about what happens when your wife finds out you can't keep your dick in your pants,

Master Chief," Kincaid replied calmly. "As I told your daughter... my half-sister, I'm guessing... this is official business."

The master chief settled into his chair, defeated. He raised his hand to cover his face, and then wiped hard from his forehead to his jaw before letting it fall down and out of view. Montoya sighed heavily. "I know that you're upset and you've no reason to help me, but is there any way possible that we could come to an arrangement?"

Kincaid nodded. "Luckily for you, I want what's best for Jacob." He leaned forward, ready to listen. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

Leone sat down at the table in the observation deck and looked at the JAG officer to her right. Kincaid was seated on her left.

"Well, Jesse was right. He wasn't the father," she declared succinctly, motioning to the PADD with the test results that was sitting in front of her.

"Yes, sir, that's true. However, Master Chief Petty Officer Montoya has requested that his son, Commander Kincaid, be given full custody of the child. He has already signed the paperwork to that effect." Okugo looked at the executive officer.

Kincaid turned towards the captain. "Sir, I hate to put you in this position after you've just selected me to be your XO, but I'm going to step in and take custody of Jacob. His life's been hard enough and to allow him to go and live with a man who just really wants to deny his existence just isn't something I could do."

"I understand, Jesse," Leone replied with regretful smile. "I'm definitely sorry to see you go, but I can see that your family needs you at this time." She turned to Okugo. "Commander, thank you very much for your attention to this matter. As you can see, we've but to file paperwork at this point. I don't want to keep you."

Okugo's eyes shifted between the captain and Kincaid. "Er, yes, of course." He rose from his seat and smiled. "Thank you, Captain, Commander."

Once alone, Leone noted, "I hate to ask you so soon after, but before you go on leave, I'm going to need your assistance in locating your replacement. If you can spare the time."

"I think that it will take some time for all the legal red tape to be taken care of, sir," Kincaid replied. "I'm sure I can use the time to recommend someone, but..."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry, I just thought that Commander Elannis would be my successor."

Leone sighed. "I guess I understand why you would think that, but let me ask you... would she be your recommendation?"

"Absolutely not."

"There you are. She's a fine operations manager, but she has a long time coming before she'll be named an executive officer," Leone explained. "Even by me, and I've known her for years."

Kincaid did nothing to hide his surprise. "I just assumed, given that you tend to include her on some of the briefings... I mean, even the one regarding this situation..."

"You thought I was grooming her to have her take over at some point."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, in light of your family matters, I felt it was prudent to have her present. Regardless of your status, she's going to have to step in an acting capacity until a permanent solution could be found. She's third-in-command, after all."

"I don't mind telling you, sir... I felt more than a little exposed by that. But I understand why you did it."

"I apologize if it made you feel uncomfortable, Jesse. I know it was a sensitive issue and I also know Ariel can sometimes be pretty abrasive, but she had to know what was going on and prepare accordingly."

Kincaid nodded once. "Getting back to the matter of a new XO, I'll take a look through the available pool and have a short list for you by the end of the day? Four or five names?"

"I appreciate that," she said softly. "Look... I know that your time here wasn't exactly what you had hoped for..."

"Sir-"

Leone held up a hand. "Let me say my piece, please. I know you were expecting something else when you came here, and I wanted to say that in spite of all that, you did an outstanding job with the position. You're a good officer, Jesse. I know wherever you end up, they'll be lucky to have you."

Kincaid could only blink in response at the captain's words. "I..." he paused to search for the proper reply. "Thank you, Captain."

"Thank *you*, Jesse." She held out her hand to him.

He took her hand in his and suddenly felt very uneasy about his leaving the ship. To cover, he gestured with his open hand toward the exit. "Sir, I was going to make a call to my mother to tell her I was coming to visit, since I thought the first step would be to use some of my accrued leave time and take Jacob home while Starfleet sorts out a good posting for us. If you'll excuse me?"

