

Timing, Degree, and Conviction

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Timing, Degree, and Conviction

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

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

Stardate 43409.1: *Farragut's* operations and security division must work together to track down a series of reported thefts aboard ship that prove to have few leads. Meanwhile, Commander Kincaid takes over the monthly Captain's Mast proceedings to deal with the various infractions and violations of discipline aboard ship.

Notes

This story was original published at the classic Ad Astra site on 13 May 2013, under a different name than my current nom-de-plume.

Historian's Note: The events of this story take place prior to the third season TNG episode, "The Vengeance Factor," through "The Defector," and continues until after "The Hunted."

Editor's Note: This story begins with a scene containing sexual content. You have been warned.

Teaser

Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead

By Lord McCovey Cove and A.J. Gertner

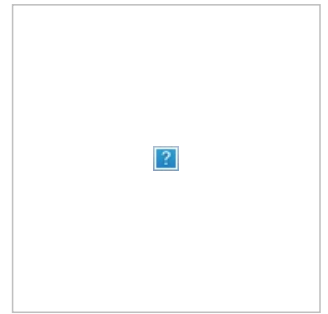
Episode Eight: Timing, Degree and Conviction

NCC-60597 (USS *Farragut*)

En route to Starbase 324, Warp 6.5

Stardate 43409.1

Cabin 6431



Lieutenant (jg) Gregory Aspinall did not open his eyes, but he knew he was not in his quarters. While his bunk allowed for only one person to sleep comfortable upon it, the bed he laid upon could accommodate two people easily. Also, it was presently accommodating two people, as he noticed that he could feel the soft and smooth warmth of a woman's legs tangled with his.

Greg opened his eyes and stared right into the back of Lieutenant Victoria Waltham's head. She slept away from him, but their legs were intertwined. He further took notice of the fact that they were both nude; his manhood nestled against her backside. Its usual rigidity in the morning called his attention from his surroundings to the soft skin within reach.

He slipped his hands around Victoria's midsection and returned to spoon her just as he had shortly before falling asleep.

"Good morning," he heard her soft voice tell him.

"Morning," he mumbled in her ear. "I hope you slept well."

She pressed her back into his chest and purred. "I did, thank you."

He enjoyed the play of her hair against his cheek before moving his head down to rest against her bare shoulder. "You're very warm."

Victoria reached around her thigh to encircle her hand around his shaft. "And you're very hard. Am I to understand that you'd like a repeat performance from last night?"

"As much as I would really like to say yes," Greg replied, unable to keep the pleasure from his tone, "I have duties to perform in a little under an hour."

Not breaking physical contact with Greg, she turned around to face him. She leaned her face into his and pecked him gently on the nose. In a lowered tone, she said, "I'm rather certain that we could finish in time to send you off with a smile on your face."

Greg groaned. "You're evil."

"I'm randy," she squeezed, then pecked his nose again. "I know you want me."

"I know I want you, too. Believe me."

"Then do something about it."

"I can't."

She released him and he immediately exhaled. "Why not?"

Greg took his time extricating his legs from hers. "What I want to do to you would take far more time than we have. And you deserve more than a simple quickie from me." He rolled away from Victoria, until his legs shot out from underneath the cover and his feet lay flat against the carpeting of the deck.

She appeared from behind him, laying kisses over his shoulder and neck. "You're very sweet."

He chuckled. "So far, you're the only woman to notice."

"Then I consider myself very lucky," Victoria said. Her fingers reached across his chest and played with his nipple. "Very lucky, indeed."

"Oh, God, please don't do that," he sighed. "I still have to go back to my quarters and get ready."

"I could order you to remain in bed, you know."

"You could, but since a full commander is my department head, I think you'd have a hard time countermanding his order."

Victoria smirked at that. "I should think that Commander Kincaid has distractions of his own to contend with, without being bothered by the activities of one of his officers."

"What do you mean by that?" Greg tilted his head as he turned slightly to face her.

She said nothing, instead distracting him with another flick of his nipple and a soft kiss upon his chest. Her kisses began to move southward, and Greg leaned back automatically. When she reached the middle of his abdomen, he stopped her by pushing away from the bed and standing

up.

He wore a pained expression as he spoke. "I'm sorry. Believe me, I am really sorry. But I need to go home, get a fresh uniform, and report to the bridge for my shift."

Victoria sat on the bed with her legs curled up under her. She grinned at him and gave him a nod. "No one would ever say that Lieutenant Aspinall places himself above his duty. We have many weeks ahead of us. No need to be impatient." Her eyes drifted down to his groin, and she giggled. "Though, I dare say part of you is leading me to believe the opposite."

"It has a mind of its own," he assured her. Greg began pulling on the dress uniform from the casino night until he stood before her with his jacket half-on and his dress shirt without the necktie. "I would very much like to take you to dinner tonight."

"I would very much like to skip the meal and make up for the eight hours you'll be away," she stared at him with hungry, unblinking eyes.

Greg shivered at the thought and could not help but smile. "I like your idea, better."

In a stern tone, she ordered, "Then, meet me back here at sixteen hundred." Victoria's lips broke into a lascivious smile. "We'll continue where we left off."

He dropped his smile and approached her. He reached for her left hand and pulled it up to his lips, kissing her fingers. "Have dinner with me, first, in Ten-Forward. I'd like to spend some time outside the bedroom with you. I want to know you better."

Victoria's smile did not abate as her arm was lifted up. "Gregory, you know me rather intimately right now. Wouldn't you say?" Off his determined look, she relented, "I will have dinner with you, of course. And again, you are very sweet."

He released her hand and took a step backward away from her. "Thank you." Without another word, he departed her quarters. Once the doors closed behind him, he took in a very deep breath. His eyes looked to the overhead lighting and he exhaled slowly.

Greg moved down the corridor toward the nearest turbolift, and in a quiet whisper, he said, "Holy shit. What the hell have I gotten myself into?"

Act One

Act One

Commander Jesse Kincaid touched the door panel leading into the captain's mess and waited patiently. Within moments, the hatch opened and he joined Captain Krystine Leone and Lieutenant Commander Ariel Elannis, who were already seated at the four-person table within. A pair of stewards wearing their special serving uniforms stood nearby.

"Good morning, sir," he said after stepping inside. Kincaid nodded to Ariel, "Commander."

"Good morning, Jesse," replied Leone. She had a near-full teacup in front of her. "You got here just in time. We haven't even ordered, yet."

Kincaid smiled at the captain's personal steward, an older petty officer first class named Handel. "Good morning," he said to him.

"Good morning, Commander," replied Handel. "Coffee?"

"Yes, please," the executive officer nearly pleaded.

While Handel moved away, Ariel kept her silence. Her eyes carried the look of someone who had not yet been to sleep. She nursed her coffee mug as though it were the only source of warmth amidst a blizzard.

Handel set a mug of black coffee down on the table as Kincaid took a seat. He shot an amused expression at Ariel and her apparent fatigue..

"Late night, Commander?"

"Mrgh," Ariel muttered. She shot him a deep frown before returning to her coffee.

Leone tilted her head toward Kincaid. "Something going on?"

"I received the commander's Mast approvals at oh-four-hundred. No doubt after a full night of reviewing them," he informed her matter-of-factly. "Perhaps, in the future, Commander Elannis will find that procrastination is not the best method in the execution of her duties."

As Ariel took on a sour expression, the captain changed the subject. "Oh, boy... another Captain's Mast," she said.

Kincaid nodded. "I'm awaiting some last-minute changes from some of the department heads." He checked his PADD and smiled at Ariel when he read her Mast recommendations, but continued to speak to Leone, "Master Chief Thornton is getting everything set up on one of the holodecks."

Leone peered at her teacup and sighed. "I loathe the Mast, to be honest."

"I know of no captain who enjoys it, sir," agreed Kincaid.

She took a sip of her tea and added, "You know, I actually ran the Masts aboard *Potemkin* as T'Ciryra's Exec. She made it one of my collateral duties."

Ariel groaned slightly at that, placing her cheek on the table with her nose close enough to graze the side of her coffee mug.

Though Kincaid turned to give her an annoyed glance, Leone ignored her and continued. "Though we tend to pride ourselves as an evolved species, we can get ourselves into some very dumb situations. After a while, it kind of chips away at your humanity. I'm not looking forward to running the Mast, again."

He straightened in his seat. "Sir, I'd be happy to volunteer for that duty, if you'd like."

Ariel's eyes shifted toward Kincaid, but she continued to maintain her silence.

Leone brightened considerably. "Are you sure? I'm certain you have personnel in your department who're being charged."

"Captain Masterson tended to like to run his own Masts, but I know how to conduct them and I'm sure that the local JAG officer would be of assistance," he assured her. "If you'd prefer to simply review our findings, I'll handle the duty and bring you the final reports when we conclude at the end of the week."

"I'll take you up on that, Jesse. Thank you." Leone then raised a hand to Handel, who was standing by to retrieve breakfast for the three senior officers. "I'll just have two eggs and some bacon."

Kincaid ordered his breakfast, and Ariel chose to continue to drink hers. "I checked in with the bridge. Looks like we're on time to arrive at Starbase Forty-Seven."