Yvonne Colby brightened considerably when Greg joined the table that she shared with Iris Wu. As had become their custom very quickly since coming aboard, the three of them often met after the end of their respective shifts in Ten-Forward.

"Good evening, ladies," Greg said as he took his seat. "Have you ordered, yet?"

Iris inclined her head slightly toward him, and used an annoyed tone when she spoke, "Yvonne insisted that we wait for you."

"You didn't have to do that," he replied quickly. "You know the most dangerous place to be in the universe is between Iris and her next meal." Greg lifted a hand to call the attention of the nearest waiter.

Yvonne laughed dutifully. "So true-OW!" She reached down to her shin after Iris made hard contact using her booted foot.

Iris said nothing to Yvonne, choosing to ask Greg, "Are you sure you won't join us tonight? We could really use a third."

Greg smiled. "Nah, it's all right." He looked up to the waiter to order his dinner and then continued after his departure. "I'm looking forward to catching up on some sleep. Thank you, again, though." He noticed Iris' eyes were no longer on him.

"Who's that?" asked Iris, suddenly. Her eyes stared beyond Yvonne's head and toward the long bar against the aft bulkhead.

Yvonne turned to look at the subject of Iris' question. A command lieutenant entered the lounge and ordered a drink from the man standing behind the bar. She'd never seen her before. "I don't know. Is she new or something?"

"No idea," Greg admitted, taking a long look. "I know most all the command officers."

Iris shot Greg a quick glance that turned into a double-take. With her left hand, she lifted one of the cloth napkins from the table and offered it to him. "Would you like to wipe the drool from your chin, sir?"

"Get away from me with that," he expressed his annoyance with a quick wave of his hand.

Yvonne reached forward to touch his arm. "Hey, was everything all right with Lieutenant Atherton earlier? I felt like maybe we upset her with what we said."

Iris scoffed. "You felt? *I* said that."

Greg smirked at both of them. "I'm sure she's fine. She and the Exec go way back, so naturally she's quick to defend him. And let's be honest, we weren't being very kind with all our gossiping."

"It was just harmless talk," Yvonne tried to defend herself weakly. "We do it all the time."

Iris replied, "Perhaps it's time we changed that, then."

Greg nodded. "I agree."

"Should we go find her and apologize, then?" Yvonne folded her arms across her midsection.

"I don't think that's a good idea. She made her point and left, and anything more would just remind her of how upset she was earlier," Greg said after some thought. "Best just to improve our conduct."

"Would you mind if I joined you?" said a new voice. All three officers lifted their heads toward the source. The attractive lieutenant that entered earlier now stood at their table, drink in hand.

"Not at all," Greg said immediately, getting to his feet quickly. "Please."

Yvonne said, "Yes, join us. We were just saying that you must be a new addition to the crew."

Greg smiled widely. "A welcome addition, all the same."

The lieutenant grinned at him. She moved her drink from one hand to the other and offered it to Greg. "I'm Lieutenant Victoria Waltham, transfer from the starship *Repulse*. I've come aboard to join the personnel department."

Greg felt her soft hand in his for a moment, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end again. "Lieutenant Gregory Aspinall, chief helmsman."

Iris and Yvonne mouthed "Gregory" to each other.

"Yes, I know," Victoria replied. "You're Admiral Aspinall's son, correct?"

For once, Greg did not hide or evade the question. Instead, he confirmed it. "Yes, I am. Do you know my mother?"

"Not personally, no. It's difficult to not know about the current vice-chief of Starfleet Operations, however." Victoria looked down at her hand and smiled. "You prefer the extended handshakes, I see."

Greg quickly jerked his hand back. "Sorry!"

"Not at all." She offered her hand to Iris and Yvonne, and completed the round of introductions. Greg offered her the empty seat at the table, and Victoria accepted. "I must say, this is an impressive vessel."

"First time on a Nebula-class starship?" Yvonne asked.

Victoria set her glass upon the table and looked at Greg while answering Yvonne's question. "Yes."

Greg's eyes executed evasive maneuvers as he suddenly found his glass very interesting.