Ariel cleared her throat, but her tone held its rough edge. "Slow patrols of the border are like that. I hope it stays uneventful while we're out here."

"The less traveled portions of the sector tend to be quieter, yes," Kincaid replied blandly. He turned back to Leone. "But, it does provide us with time to drill the crew and keep their response times in accordance with regulation."

Leone gave an approving expression. "Ariel, what's on your docket for today?"

She cleared her throat once more, and her tone sounded closer to normal. "Willie and I will be working with Lieutenant Bartlet on tracking

down some minor replicator malfunctions we've been seeing from time to time."

Kincaid added, "I read her report, but she didn't have a theory as to why it was happening."

"That's why we're meeting today."

The captain moved her teacup to the outer edge of the table and it was refilled very quickly by Handel. Leone spoke as he filled up her cup, "If it's a malfunction, why is Wilson getting involved?" He added the appropriate amount of sugar to the cup before withdrawing to the galley..

"It was actually Wilson's department that tracked the malfunction. One of his ensigns was performing a security drill with her team on deck twenty-two, and they found the industrial replicator spitting out a large number of tricorders. It had already created four crates by the time the team found it," explained Ariel. With every word, she became more animated than she had before.

Leone blinked. "That's odd." She sipped at her cup and said, "Let me know what you all find," just as Handel and his assistant arrived with breakfast.

Lieutenant Abigail Atherton had been aboard *Farragut* for only a few months but had already gained a reputation as one of the ship's most prodigious eaters. She usually ordered extremely large meals and today's breakfast in the wardroom was no exception. Scrambled eggs, hash browns, bacon, toast and an array of berries were all laid out before her, including a cup of English breakfast tea.

Her attention diverted to the door of the wardroom when it opened to admit Greg. He exchanged glances with her, then blushed hard as he broke eye contact and moved to the replicators to order a mug of coffee. When he sat down next to her, instead of across from her like usual, she shot him a curious glance.

"Good morning," he said with a toothy grin. "Looking forward to the day?"

"Not really. There's a Captain's Mast today and I have to finish my list of people who I'm not just dealing with myself. I take it your list is already in to the XO?" Abbie asked, cutting into her eggs with her fork.

Greg shrugged. "I usually just sign off on Chief Amdal's recommendations. He's one of the good NCOs."

"I'm sure he's enjoying his promotion then since you're giving him all the responsibility," Abbie responded with a shake of her head.

"C'mon, Abbie," he replied, keeping his smile in place. "The NCOs usually have a much better perspective on what's going on in the ranks. That's their job. They get the first reports from the supervisors, anyway. I don't see them until the day before Mast begins."

"If you're the one in charge, you're the one who should be making the final decision." Abbie sipped at her tea, adding, "That's how your boss does it."

"Technically, I am making the final decision. It can't go to the Mast until it has the approval of the department officer," he remarked. Greg took sipped gingerly from his mug. "Is that what has your panties in a twist this morning?"

"Well, since I take my job responsibilities seriously, I'm just mulling over my decisions, to make sure I'm comfortable with them. I thought about it last night and before I hand in the list this morning, I just want to make sure I'm still okay with whom I've chosen for the Mast."

Again, Greg offered nothing more than a shrug. "I trust the chief knows best, I suppose. I don't need to micromanage him to get the job done." He leaned forward conspiratorially. "Besides, my time last night was much better invested than double-checking Mast reports."

"What did you do?" She immediately regretted asking the question when she saw his expression.

He grinned. "Let me begin by saying that I had a hell of a good time last night."

"I have a feeling I really don't want to know about it," Abbie quickly amended her stated interest.

Greg continued to grin widely. "Victoria..."

He did not have to say another word. Abbie knew what happened. She shook her head and cut him off. "I suppose you came straight from her quarters this morning." The edge in her tone peeked out on the word "straight."

"Not exactly. I mean, I woke up there."

"I *see*," Abbie replied sharply as she pointedly returned her attention her meal.

"And then I had to go back to my place, get a clean uniform."

"I get the picture."

Greg continued, undaunted, "And so then I changed, and came here for breakfast."

Abbie oozed sarcasm. "Great. I'm all caught up, now. Thank you for sharing. Next time, just send your personal log so I can ignore it."

He leaned in and lowered his voice. "But let me tell you, she is an amazing woman. She did things that I'd only read about in-"

"Okay!" she said, suddenly. "Story time is over. Let us contemplate the events of the previous night in mutually pleasing silence and then later, I will forget that we even had this conversation."

Greg was enjoying this reaction too much to stop. "She was just..so.."

"I don't need to hear any more about your embellished sexcapdes, Lieutenant."

As if seeing her for the first time, Greg peered at her. "What crawled up your pant leg and died?"

She rolled her eyes. "I long for the days when I served on a ship in Starfleet."

"Uh, where do you think you are now?"

"Right now? I think I'm a secondary supporting character in a sex-comedy written by a teenaged boy." Abbie gathered her things for a hasty departure.

"Well, you could have a major role if you just loosened up a bit," Greg muttered to himself as she left the wardroom.

Abbie had only managed to eat about half her breakfast in the wardroom before she fled, so her first task upon entering Ten-Forward was to order a second meal at the bar. Only once it was placed did she look around for a place to sit and spied Isira and Petra speaking quietly at a table near the window. She wound her way towards them and then asked politely, "Would you two mind a third?"

Lieutenant Petra Bartlet peered up at Abbie through her dark brown bangs. "Not at all..." she said with a smile. "I don't usually see you in Ten-Forward this early, er... lieutenant?"

"You can call me Abbie," the science officer replied easily after Isira just gave her a smile and motioned to an empty seat. Once she sat, she nodded towards the PADD beside the engineer. "Is that your list for Kincaid, Lieutenant Bartlet?"

"Please, you can call me Petra. Or Pet, for short."

"I think I'll use Petra," Abbie answered, giving the engineer a smile.

"I was just helping the lieutenant go through her list, to help provide some counsel for her decisions. It's quite the responsibility," Isira confirmed for Petra.

Petra explained, "This is actually my first time as a starship division officer. I've read the manuals and passed the certifications, but it's daunting to actually have to do it, sometimes."

Isira asked, "Is your own list complete, Abbie?"

"Yes, my list is done, but I'm giving it one last review to make sure it's what I want to submit. Like the lieutenant said, the first time you do something like this, you want to make sure you get it right," Abbie agreed. She smiled and thanked the waiter when he delivered her food.

"W-Well, of course," replied Petra earnestly. "I guess I'm feeling guilty about sending my personnel for punishment. They're good people."

Isira reached out to place a reassuring hand on Petra's shoulder. "It's alright to feel that way. However, try to find the confidence in your ability to make these kinds of decisions. Your team will respect your leadership."

"That's the way I feel about it," Abbie noted, nodding her agreement with Isira. "I know I have pretty good judgment, so I'm actually glad that I'm the one making the decisions this time. I don't think I'm going to be unnecessarily hard on anyone."

Isira gave Abbie a bemused look. "You're 'glad'?" she questioned. "You relish the ability to make the decision yourself. You love being the one to make the call."

Abbie chuckled and wrinkled her nose at Isira in self-mockery. "Yeah, you're right. It's awesome. But it's still not something I take lightly."

"I would hope not," Petra said. She dropped her eyes to her PADD once more. "Only six more names to go on mine before I can send it in. And I only have an hour before Commander Kincaid comes calling."

Abbie glanced at Isira, who gave her a subtle nod, before mentioning, "When I'm having trouble coming to a decision for my section, I sometimes write out a schematic for how it could go. You know, like a flow chart? Sometimes, seeing all the different possibilities side by side helps clarify what I really want to accomplish."

"Sounds like it might be easier than reading through the gory details of each report and then wondering how the Mast will respond if they're found guilty," Petra said with a heavy sigh. "Perhaps next time, you could show me?"

"Sure thing. And if you just want to talk to someone about the annoyances of being a section chief, I'm here too," Abbie offered.

Petra offered a warm smile. "I will certainly take advantage of your offer."

"Please do. I've already fallen into a rut on this ship. Breakfast, work, lunch with Greg," Abbie explained, adding a note of pique when she mentioned the chief helmsmen. "Work, then work out, then dinner with either Isira or Kincaid."

"I, uh... I mean, that sounds pretty good to me," Petra replied as she leaned back in her chair. "I haven't had a chance to really socialize with too many people since reporting aboard. Outside of work, I mean. Like now."

Abbie shared another look with Isira, then smiled at the engineer. "Well, you're more than welcome to join us for dinner some nights. We were even thinking of starting a movie night, you know, the old style ones."

"Oh, yes. Ensign O'Day and Lieutenant Aspinall once invited me to watch movies once," Petra replied. "But, the one invitation was extended on a night when I had the watch in engineering." She sighed. "I regret not taking them up on it, considering recent events..."

"We'll make sure to schedule one when you're not otherwise occupied, then," Isira immediately offered.

The chief engineering officer smiled widely. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

Act Two

Act Two

The first day of the Captain's Mast loomed before Kincaid as he entered Holodeck Four. The holodeck's running program was created by *Farragut's* Command Master Chief Kim Thornton and made to resemble a typical Starfleet conference room with a large outer room to hold the crew that would stand before them for the day. Kincaid gave a curt nod to the marine gunnery sergeant running the marine detail assigned to them for the duration; they acted as bailiffs during the proceedings.

"Good morning, Master Chief," he said as he walked to his seat within the room.

Master Chief Thornton replied in kind, though her attention was diverted toward a PADD and her assistant. A Yeoman Second Class seemed to always be at her side the previous day, providing her with information in a timely fashion. "We have a pretty full docket today, Commander," she said in a soft contralto. "Should be coming up on your display, now, sir."

Kincaid checked his PADD. "Thank you," he said. His eyes widened at the list of names. "I just don't get how so many crew could possibly be out of discipline so soon after reporting aboard. It boggles the mind."

"Sometimes they like to push the boundaries with a new ship when they report aboard, and sometimes you have overzealous supervisors who like to assert their authority a little too much," the master chief said. She nodded a silent greeting to the other master chief who entered to take his place on the presiding board. "I note the ones we dismiss and have a chat with them later. Discipline needs to be maintained on both sides."

Kincaid found himself liking the master chief. "Agreed."

Damage Controlman Apprentice Fullerton C. "Cal" Lasseter stood at attention along with several other crewmates of varying ranks. He wore his best mustard yellow uniform with three stripes and stared straight ahead out of fear of aggravating the dress marine marching up and down the corridor outside of the simulated conference room. Although there were chairs available, no one was allowed to use them as they were ordered to remain at attention.

The marine, wearing the rank of a staff sergeant, addressed the group. "I will escort each of you inside, individually. You will stand before the Mast and speak only when spoken to. You will address anyone who speaks to you with respect, responding with 'sir,' 'chief,' or what have you. If you fail to do so, I will issue a warning. If you fail twice, I will slap binders on your hands and take you into custody."

This was not the first time Cal had heard the speech, and in his estimation, not the last. When the staff sergeant asked if they understood, he joined the chorus of "Yes, Staff Sergeant."

The staff sergeant nodded once, then pressed the door annunciator. He escorted the first crewman in; she was a very young-looking girl with only one stripe on her collar. Obviously her first time through the system, and already traumatized by the procedure. The staff sergeant issues marching orders to her and she followed them to the letter. Once they entered the mess, the door slid home behind them and they could hear nothing behind.

She finished her meeting in under fifteen minutes, with a stricken expression upon her face. She returned to her standing position as she had not yet been dismissed, and then it was Cal's turn.

"One step forward, march," ordered the staff sergeant. "By the left flank, march."

Cal turned to the left and strode to the mess door. He stopped on the second step as the staff sergeant ordered him to halt. He turned to the right, then waited for the door to open and admit him.

Beyond the door lay the simulated large conference room, within was an arrangement of tables in a semi-circle. Commander Kincaid, Master Chief Thornton, another master chief he'd never met, and the ship's marine master gunnery sergeant sat within, eyeing him as he obeyed the marine sergeant behind him. He stepped in and stood at attention.

Cal felt his stomach lurch as he saw the executive officer in lieu of the captain. Word was that he was a straight-arrow officer, whereas most of them liked the laid-back command style of their commanding officer.

The ship's command master chief seated next to the XO, an older woman with silvering brunette hair, straightened up in her seat. Her uniform was a command red jumpsuit variant. Although he had to wear a dress uniform, the chiefs and sergeants could wear whatever they wanted. She scanned him with her eyes and then back down at the PADD before her. "Crewman Lasseter, this is your second appearance before the mast. This time, it's insolence toward superiors."

Kincaid's eyes widened at the familiar tone used by the master chief and looked down at the PADD he set down on the table. His fingers tapped on the controls. Cal assumed he was looking him up.

"It was not my intention to do so, Master Chief," replied Cal.

She leaned forward, placing her hands in a steeple atop her PADD. "Intentionally or not, the facts in evidence are that you willfully exhibited insolent behavior to your supervisor while on duty. What's the problem, Crewman? You dislike working with Petty Officer Solat?"

Cal took in a deep breath and decided he would go for broke. "I would like to answer the Master Chief's question, if I may I have the Master Chief's permission to speak freely."

The master chief angled a look toward the XO, as he was the senior officer on the deck. When Kincaid gave his ascent with a succinct nod, she turned back and smiled. "All right, Crewman. We'll give you enough rope to hang yourself with, because I'm curious how a guy with such high marks coming out of basic ends up standing before the mast so many times that he's going to end up in the brig before long."

"Thank you, Master Chief, Commander," Cal said immediately. "The incident as described by Petty Officer Solat began as a free exchange of ideas during a team meeting. The petty officer's opinion on a particular task held some disagreement amongst the team, but I felt that they were holding back due to intimidation. I held no such compunction and spoke up. My tone was misinterpreted."

Kincaid read from his PADD, "Petty Officer Solat reported that you called him, and I'm quoting from his report, now, an 'evil cold-blooded elf.'"

Cal pressed his lips together. "Commander, with due respect to the petty officer, I believe that he may have misheard me."

"Oh? Do enlighten us."

"I called him an evil cookie-making elf, sir. However, if I might add in my defense, I did not say it very loudly and it was after he ended the meeting," Cal responded, unable to contain his grin. "His hearing is obviously more acute than I realized, though as he did mishear my speech, I submit that his report is inaccurate."

The master chiefs and gunnery sergeant tittered at that. An inaccurate report, especially one with a formal charge against another enlisted member, was a violation of another article, number one hundred-seven.

"I would be willing to overlook his actions if you're willing to overlook mine," Cal offered, helpfully.

The staff sergeant standing behind him barked in his ear loudly, "That's a warning, Crewman!"

"Master Chief!" Cal added quickly. He didn't want to be thrown to the deck by the overzealous marine and tossed in the brig.

Kincaid leaned over to speak with the master chief quickly. She nodded in response to his words, then announced, "Staff Sergeant will escort his detail outside where he will wait for the result of our deliberations. Send in the next detail to stand before the mast."

Soon, he found himself back outside and standing in line as he had before entering the Mast. Back in formation, he waited patiently for the others' charges to be dealt with. He afforded himself a quick smirk before dropping it, lest the other marines nearby take issue with his private amusement.

By the time Ariel and Wilson entered Cargo Bay Two, Bartlet and her deputy, Lieutenant (jg) Harold Vestry, were examining circuitry laid out atop a portable table. Senior Chief Tallan stood nearby as he directly supervised the maintenance crews working in the area.

"Looks like a level one diagnostic," noted Ariel as they approached Bartlet.

Vestry looked up and confirmed, "That's exactly what this is, sir. We decided to get an early start, in case this was a systemic problem."

"Have other replicators shown a similar problem?" asked Wilson.

Bartlet replied, "We found power spikes in one other unit in Cargo Bay Five. They seem to be occurring in the early morning hours or very late in the evening."

Ariel said, "While the third shift is on duty."

"Were there any replicated items found in those cases? Or did anyone report finding a similar state as Ensign Wu found in here?" Wilson turned his head back toward the partially-dismantled replicator.

Bartlet and Vestry shared a look. The chief engineer admitted, "No, sir. No reports of any replicated materials or items were brought to our attention. All we've found thus far is the redirection of power to those units within certain hours overnight."

Wilson moved around to the other side of the table to access a separate panel. With a few taps of his fingers, he asked, "Can we pull the replication records to see what it was producing?"

"We should be able to, yes, sir," Vestry said. He tried to access the record, but found he could not. "Uh... Senior?" he called out.

Tallan looked up from a conversation with one of the maintenance petty officers and moved to the lieutenant's side. "Yes, sir?"

"I can't access the replicator records for Cargo Bay Five. Could you lend a hand?" Vestry offered his PADD to the Andorian NCO.

His blue fingers moved across the PADD's surface quickly. "There's nothing to access, Lieutenant. According to this, the replicator never recorded anything."

Ariel moved to peer over their shoulders at the result of the search. "Perhaps I should have some of my people take a look to see if there's been any tampering."

Bartlet nodded. "No way a replicator draws that much power for nothing." She looked back toward the diagnostic. "We'll continue our efforts, here, just in case."

The chief operations officer spoke as she walked toward the exit, "I'll let you know what we find out."

The marine staff sergeant dismissed the assembled crewmen, but told Cal to stand fast. "The mast will see you, now." He pressed the button and the door slid open.

Cal noticed that there were no more marching orders. Nothing about keeping his words respectful or threats of being shoved to the deck and placed in cuffs. He stepped through and stood at attention as he did before.

"Crewman Lasseter," said the master chief. "In light of the fact that the petty officer's report was..." She paused and searched for the political word to use, "inaccurate, we have decided to reduce our findings. However, by your own admission, you did exhibit insolent behavior toward your supervisor and this is intolerable. Am I being read clearly, Crewman?"

"Aye, aye, Master Chief," replied Cal. He kept his eyes on the bulkhead far behind them.