"Why's that?"

"I've only been in Starfleet for eighteen months. My first assignment was in the personnel office on an outpost for six months before I got my orders to report to *Repulse*." Victoria added, "Though, I did get to step aboard a Galaxy-class ship for all of twenty minutes to hand-deliver some orders."

Iris' attention immediately shifted to their guest. "Oh? How was it?"

"Boring, actually. I saw the airlock and a bit of a corridor."

"Oh," Iris replied, disappointed.

Yvonne smirked. "Forgive her. She is unnaturally fascinated with the Galaxy-class ships."

"I can understand why. They're beautiful ships," affirmed Victoria, as her eyes returned to Greg. "These new ships being turned out follow a new architectural concept; graceful and majestic. The press says they're the twenty-fourth century equivalent of the launch of the Constitution-class."

Iris tilted her head. "For a personnel officer, you sure know a lot about ships."

"I joined Starfleet because of the ships in the adverts," Victoria presented Iris with a smile as she spoke. "I just think there's something beautiful about them. I read all I can on them. It's kind of a hobby of mine."

"Well done, Lieutenant," Greg chuckled, while Iris absorbed the new information with a chagrined nod. "Iris, you shouldn't be so suspicious all the time."

"She's only doing her job, *Gregory*," Yvonne fired back.

"Indeed," agreed Victoria. "And I took no offense."

Now, Greg wore a chagrined expression on his face. "Then I'm sorry."

Victoria placed her hand on his shoulder and asked, "Now that we're all friends, I was wondering if you might be kind enough to show me around?"

Act Five

Act Five

In some ways, calling his mother was harder than calling the man who would be now listed as his biological father on his medical records. He cared about what she thought of him. He didn't think she would disapprove of his choice to take custody but he was worried she would think he was being taken advantage of by Montoya.

He fidgeted while waiting for the transmission to connect, tapping nervously at his desk. When the screen flashed to reveal his mother, he was momentarily struck by how similar she looked to Cassandra Reardon. Even in her sixties, May Kincaid was still beautiful, her hair still a honey blonde and her blue eyes as bright as ever. *Apparently, Montoya has a type*, Kincaid thought sourly to himself.

"Jesse?" May immediately inquired in surprise. She was in her office, the wall behind her showing off the latest plans for the colony's farming operations. As the lead agricultural engineer for Solosos III, she oversaw farming for the whole colony. "What's wrong?" she asked sharply.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm going to be taking some leave and coming home."

"Why?" she interrupted, before he had a chance to tell her. "I'd love to have you home but I've been trying to convince you for two years you need a vacation. What's happened?"

"If you'll let me finish, Mom," Kincaid continued, but with a smile. He briefly explained the situation, but finished with, "So I'm taking custody. I thought that I could spend a few weeks at home with him and you, getting him used to our family, while Starfleet works out where I will be assigned."

May was looking at the picture he had sent over of Jacob. "He looks just like you when you were a little boy."

"Yeah, I know. It's how I realized we had to be related."

"Of course." May straightened and gave her son a smile. "So, when are you sending him to live with me?"

Kincaid blinked in shock. "What do you mean? We'll visit, of course, but I'm going to get a posting where I can raise him myself."

"Jesse, don't be ridiculous. I'm not going to allow you to drag that child hither and yon while you serve on this ship or that starbase. That's no way to raise a child. Children need air, and sunshine, and dirt. You'll send him to me and he can be raised properly, here."

"Mom," Kincaid tried to interrupt. "I..."

"I told you before when you thought you were going to marry that Cynthia girl. Over my dead body are you going to raise your children on some tin can in space. It's one thing if you were going to be posted to Earth, but you're not, so give him to me."

"Mom, are you sure about this? I mean, he's not related to you."

May waved her hand. "He's your brother. That makes him related to me."

"You're going to retire next year. Are you sure you want a little kid around the house?"

"Can you think of a better way to stay active? I tried to take up painting, like Cheryl suggested, but it's not for me, Jesse." May turned to think over an idea. "I'll give him that room I set up as a studio. It's a waste to leave it and he can pick out the color for the walls and how he'd like it arranged. It'll be good for him to mark something as his space."

"You could keep the studio and give him my room."

"That's your room. He can have his own." May paused, then added thoughtfully, "I should go to Starbase 310 and pick him up myself. It's better if he gets to know me right away, rather than be with strangers on his way here. The poor thing."

"If... you think that's best, Mom."

"I do. You know, Jacob was on my list of names for you. But then the Berhardts named their son Jacob and I didn't want you to share the name with a boy who would be in your class." May took out a PADD from her desk and began to make a list. "Make sure you get the starbase to send his medical and school records. I need to know what size he is too, to make sure he has the proper jackets and boots. Oh, and I need to know if he has any aptitude or interest in any sports. I'll want to get his name on the lists right away to make sure he has a spot to play next season."

"Of course." Kincaid gave his mother a grin. "Thank you."

"No thank yous are necessary for family, Jesse. You know that. Now go, make the arrangements. I'm going to have to make some of my own to take some time off. Give me a call later with the details I need to know and I'll arrange for transport."

"I could do that, Mom."

"You have enough to do. You're the executive officer of the *Farragut* but I'm the captain of this child now. It's my responsibility. I'll speak to you soon."

"Of course, Mom," Kincaid conceded.

"And Jess?"

"Yes, 'Captain?'" he said with a smirk.

She chuckled softly, but drew a hand to her lips to kiss them with her eyes closed. She reached out with the same hand toward him on the screen. In a soft tone, she told him, "I'm really proud of you."

Kincaid was more nervous standing outside the observation room in sickbay than he had been as a midshipman on his first day of classes at the Academy. Paxton seemed to be able to see this because the man clapped a hand on his shoulder and told him, "You'll be fine." Kincaid nodded in reply once then made the decision to go into the room himself.

Jacob was in there, sitting at the little table while still playing the game on the PADD he had earlier. When the door opened to let in the two men, he merely looked up at them but didn't say a word.

"Jacob," Paxton began, walking over to the little boy and crouching down so he could be on the same level. "This is Jesse Kincaid, the man we found who is your big brother. He's a commander in Starfleet and the executive officer of this ship. Remember I told you about him earlier?" The child nodded but did not say anything as he looked at the officer with a blank expression.

Kincaid took that as his opening. "Hi, Jacob. I've been really looking forward to meeting you." Taking a cue from Paxton, he took got down to the child's level, though he managed to fold himself into one of the small seats at the table. Up close, he could see that Jacob's eyes were as blue as his mother's. "I wanted to show you something," he continued, putting another PADD on the table. "Do you know who that is in that picture?"

Jacob examined the picture of the small child in front of a rock formation and a small frown came to his face. "Is it me?" he asked finally in a quiet voice.

Kincaid smiled and shook his head. "No, that's me when I was your age. But that's how I knew right away we were brothers, because we look so alike." He looked over the PADD and added, "If you look at the next picture, you'll see the house where I grew up."

Jacob carefully swiped the image to view the next one, which was of a modest but well-kept home. "That's the house where I lived with my mother. Her name is May. We come from Solosos III; that's where this house is right now. My mother is still there. She is the head agricultural engineer for the whole colony, which means she oversees all the farming."

Kincaid led him through all the pictures, showing him the inside of the house where he would get his own room, explaining the names of the mountain ranges, and showing him the nearby river and parks. He showed off the school and the ballparks, and the tree house shaped like a Constitution-class starship Jim Garrison had built for the children in the neighborhood.

"I know you haven't lived on a planet before, Jacob, but it's really a lot of fun. You can hear the wind blow, and watch the rain and snow come down. You can go fishing in the river and play in a park with real grass," Kincaid finished up.

"I bet you could even really go camping, like you and David always talk about doing," Paxton chimed in, trying to draw out the still silent child.