"After discussing it with the rest of the mast, Commander Kincaid will discuss your punishment after we adjourn." She tapped a bell in front of her twice. "This mast is adjourned. The crewman is dismissed."

Cal took one step back and twisted on his right heel. He heard Kincaid call after him, "Wait outside for me, please, Crewman."

Kincaid joined him after only a minute, then gestured for them to walk together toward the holodeck exit. "Crewman, I read your record."

"Yes, sir," Cal said stiffly. He did not relish this conversation or the outcome.

"You can speak freely. This is an informal discussion," assured the XO with a smile. "I'm not looking to trap you in another charge."

"That's a relief."

They entered a lift together and the car sped upward toward the officer's section of the ship after Kincaid spoke his order aloud. "Anyway, like I said, I read your record. You got pretty high marks in basic. Your instructors seemed to like you a great deal; quite a few of them expected you to flourish out in the field."

The doors opened to allow them to depart, and he led him to his office. Cal stood, waiting for an instruction from the XO.

"Have a seat," Kincaid said. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, sir. Thank you, sir," Cal replied. He slipped into the visitor's chair before the commander's desk.

"Hope you don't mind me indulging, then," Kincaid turned to the replicator. "*Raktajino*, double-sweet." He retrieved the mug from the replicator's materialization pad and sat down behind the desk. "As I was saying, high marks, you were going places. You were all set to make petty officer two cycles ago and then you got hit with five infractions in less than three months?"

"Yes, sir."

"What happened?"

Cal sighed, letting out his breath through his flaring nostrils. "Sir, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not discuss it." He rose in preparation to depart. "I will try harder to be a model crewman."

"Glad to hear it, but not good enough," the XO said sternly. He pointed down toward the deck, indicating his order to have Cal sit back down. "What the hell happened between your last posting and this one?"

Cal's eyes darted away from the almost-penetrating gaze of Kincaid. He slowly sank into the chair. "I don't want to make excuses, sir..."

"I'm not asking for excuses. I'd prefer an explanation."

"Then, I'm sorry, sir. I cannot provide one."

Kincaid frowned as he peered at his mug briefly. "Very well. I'm going to defer punishment until I have more time to consider. Master Chief Thornton has left this with me, so I'll be in touch with you, soon."

Cal sensed that the meeting was over and rose from his seat. "Aye, sir. By your leave?"

Kincaid stood up and set his mug down. "Crewman, before you go, I'd like to say that here on *Farragut*, we prefer to work with people and not just punish them outright. This isn't the flagship of the fleet, but I'd rather you come away from your time here for the better, not the worse."

"I... appreciate that, Commander," Cal said hesitantly. He lifted his gaze to meet Kincaid's. "But I would prefer to simply take my lumps and move on. If I'm to remain here, fine. If not, I'm sure there's a fuel transport that could use a good scrubbing somewhere in Starfleet."

Act Three

Act Three

*Personal Log of Lieutenant (jg) Gregory Aspinall
Stardate 43410.1*

I spoke with my mother by subspace yesterday. She told me that my cousin is finishing her third year at Starfleet Academy and is looking to break my flight time record on the Academy's flight range at Titan. If she only knew how much I had to practice to get my name on that damned plaque. Oh, well. Nothing lasts forever.

Victoria's been nothing short of fantastic this past week. Although we spend a healthy amount of our time together in her bedroom or mine, we do make our nightly appearances in Ten-Forward. We also managed a real date last night; we walked along the beach in San Francisco, just south of the Academy grounds, and she took me to this little dive in the Mission that I never knew about. Great food and even better drinks. Got to remember that place for when I get back to the actual San Francisco.

During dinner, she asked me why I hadn't applied for promotion to full lieutenant. It was the same question that Captain Leone asked me right before we came back from... uh... well, right before we came back. I told Victoria that I wasn't looking for more pressure or responsibility than I was ready for, and she told me that she felt like I was ready.

I told her about Tommy and what happened. She was so kind and really listened to me. I felt like I was making a fool of myself, but she took my hand in hers and assured me that I was not. I didn't know what to say, and we sat there looking at each other for a long time. She didn't have to say anything more. I'm definitely going to think about that promotion.

Things are going great with her, and I'm hoping for the best. I could see myself spending a lot more time with her, maybe even... I don't know. But I think something's there.

The doors to Greg's quarters opened and he stepped through them and stopped. When the doors closed behind him, he took in a deep breath and closed his eyes. The previous night with Victoria remained fresh in his memories, and he indulged in reminiscence before he reported for the morning shift on the bridge.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," said a familiar tone.

Greg's eyes snapped open to see the Andorian Spaceflight Operations Chief (SOC) Therun Amdal staring back at him. "Oh, good morning, Chief. I didn't see you there."

"You had your eyes closed. I don't think you were seeing anything."

"Right," replied Greg. With a quick nervous glance back toward his quarters, he gestured toward the turbolifts at the end of the corridor. "You on your way up to the hangar?"

"Yes, sir. I was just running a set of tools to impulse engineering, after checking up on the repairs to one of the shuttles." Amdal's left antennae twitched slightly as he took in his superior officer's appearance. "Your tunic is slightly askew, sir," he noted.

Greg looked down to see that the hem of his uniform top exposed his wine red undershirt. He snapped it back down into place. "Thank you, Chief."

"Of course, sir," Amdal replied in amusement. "Are you on your way to the hangar or to Ten-Forward for a meal?"

"The wardroom, actually," Greg said as he began to walk. "I can walk you as far as deck five, if you don't mind the company."

"Of course not, sir," Amdal answered as he followed alongside. "Are you meeting with Lieutenant Waltham or Atherton this morning?" he wondered.

The question surprised Greg, as he stammered out an answer. "W-Well, I'm going up to see Abbie. Victoria's still... er, I mean, she's not available right at the moment."

"That's where the smart money is, sir. Atherton's got a good reputation and the better career ahead of her," Amdal cheerfully offered.

Greg grimaced slightly at the advice. "I don't typically base my love life on the career potential, Chief." He turned his head to look at the Andorian. "Can I presume that my personal life is now the subject of gossip in the Goat Locker? What am I saying; of course it is."

"Oh, no, sir. We just can't help but notice you spend all your free time with one or the other. The chiefs in Lieutenant Atherton's section all speak very highly of her; same with the enlisted aboard her last ship. She ended up joining their poker game when she got kicked out of the officers'," Amdal freely revealed.

"Might I ask what the scuttlebutt is on Lieutenant Waltham?" Greg asked just before they reached the turbolift.

"There isn't any, except that she seems very focused on you, sir," Amdal reported.

Greg smiled. "That's not unusual, is it?"

"I'm not sure, sir. I'm not familiar with the mating habits of... humans," Amdal replied.

That brought out a chuckle from Greg. "Senior Chief Tallan doesn't usually call me 'human.' I'd gotten used to 'pink-skin.'" He tapped the turbolift call and waited. "But, I can see the confusion. This is not a typical relationship for me, I'll admit that much. I've never had anyone be this aggressive."

"Aggression is usually a sign of attraction," Amdal opined. "One of my wives was very aggressive; it's a good sign."

Greg took that with a thoughtful nod. The lift arrived miraculously empty for the time of the morning. As they stepped aboard and it began to move quickly up to deck five, he turned to the chief and said, "By the way, I wanted to thank you for all the work you did on the Mast list."

"Of course, sir. Most of the issues we can deal with ourselves, but a few seemed ripe for the Mast."

The lift stopped at Greg's destination and the doors parted. "It's not an easy job, but I appreciate it all the same. And not just for the Mast, Chief. The department would fall apart without you." He started for the wardroom without saying another word.

Amdal's antennae twitched again and he frowned in confusion at the lieutenant's retreating back. "Thank you, sir," he answered.

"Mom says that Jacob is doing as well as can be expected right now. She has him seeing a counselor twice a week, but it's still a big change for him. He's got a mild case of agoraphobia, they say, because he's never been anywhere that wasn't a ship or a space station before. He's waking up in the middle of the night crying every other night and half the time she finds him under his bed in the morning." Kincaid shook his head as he leaned forward in his seated position on the couch in the counselor's office.

"It's a common problem with children who are born in space and aren't properly exposed to other living situations. But he's young, he's already in counseling and he will grow past it," Isira assured him in response. She was sitting back in her own chair, regarding the commander. "Which you know. You're worried for him, as is natural, but you're confident what your mother is doing for him is the right thing."

"Yes. It just bothers me a little that I can't be there for him. But Mom is way better equipped to handle it." Kincaid forced something of a smile to come to his face. "He's taking that bear I gave him with him everywhere right now. That's something else the counselor says they'll have to work on once he's not quite so afraid of the sky."

"Did he name the bear finally?"

"Yeah. It's 'Commander Bear,'" Kincaid admitted sheepishly.

"Children often don't have complicated names for their toys. Or their pets. You can't expect a four year-old to come up with something much better than that," Isira noted with a chuckle.

"I guess so. Abbie once told me what she had named her stuffed animals - Castor and Pollux - and I was a little worried that maybe Jacob was being odd. But then, Abbie's the one who had a really odd childhood, so I shouldn't be surprised. I worry about her sometimes too. The way her family has no concept of the word is really heartbreaking."

Isira raised an eyebrow. "Now you're worried about Abbie?"

"Sometimes. She's very independent and can more than handle herself, which I guess you would have to be to survive a father like that and a mother who never gave two craps about you, but she's still human. She needs people and a family and a community, just like everyone else."

"Of course. But she's a Starfleet officer with a good career, an excellent reputation, and at least two other officers consider her family, as I am told," Isira noted pointedly. "Including yourself."

"Yeah, but she's still pretty isolated, I think," Kincaid replied.

"But that's not really something that should be the subject of a session between you and I, is it, Commander?" Isira questioned pointedly. "We've talked about your mother, your brother, and now your putative sister. Why don't you talk to me about what's actually on your mind?"

Kincaid flushed and shook his head. "The things I hear and have to do as part of the Captain's Mast shouldn't be the subject of a counseling session."

"On the contrary, my job is to help you do your job, Commander. Whatever information you feel is privileged remains so in my office as well. There's something bothering you about today's Mast, so let's talk about that instead of your family, with whom you're quite comfortable."

After a moment's hesitation, Kincaid makes a slow gesture with his hand as he spoke, "We had a pair of marine privates that engage in bare-knuckle fights semi-regularly, as well as a petty officer who tends to use her off-time to drown her sorrows overnight and then takes a nip during her shift all day." He turned to shoot a glance at Isira, "I sat there listening to the token resistance each one had for their transgressions and I was left feeling very hollow for it. Instead of doling out disciplinary action, I wanted to refer each of them to you."

"What stopped you? As I said, that is my primary job aboard a ship of the line, to help its crew members do their jobs without compromising their mental health."

He grit his teeth. "They're no longer members of the crew. We recommended general courts-martial for the privates, and the petty officer has been relieved." Kincaid let out a slow breath. "I feel responsible for this. That's why..." He trailed off, seemingly lost in thought.

"That's why..." Isira prompted pointedly.

Kincaid continued, "There was a crewman in the Mast today named Lasseter. He wasn't in there for anything felonious, which was astonishing when you consider the rest of the docket. He carried himself intelligently, and I thought to myself, 'There's a guy I can work with.' I looked him up. He went to basic out of high school, got excellent marks from his instructors. Ended up going to damage control and

operations school which earned him an automatic promotion."

"And yet, here he was, at the Captain's Mast," Isira interjected.

He waved it off. "Minor problem with a questionable report from his supervising NCO. What I'm saying is that it wasn't anything that required him to be tossed in the brig over, pending charges before a general court-martial. Non-judicial punishment was necessary if only to let him know this his smart-ass attitude wasn't warranted, but I think he could be a really good petty officer if he was placed under the right guidance, the right leadership."

"You're the executive officer, and the captain's given you full discretion. What's stopping you from doing what you think is the right thing to do in this case?"

"I'm concerned with the fact that I can't move every one of merit around like this," he said with a sigh. "Do I simply go through tomorrow's Mast docket and find the troubled youth like Lasseter and shuffle them? And if I intervene on his behalf and not others, is that favoritism?"

"Is that all you can do? Is there no other option?" Isira asked. "It seems to me that non-judicial punishment isn't just changing someone's assignment. There's a whole range of things that can be done."

"No, the NJP was a warning, and the master chief left the remainder up to me, since I'd shown an interest in the matter during recess," Kincaid explained. "I intend to talk to Lieutenant Bartlet and see if maybe I could advise her. I'm also checking to see if this particular supervisor had has any problems in the past."

"That sounds like a plan. So why are you so uncertain about this course of action?"

"I'm concerned about playing favorites." He intoned, presenting her with a dour expression. "Especially aboard *this* ship."

"You're very concerned about appearances, Commander, but let me ask you: are you certain about your instincts in this matter?"

"I usually am, but in those other cases, I didn't have to be concerned with the appearance of favoritism... I could simply make the decision and the crew would respect that I was making a choice for the good of the ship." Kincaid paused to consider his own words. "To hell with it. It's my call, and the captain wouldn't even bother with such a low level change. If they don't like it, tough."

Isira gave him a smile. "Good to hear, Commander."

"In spite of our finding that the records had been deleted, Lieutenant Bartlet is continuing the diagnostic," said Ariel. She picked up her ivory-colored king's knight and advanced it the two spaces toward the center of the chessboard.

Leone responded with the Ware Opening, moving her queen's rook's pawn two spaces. "I'm certain that she's intent on eliminating any mechanical failure with the replicator system."

Ariel eyed the bizarre opening, but said nothing. "Uh, of course," she said distractedly. Her king's pawn now move up two spaces. "But now that we know that the records were intentionally deleted-

"You were able to track the deletion to outside input?" Leone asked, interrupting her. She advanced her queen's pawn in response, but only a single space. "Have you eliminated the possibility of data corruption?"

"On a computer less than six months out from drydock?"

"It's not impossible."

"It's not impossible, yes, but highly unlikely."

"I hear that as you haven't checked, yet."

"No... but I think that would be something that my team would have found right away. And it seems rather odd that only the replicator records for each of the power spikes could have been the sole data subject to this very specific, very timely corruption," Ariel said, her tone growing annoyed.

Leone smiled. "By the way, check."

Ariel looked down at the board suddenly and her eyes widened at her predicament on the board. Confusion took over, to be replaced with a sly smirk. "Oh, nice job with the distraction, Krys."

The captain grinned. "Know your enemy, right?"

Ariel stopped the conversation to reverse her position on the board until Leone finally resigned her king. "Even when you're playing your little mind games, I'll still kick your ass all over the board."

"If it weren't for that damned polite aspect of announcing when you check the king, I would've had you," Leone rose from her seat behind the desk in her ready room. She approached her small replicator and hesitated before ordering her drink. "You think I should wait for engineering to clear usage before I get a glass of iced tea?"

While resetting the board for another game, Ariel smiled. "I'd risk it. What's the worst that could happen?"

Leone replied, "I could end up with five hundred glasses of iced tea? I'm not that thirsty." She returned to the desk without ordering. "What's

the next step?"

"Well, Wilson is pursuing a line of inquiry. Only a certain number of people have access to the replicator in the first place. He's checking to see who was working near that section during the times indicated by the missing records."

Ensign Yvonne Colby entered the main corridor outside the NCO staterooms flanked by two privates from the ship's marine company. "In here," she ordered, as she pressed the door control to open it. As soon as she took a step inside, she could see some of the crew lounging in their bunks.

"Officer on deck!" screamed a petty officer to her left.

All of them got to their feet, as the call went out; the words drilled into them from basic training. Yvonne stepped forward with the two privates trailing. "Boatswain's Mate Third Class Comeau, step forward."

A dark-haired man responded to the order as soon as she said it. "Aye, aye, sir!" he replied as though he were a fresh recruit. He maintained his parade stance after taking the single step forward.

"As you were, Boats. You will accompany the marines outside, now." She followed all three out into the corridor, thereby releasing the crewmen inside from having to remain standing. "Lieutenant Nieves wants to see you," Yvonne told Comeau.

"What did *I* do?" he asked, not bothering to hide his surliness from her.

She ignored his tone and shrugged. "The lieutenant says he wants to see you, so you go see him."

Comeau snorted. "This is bullshit, sir."

His reward was a slap to the back of the head by the private on his right. "Watch it!" the marine growled. Nothing more was said after that, all the way to the lift and toward Wilson's office within the ship's security complex on deck seven.

When Comeau and Yvonne appeared at the doorway, Wilson was mid-conversation with Bartlet. They asked them to enter, offering a seat to Comeau. Yvonne took up position near the door, while the privates stood guard outside.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Boats," began Wilson.

Comeau sneered at him. "Oh, it was my pleasure, I assure you, *sir*."

"Do you know why you're here?"

"I have no fucking idea why I'm here."

Yvonne opened her mouth to chastise the crewman for speaking disrespectfully, but Wilson raised his hand slightly to ward her off.

Bartlet handed Comeau a PADD and asked, "Is this your access code?"

Comeau peered at the display briefly and nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And..." the chief engineer flipped to another screen, "... is this your code accessing the maintenance panel in Cargo Bay Five?"

"I have duties in Cargo Bay Five from time to time, sir. You know that," Comeau responded testily. "Can I ask what the hell all this is about?"

Wilson ignored his question to ask his own, "Where were you the previous evening between twenty-three and oh-two hundred hours?"

Comeau hesitated before responding, "I was in the arboretum. Why?"

"Did anyone see you?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there to find other people, *sir*. I go there to be alone."

Bartlet asked gently, "Without your commbadge?"

"When I don't want to be bothered, yes. I'll store it in my locker. Is that a crime, now?"

She responded worriedly. "It's not against regulation, but it would have been helpful to verify your whereabouts, Boats. I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what, sir?"

"Boats," said Wilson as he stood behind his desk. "She's sorry because your codes were used to access an industrial replicator in Cargo Bays Two and Five over the past couple of nights. Your authorization was utilized to replicate a large number of devices ranging from tricorders, PADDs, and power cells. According to Lieutenant Bartlet and your supervisors, no such order for replication was passed to you. You are aware that unauthorized use of the replicators is in violation of established procedure, yes?"