"Absolutely," Kincaid quickly agreed. "I used to go camping a lot when I was kid. I would look up at the stars and trying to count them too." He smiled again, ruefully. "I always lost count though."

When the boy still didn't say anything, Kincaid added, "I know it's all very strange and new for you. You just met me, and soon you'll meet my mom, May, who you're going to live with. She's a really good mom, probably almost as good as your mom. I think you're going to like her a lot and she's very excited to meet you."

"I just want you to know that you're my brother, and making sure you're okay is really important to me. That's why I thought you might like to live on Solosos III, with my mom. I had such a good time growing up there and I think you will too. And even though I might be far away sometimes, I'm always going to be there for you, because that's what brothers do. If you ever need anything, or just want to talk to me, you just have to call." Kincaid took a breath and ventured, "Does that sound okay to you?"

Jacob flipped through some of the pictures again, then looked up at his brother to ask, "Can I pick the color of my new room?"

Kincaid gave him a big smile in return. "Absolutely. Any color you want."

Paxton chimed in again at this point, asking Jacob, "Would you like if your brother came back to the station with us to have dinner? You can talk about what color your room should be."

"Okay. And I can show him my pictures," the boy added, finally giving Kincaid a shy smile in return.

"I'd really like that, Jacob," Kincaid answered happily.

Abbie was already nursing a cup of cocoa in Ten Forward, enjoying a moment's rest after her shift before Kincaid joined her for dinner. She figured he would be late, since he was saying goodbye to Jacob before the ship pushed off from the station.

Ariel Elannis and Wilson Nieves entered the lounge together, mid-conversation. Ariel spotted Abbie and she led Wilson toward her table. "Hell of a day, today," Ariel said as she put her hand on the back of one of the chairs. "Do you mind if we join you?"

The science officer consciously let her expression go neutral and she shrugged a shoulder. "I was just waiting for Commander Kincaid to join me," she noted.

Wilson hesitated. "If we're disturbing you..."

"Oh no," Abbie replied easily, lifting her cup to take a sip.

They both took an empty seat next to each other. Wilson smiled. "Thank you. I was just telling Ariel that she missed her golden opportunity to resume being our executive officer."

"And I was informing our soon-to-be-demoted security chief that I didn't want the damn job," Ariel replied through gritted teeth. In the next sentence, she spoke normally, "I think Willie is after *my* job, though."

He held his hands up. "No, thank you. I'm happy in security for the time being."

Ariel leveled her gaze toward Abbie. She leaned forward to rest her elbows atop the table. "Though, while I'm glad he's sticking around here, I have to say that I didn't see any of this coming."

"Well, things have a way of working out for the best," Abbie responded, glancing at the doors to see if the commander had arrived. Instead, she watched as the lead flight controller entered instead.

Wilson turned to see what captured Abbie's attention, then smiled. "Hey, Greg," he called out to him.

Greg approached the table, but his eyeline was attuned to the corner of the lounge. "Good evening, everyone. I'd stay and chat, but I have a previous engagement. Enjoy yourselves." Without waiting for a response from anyone, he darted away and into the corner where Lieutenant Victoria Waltham awaited.

Ariel tilted her head. "Wow. Who's the new girl?"

"Lieutenant Waltham. She transferred aboard a couple of days ago to work in personnel," replied Wilson.

"She works quickly, doesn't she?" noted Ariel amusedly.

"I'm sure there's nothing untoward. Not all of us are driven by biology."

Abbie snorted derisively. "Certainly not. In this case, she's driven by his surname and he's driven by his grief. It won't end well."

Both Wilson and Ariel dropped their smiles. Ariel spoke first, "He's been through a lot this past month."

"We've been trying not to crowd him," Wilson added. He turned his head toward the seemingly-happy couple. "It's not easy the first time you lose someone you're close to when you're on the job."

"I know exactly how hard it is to lose a friend in the line of duty. But screwing away the pain only ends up increasing it." Abbie set down her cup, adding, "Greg's been allowed to coast through everything on his own terms, it seems. If you guys really want to help him, you will crowd him a little. I know Isira would, but he basically runs every time he sees her."