The petty officer's attitude changed dramatically as he listened. "Sir, I'm telling you; I have no idea what you're talking about. I didn't access any of the replicators in the cargo bays."

Wilson shook his head. "I'm sorry, as well." He lifted his eyes toward Yvonne. "Ensign, have the marine detail confine him within the

detention center pending charges."

Comeau expression changed from fear to fury. "You can't hold me in the brig without the captain's order, *sir!*"

"You're right, Boats." He slapped his commbadge. "Nieves to the captain."

Act Four

Act Four

Captain Leone looked over the service record of Rafale Comeau with Ariel standing behind her. "So, he had the proper authority to access the replicator for maintenance purposes, which included use of it," the captain spoke her thoughts aloud. "The missing piece of this puzzle, lieutenants, is if you found the records deleted, how did you discover that it was Petty Officer Comeau's code that was used to access the replicator in the first place?"

Petra spoke first, "The replicator in Cargo Bay Two was not tampered with, sir. It did utilize his code in that instance."

"And the others?"

Ariel replied when both Lieutenants Bartlet and Nieves looked to her. "My team was able to reconstruct the deleted records enough to determine the specific access code, though what exactly was replicated is still a mystery."

"He denies the entire ordeal, Captain," said Wilson. "He maintains that he was in the arboretum at the time of all of the recorded power spikes in engineering."

Leone nodded. "He also said that he removed his commbadge for privacy, and that he was alone during those time, so we're unable to prove or disprove his claims."

"I'm sure that was his intent," Wilson said. He folded his arms across his chest. "The lack of his alibi places him within reasonable doubt."

Wilson's words hung in the air as the quartet of officers considered the problem before them. Leone broke the silence with her query, "At the moment, this is a purely circumstantial case?"

"Yes, sir, but all the facts fit so far."

"I understand that," she replied quickly. "It's why I agreed to brig him for the time being. But I don't relish the idea of confining a possibly innocent man because the circumstances fit. I'm going to put a time limit of twenty-four hours."

Wilson's eye widened. "But, sir--"

"Twenty-four hours," Leone repeated, intentionally interrupting him. "If you present solid evidence that removes any doubt, then make sure he stands before the Mast before the end of the week."

He broke eye contact with her, choosing to stare at her desk instead. With a single nod, he conceded, "Aye, sir. Twenty-four hours."

"Thank you," said Leone. "I'd like to be kept up to speed with regular reports until then. You're all dismissed."

The officers filed out, but Ariel got to the door and stopped to allow it to close and give them some privacy. Leone looked up and asked, "Ariel?"

Ariel turned around to face her. "Something I noticed in his service record..."

"His rehabilitation?"

"It said he voluntarily entered a drug rehab program before he entered Starfleet," Ariel commented. "I know he's been cleared and he's also been sober since then, but what if we're seeing the signs of a relapse? What if he's using the replicators to generate capital to buy drugs?"

Leone sighed and regarded her friend closely. "You mean, like Ellis did?"

The mention of Ellis Oberlin brought a sudden blush to Ariel's cheeks. As Wilson did before, Ariel dropped her gaze down to the desk. "There are times when I regret telling you about him. But yes, since you bring it up, something like that."

"I know you're still sore over what happened, but try not to prosecute Comeau for what Ellis did to you," Leone warned gently. "And if you want to talk about it, I'm here for you."

Ariel growled, "I was drunk when we talked about him before, and don't for one moment tell me how to feel one way or the other about this." Her hands clenched tightly into fists when she spoke, and her jaw tightened visibly.

"Ariel..." Leone said softly. She stood from her seat and walked over to stand before her friend. She placed her hands on Ariel's upper arms in an attempt to console her. "Ariel, I'm not going to betray your confidence in me. I love you very much."

As soon as Leone said it, Ariel relaxed considerably. "You do?"

"You know I do. You've been my closest friend for over a decade," Leone affirmed with a smile, drawing Ariel near enough to embrace her. "Just hear me out on this, all right?"

Ariel closed her eyes to enjoy the sudden physical contact with Leone. "Yeah..."

Leone released her and then leaned back to use her desk as support. "Comeau isn't Ellis. I feel that your past history is leading you to draw a conclusion, here... and because drugs are involved, your anger might cause you to assume the worst. I know you got burned and I know it's

going to feel like an opportunity to right that past wrong, but please keep your objectivity on this."

"You're right," Ariel said. "As usual. I'll do my best."

"That's all I ask."

Ariel looked down at her hands. "Um..."

Leone tilted her head. "Yes?"

"Do you think I could get another hug?"

Leone chuckled softly. "Of course," she said, opening her arms and standing upright.

Without any hesitation, Ariel settled into the embrace once more and rested her head on Leone's left shoulder. "I'm sorry about before. I shouldn't have yelled at you," she told Krys in a distracted tone.

"Don't worry about it," Leone assured her.

Ariel moved her arms in opposite directions, forcing them to make full body contact. Their embrace lasted for nearly sixty seconds before Leone tensed slightly.

"Uh, Ariel?"

"Mmm.... yes?" Ariel said lazily.

Leone cleared her throat. "I need to see to some work, eventually."

Reluctantly, Ariel withdrew from the hug and took a step back. With heavy-lidded eyes and her lips parted slightly, she ran her hands over the sides of her uniform and then across her midsection as though to continue the embrace alone. She then bit her lower lip and let out a ragged breath. "Right. I'll let you get back to work. See you at dinner tonight?"

After she walked behind her desk once more, Leone touched the desktop terminal and sat down. "I'll be there," she said. Once alone within the ready room, the captain let out a held breath. The cool sensation of a light sheen of sweat on her forehead and upper lip informed her of the sudden flush of her skin.

She touched the control panel on the desk and was rewarded with the tri-tone acknowledgement from the ship's computer. "Computer, I want to record a personal message to my husband. You'll find him on Starbase Six..."

Abbie sat at a table by the Ten Forward windows, nursing a mug of tea and scrolling through her mail. She saw that among the usual announcements from her alma mater and the journals to which she was subscribed was a message from Dorian. Her mouth quirked as she selected that message to read first and was quickly rewarded with a number of jokes that he'd compiled for her amusement. She would never admit it, but she had grown fond of these unpredictable missives, mostly because he had a very good sense of what she found to be funny. Soon, she found herself shaking with restrained laughter and she missed the entrance of Lieutenant Victoria Waltham.

Victoria scanned the deck for signs of familiar faces and noticed one such person. She approached Abbie's table and offered a warm smile. "Good evening, Lieutenant Atherton."

Abbie looked up, the annoyance plain on her face to be interrupted by the other officer. "Waltham," she greeted civilly in return.

"Please, call me Victoria," came the reply. She touched the back of the seat to Abbie's left and asked, "May I? I'm meeting Gregory in a bit, so I won't be long."

Abbie gazed at the woman impassively for a moment, then shrugged a shoulder to indicate her acquiescence. The gesture did not rise to the level of invitation or even acceptance.

"Right then," replied Victoria as she pulled out the seat and sat down. "I feel like perhaps we should get to know each other, given my involvement with Gregory."

Abbie couldn't help the snort which followed that statement. "Is that so? Let me assure you then that I don't really care about your involvement with Greg. It's none of my business."

"He considers you a close friend."

"He considers me a lunch buddy, someone to listen to his jokes while he shovels food in his mouth. If his friend was still here with us, I doubt I'd get half as much attention from him." Abbie pointedly returned to reading her mail as she said this.

Victoria never dropped her smile. "I assure you, he doesn't think of you in quite those terms."

"That's clever, mimicking my turn of phrase," Abbie responded, still keeping her gaze on the PADD in front of her. "I'm not a threat to your burgeoning...whatever."

She finally dropped her smile, then turned her head to peer over her shoulder briefly. "Make certain that you remain that way," Victoria muttered just loud enough for Abbie to hear. She rose from her seat to greet the arriving Greg with a kiss. "Did you have a nice shift?"

Taken aback by the sudden greeting, he leaned into the offered affection before replying. "Quiet, as usual." Greg added, "Hey, Abbie."

How're you?"

"I was just leaving," Abbie replied, after giving Victoria a roll of her eyes. She got to her feet, picking up her PADD along the way. "Have a pleasant dinner," she added as she walked away, her tone implying she doubted that could occur.

"Give me a moment, would you?" Greg asked, though he didn't wait for Victoria to say anything. As Abbie exited the lounge, he caught up with her as she waited for the lift, choosing to ignore her irritated expression. "What's going on?"

"Nothing is going on, Greg. Go back to dinner with your playmate."

He furrowed his brow. "She'll wait. What did I do to deserve this, exactly?"

"Deserve what? This is not about you, Greg. This is me withdrawing from watching the performance she was about to put on for my benefit. She opened with a common tactic, and she'd probably end with one, but all she wants to do is prove to me and herself that you are with her and not with me, and that's the way things are. Which is fine with me, because I don't have any interest in you. She needed to gauge that, to assess my threat level to her and that's done now. I don't need to see the full sixty minute show."

The turbolift doors finally opened, and a trio of crewmembers exited leaving the car empty. Greg placed his hand on the frame to prevent them from closing before Abbie had a chance to step aboard. "I don't know what this is all about, really. But this conversation? It's not over." He released the door once she entered and parted with, "Enjoy your evening."

"Same to you. Try not to catch anything," Abbie replied blandly before ordering the turbolift to take her to Deck Eight.

Kincaid found Petra within her office on deck thirty-six, just outside of the warp core compartment. She held a PADD in one hand and scanned readouts using the other. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything," he said.

Petra turned her head to look up at him, and upon recognition, she rose fast enough to knock her knee against the underside of her desk. "Commander!" she ended the word on a painful noise.

"Are you alright?" asked Kincaid with concern.

"I'll be fine. Not the first time that's happened," she assured him. "What can I do for you, sir?"

He sighed. "Well, actually, it's something I think I might be able to do for you. I need to speak with you about one of your enlisted."

As she rubbed at her left knee, Petra winced but gave him a nod. "Certainly. Uh, would you mind if I ask Senior Chief Tallan to sit in on the discussion?" Once Kincaid gave his quick assent, the senior chief arrived within minutes of the summons.

"Commander," the senior chief greeted the executive officer first. "Lieutenant. How can I help you?"

Kincaid looked around and led the pair toward a small meeting room located away from the main engineering compartment on deck thirty-six. Once inside and in private, he began without preamble, "I wanted to speak to you both about Crewman Lasseter. He appeared before the Mast today, and I sense that his performance as of late has been below expectations."

Petra's brow furrowed. "I'm afraid that I don't have any direct experience with that particular crewman." She turned her head toward Tallan. "Senior?"

"Solat is a tough Vulcan to please, Commander," Tallan said after a brief hesitation. "But he gets the job done ahead of expectations. That level of output comes at a cost."

Kincaid eyed Tallan. "Exactly what kind of cost are we talking about?"

"A little over three-quarters of his team are often written up for slight infractions. I've dealt with a number of them personally. Lasseter bears the brunt of it because of his... personality."

As Tallan spoke, Petra assumed a demure stance before Kincaid. "Sir, I apologize. This is the first time I'm hearing about this kind of problem. I will do my best to keep abreast of situations like this in the future."

Kincaid waved her off. "No need to apologize, Lieutenant. The Senior's doing his job and you're doing yours. But, for the sake of Lasseter's career, I thought I would take a closer look into what was going on to make sure that I had all the facts."

Tallan gave Kincaid an approving glance, then added, "I don't blame Solat or Lasseter. They just have different ways of expressing themselves."

"I see," Kincaid replied, the chief's explanation reminding him of Wilson's recent update on his investigation. "While I have you both here, I should ask about another member of your department, Boatswain's Mate Third Class Comeau. I saw he hasn't been written up but when Nieves was dealing with him, he reported that he had a bad attitude. Have either of you found that to be the case?" he asked about the apparent discrepancy.

Tallan looked confused, his antennae twitching. "Comeau? He leads one of my damage control teams."

"He's been arrested for tampering with an industrial replicator with intent to steal. Does that seem in keeping with his character?"

"Absolutely not, sir. Comeau does the job; no attitude problems with him at all. He gets on with me and most of the Tellerites we have on staff. They love him, actually."

Petra grinned. "Must be his grasp on Civil Conversation."

"Something like that," Tallan nodded. "I don't know what evidence the Lieutenant has against Boats, but I don't think it will stick. Comeau wouldn't do anything like that."

Kincaid nodded sagely at this. "I'll let the lieutenant know. Thanks for your help, Senior."

Tallan nodded acknowledgement, then interjected, "Sir, I don't like the Vulcan very much, but I don't want you think he's not the right person for the job. He's strict but he does what he needs to do."

"A young Vulcan, I presume?" asked Kincaid.

"Fairly, yes. Forty-six or so."

"I see." Kincaid took in a deep breath and let it out to stall for time. "Would either of you be adverse to an intraship transfer?"

"I hate this part of the job," Yvonne whined. "I'd give it all up to return to patrol work. Even arresting that one guy was better than this."

Ensign Iris Wu rolled her eyes. "You're not even doing the actual work, you're just supervising."

The evidence of the replicated tricorders flowed through the scanner, one at a time. A team of forensic specialists from the science department catalogued and scanned them for the record. The surface information gathered by the scanners included any fingerprints or DNA lifted from each device. The quick, cursory scans delivered information to the large screen both ensigns monitored while they were within the lab.

"It's boring," Yvonne lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. "I'd rather be doing something meaningful."

The lead specialist wore the rank insignia of a Chief Warrant Officer. She turned her head and glared at Yvonne on the word 'meaningful.' Yvonne gave the woman a chagrined expression and a quick, "Sorry."

"Smooth," Iris noted.

"I said I was sorry!"

Wilson entered the lab while Yvonne moved off to hide from the now-angry forensic team. "Report." He eyed Yvonne's back. "What's wrong with her?"

"Nothing that Counselor Otex couldn't fix." Iris replied, "The team is making good progress, sir. I have a partial report on the surface findings available, if you'd like to look at it?" She offered a nearby PADD.

He accepted it. "Thank you. Anything of note?" His finger tapped through the screens and their lines in small type. "The scanners picked up fingerprints?"

"A large number of them, yes, sir. They've all been catalogued and the computer is working on identifying them, now," she said. "Some of them belong to the team that discovered them."

Wilson scrolled down as his search for his suspect's information was highlighted. "Only two from Comeau?"

"Yes, sir. One print lifted from two separate tricorders, both of them are the left index finger only. Full prints on both."

"That's... bizarre. No thumbs or partials?"

Iris asked, "Is it enough to implicate him?"

"It certainly doesn't help his case, but I'm not certain that the captain would accept it as hard evidence."

"I think that it puts him in the cargo bay at the time they were being replicated," she reasoned. "Since Ensign Colby and her team entered just after, it's not likely that he could have touched any of the tricorders after they were taken away as evidence."

He sighed. "What you're saying makes sense to me, but... something about this is rubbing me the wrong way. Why would he open the crates just to touch two of them?"

Iris waited patiently, thinking that the question was rhetorical. After nearly a full minute of awkward silence, she broke it with, "I'm sorry, sir. I can't think of a good answer to that."

Wilson turned to her. "That's the thing. Neither can I." He called out to the chief warrant and said, "As soon as the DNA analysis is completed, get in touch with me. I don't care what time it is."

Act Five

Act Five

In the later hours of the same day, Kincaid used his rank and authority to clear the observation lounge of personnel to work. Ordinarily, he would not have done so, but the day's Mast proceedings and decisions handed down by the assembled court wore him thin. He did not need to return to a windowless office on deck two; he wanted to lose himself in the stars when he needed to.

After an hour of quiet paperwork, his enforced solitude ended when Senior Chief Tallan and Crewman Lasseter entered. The executive officer looked up from the PADD and smiled. "Good evening, Senior, Crewman."

"Commander," Tallan said with only the slightest of inclinations of his head. "Reporting as ordered."

Kincaid touched the commpanel. "Kincaid to Chief Brown. Please report to the Observation Lounge." He closed the channel before listening to a response. "He'll just be a moment."

Operations Specialist Chief Petty Officer Wendell S. Brown entered the lounge within five minutes of Kincaid's call. He wore his gold working coveralls rather than the typical uniform of the day that the other three did. "Reporting, Commander," he said in his scratchy baritone. "Hello, Senior Chief."

Tallan acknowledged Brown with a simple twitch of his antennae, while Lasseter remained at an attentive stance.

"Now that we're all here," Kincaid began, lifting himself from his seat, "I wanted to let you know, Crewman, of my decision in the case brought before the Mast."

When Lasseter said nothing, Kincaid nodded shallowly. "All right." He leaned up against the side of the table, with his PADD raised horizontally against his thighs. He used the edge to lean on as he spoke. "You know, I've had a hell of a day. I don't mind telling you that I've come to the sad conclusion that I'm serving aboard the world's largest day-care center. I have heard complaining, whining, excuses that would enthrall the most gifted writers... all in an attempt to get out of discipline for petty infractions."

Brown chuckled. "Mast duty is the shit sandwich, sir."

"Well said, Chief," Kincaid replied quickly. "After two full days of it, I'm not going to argue. But, I will say this: Of all of the children brought before me this week, Lasseter here was the lone adult."

Though Kincaid peered at him, Lasseter continued to remain silent.

"I've spoken to a number of people about you, and I've come to the conclusion that we need to give you a change of scenery," said Kincaid. "What do you think, Crewman?"

Lasseter's eyes focused on Kincaid. "I'm not sure I understand. Are you talking about a transfer to another ship, sir?"

"Is that what you want?"

The crewman dropped his gaze to consider the question. "I thought maybe I did, sir, but I don't think that I would want to run away from my problems with my supervisor. I'd rather stay aboard and see what I can do."