Wilson traded a look with Ariel before speaking. "We tried. In the beginning, around the week after we lost Tommy. He didn't want to talk about it. And I know about the counselor trying to help him, and I wish he would let her."

"Krys knows about it. I know she's talked to uh... Isira," Ariel rested her head down on her arms. "What I really want to do is go over there and slap him around, but look at him. I know he was forcing his smiles, but he looks like he's really enjoying himself for the first time since then."

"You should try talking to him now. And trust me, this is... false happiness. When it crashes, it's going to just magnify how bad it all seems," Abbie predicted sourly.

Wilson nodded and rose out of his seat. He started toward them, but when Greg leaned in to give Victoria a decidedly friendly kiss, he quickly backpedaled. "Uh..." he managed sit back down before the pair slipped out of the lounge. "Shit," he said, turning back toward Abbie. "That escalated quickly."

"And that's what I'm talking about. Three months, tops," Abbie confirmed her prediction with a timeline.

"Three months for what?" asked Kincaid. "And hello, you two," he said to Wilson and Ariel. "I wasn't expecting you guys for dinner, tonight."

"For the implosion of Greg and the new personnel officer," Abbie replied, giving Kincaid a grin. "How'd it go with Jacob?"

"We kind of invited ourselves, sir," replied Wilson, as Ariel straightened up to sit properly in her seat. "Hope you don't mind."

Kincaid merely replied with an "ah," regarding Greg. "Of course not, Lieutenant. The more, the merrier." He settled into the remaining empty seat and smiled. "I think it went very well. I know he's going to love my mom when he finally meets her in person."

"When is she arriving?" Abbie wondered, signaling for a waiter.

"Less than a week, about five days," said Kincaid. After they placed their orders, he continued, "I'll be taking some leave in a few months to go visit and spend some time with him."

Ariel smiled. "I'm not sure my mom and dad would've reacted the way your mom did. You're really lucky."

"Oh, she's nothing short of amazing," Kincaid said proudly. "Single mom for the most part, though the colony adults kind of all take part in raising the kids. But, yes... I'm very lucky to have her."

"How come you're not taking any leave now?" Abbie wondered. "Or is it because of sending mixed signals to Jacob regarding his primary caregiver...yeah," she answered her own question with a nod.

"Are you just listening in on my conversations with Isira, or what?" Kincaid asked in return. "How do you do that?"

Abbie just shrugged. "I don't know; it's natural, like how you naturally can't bluff at poker. Oh, here's the food," she replied with a grin.

Kincaid chuckled. "Well, there goes any chance of me getting into a game on *this* ship, I guess." He leaned back as his dinner was presented on the table. After the waiters left, he continued. "But I still wanted to make sure he knew that I was still there for him, so I went to the replimat and got a stuffed teddy bear with a white stomach and put my handprint on it in blue paint. That way he can put his hand on it and feel connected to me."

"Wow, that's really thoughtful. Did Isira suggest that?" Abbie inquired, only to take a large bite out of her bacon cheeseburger.

"Uh, no. I thought of it."

The science officer grinned as she chewed through the bite, then swallowed before saying, "Isira is right. You are going to be a good father someday."

Kincaid lowered his head to smile, then retrieved a holograph from his jacket's inside pocket. "I guess you can be the judge on that. We took this before the ship shoved off." He handed it to Abbie. "Pass it around."

Abbie activated the holograph and saw a picture of Kincaid and his little brother, both smiling at the camera. Jacob was clutching the bear. "He's a pretty cute kid," she pronounced before handing it off to Wilson.

Wilson grinned and leaned in to show Ariel. "That's adorable," he said.

"Strong resemblance," Ariel stared hard at the image. "It can be trying sometimes to maintain family ties or even romantic ones while you're serving. It's really cool to see you jumping in with both feet and taking charge."

"It can be hard, but it's not a choice. It's family; if you're not going to do your best for your family, then what's the point?"

END

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