"Instead of being the chief scrubber on a fuel transport, you mean?"

Lasseter hedged, "Yes, sir. Instead of that."

Kincaid got to his feet. "Well, Crewman, I'm very happy to hear that. Though, I don't think leaving you to languish under the same supervisor would be a good use of your time aboard this ship." He activated the PADD to check the reports. "According to the logs, you're not eligible to jump departments for another two weeks. Once your term is up, you'll be moving to strike for Operations. That's why I asked Chief Brown to step in. He'll be your new boss starting then."

Brown grinned and offered his hand. "Welcome to the team, Lasseter."

Lasseter looked at the hand and back to Kincaid. "I have to continue to report to Solat until then?"

Tallan grunted. "You have to keep your mouth shut and be a model engineer in order for this to work, Crewman. Any misstep and the deal is off."

Lasseter turned to look at Tallan as the Andorian spoke, then returned to Kincaid to ask, "And no other punishment?"

Brown chuckled, leaving his hand out. "Two to three months under Solat isn't punishment enough for you? Do we have a deal or not?"

The crewman enthusiastically grabbed Brown's hand. "Deal!"

"Science Lab Three to Lieutenant Nieves," said a timid male voice over the commpanel.

Wilson shot upright in bed at the soft voice calling out for him. He felt his heart pounding in his chest as he oriented himself quickly. He cleared his throat and pressed the keypad to open the channel. "Nieves, here. Go ahead."

"Sir, I'm sorry for waking you. This is Petty Officer Bott. Chief Garrett said that you wanted to be called when we completed our DNA microscan analysis?"

He got to his feet and nearly ran to his desktop terminal to activate it. "Yes, I did. Can you send that up to me? I'll take a look at it right away."

"Transmitting to you, now," replied Bott. "Have you received it, yet, sir?"

Wilson bit off a curt remark and instead answered with, "One moment, please." The screen activated and the report appeared. "I have it now. Thank you for the call. Nieves, out."

The report showed that eight separate profiles that were discovered by the DNA microscans. Six of the profiles corresponded to the members of the forensics team. One corresponded to Comeau, but it was only found on the two fingerprints. The last one, however, was found on every crate.

Wilson slapped the commpanel on his desk. "Nieves to security, I need you to locate and detain the following individual..."

Abbie had just changed into what she thought of as her "bumming around" outfit - a pair of black sweatpants that fell loosely to her ankles and her favorite T-shirt, emblazoned with the logo of her favorite hockey team. She ordered a bowl of popcorn from the replicator in her quarters and added, "Computer, begin playback of the 2368 Stanley Cup Championship Game Six," when her door chimed. With a sigh, she added, "Belay that, computer," set down the bowl on the table and went to open the door.

Greg appeared when the doors slid open. His uniform jacket was unzipped to reveal the grey t-shirt underneath, as though he arrived after coming down from the bridge. "Got a moment?"

"A moment," Abbie replied with a nod, standing to one side and inviting him into her quarters with a lazy gesture of her left hand. "What do you want?"

After stepping inside, Greg turned around to face her. "I wasn't too happy with how we left our conversation yesterday night. I don't like it when we're at odds with each other."

"At odds? What are you talking about, Greg?" Abbie asked. "I'm not going to be friends with your flavor of the month, if that's what you're asking. I'm pretty sure she doesn't want to be friends, either."

He frowned. "You make it sound like I have a rotation of girlfriends or something, which I do not. And Victoria isn't a 'flavor of the month,' either." Greg's features softened. "I think there might actually be something real there."

"You're joking, right? Because that woman is not interested in you. She's interested in what you can do for her, Mister *Aspinall*."

"Mister *Aspinall*?" Greg wrinkled his nose. "You're going to pull rank on me in your skivvies?"

"Actually, I was making a point about your last name, dumbass."

"My last name? What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"You can't be this stupid. Your mother, Admiral *Aspinall*, has a lot of pull being Vice Chief of Starfleet Operations. Getting into her good graces by getting into yours is a pretty standard career move. And if that's not her game, it's something else, because women who actually like the men they are with act much different than she acts with you." Abbie shook her head. "Don't tell me you can't see it?"

He turned his head away to hide his face. "I... I mean, I don't have much else to compare it to."

"You're... not kidding." Abbie rolled her eyes, then muttered something in Vulcan under her breath. "She's using you, Greg, okay? Take my word for it. You're a means to an end. The other day, she was testing to see if you liked me more than you liked her, which would be bad for her little scheme. And now that that's settled, if you don't mind, I have a game to watch." Her tone was condescending, as if she was explaining the concept to a child.

Greg's head turned quickly to look at her with his cheeks red and his eyes wide. "You didn't even give her a chance, I'll bet. I know that she tried to talk to you, but you're so damned guarded. You refuse to let people get to know you, to like you, sometimes. Are you afraid that I'm going to spend more time with her than with you? Is this about me not being around to take your barbs and witticisms?"

Abbie outright laughed in response. "We have lunch together, Greg. We don't really 'spend time together' and that's fine with me. My off-duty time is either spent with Kincaid, or Isira, or now Petra, or alone. Or the Chiefs' card game I was just invited to. Couldn't really say no; it would be impolitic. So this whole 'I refused to let people know me' is a load of shit."

He played with the zipper on his jacket nervously. It dipped down low enough to show off the Academy athletics tee underneath and then with a sudden decisive movement, he zipped it up and fastened it. "Right. I guess maybe I thought our 'friendship' was a little deeper than it was. I'll let you return to your precious game. Good night." Greg moved for the door with quick strides.

"Uh, you clearly didn't think that, if you thought I just wanted you around to insult." Abbie snorted and watched him head to the door. "I'm not Vulcan but I do appreciate logic. Have a good night," she added, unruffled.

"Fell off the wagon again, Boats?" asked Ariel. "Who're you selling the tricorders to? To raise the money to get your hands on whatever it is you need to feel better about your miserable life?"

Comeau sneered at Ariel in response. "I don't care what you say to me. I didn't do it."

Ariel leaned forward and casually mentioned, "Why else would you be brought before the captain at oh-dark-thirty?"

"I have no fucking idea, you overgrown slut. I was ordered to be here!"

She stood upright as though she had been slapped in the face. Reaching behind her, Ariel grabbed the arm of the chair nearest to her and sat down on the star-facing side of the bridge's observation lounge. "Boats, the sooner you come clean with the truth, the easier it's going to be on you. Whatever evidence security has on you, it's good, because they don't wake people up in the middle of the night for nothing."

For the first time since his involvement, Comeau wore a bit of nervousness on his face.

She picked up on it instantly. "You got something to say?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Let's hear it."

"I want a fucking lawyer, bitch!"

Ariel smirked. "No lawyer's going to get you out of the penal colony term they're going to hand down on this one, Boats. Oh, wait... you won't be 'Boats' anymore, either. They'll disrate you, then bust your ass down to Crewman before they send you down."

"Go fuck yourself," Comeau's anger resulted in flying spittle on the word 'fuck.' "I didn't do shit, I don't care what that guy says. You hear me?!"

The two marines standing over Comeau leaned forward to restrain him as he threaten to fly out of his seat. Ariel merely laughed at his predicament. "You keep talking a good game. You should keep it up during your court-martial. It'll sell really good to the jury, but even then I don't think you have a chance."

She placed her forearms on the table and explained, "See, I've known people like you. You get into drugs and you think it's great. Then you have this hard crash and everyone around you is there to help you get clean and sober, right? You feel good about yourself when you come out, like maybe you did nothing wrong. Days and weeks go by, you feel stronger, and after a couple of years... one time isn't going to undo all that hard work you did."

Comeau glared at her furiously. "You don't know shit about me, so knock it off!"

"I know you better than you think, Boats. You got your relapse and guess what?" She lowered her voice for effect. "All those people that were there before when you fell the first time? They're not going to be there anymore. You're alone, now, asshole."

As she spoke, she did not hear the door open and the captain enter. Leone waited for her to finish her sentence before she commanded, "That's enough, Commander Elannis."

Ariel blinked at the sudden interruption. "Aye, sir," she said quickly.

Leone approached Comeau. "Boats, we've never met. I'm your commanding officer."

Comeau nodded. "I've seen you around, sir."

The captain turned around to face Ariel as she spoke. "I apologize for the treatment you've received from Commander Elannis." She looked back to Comeau, "You have to believe that her sentiment is not shared by the rest of the senior staff."

"I... I appreciate that, Captain," said Comeau. He gazed at Ariel defiantly.

Wilson entered with another pair of marines and a man in custody. "I'm sorry for the early hour, sirs, but I have some new evidence that'll prove--"

"Johnson!" called Comeau when he recognized the other man. "You son of a bitch! I'm going to kill you!" Once again, the marines reached forward to hold him in his seat before he launched himself over the table toward Johnson.

Johnson reacted by hiding behind his marine escort. "Keep him away from me!"

Leone reached up to touch the bridge of her nose with her hand. "It's entirely too early in the morning for this. Both of you, stand fast." She asked Wilson, "Explain quickly."

"In examining the tricorders we found, there was only the minutest traces of Comeau's DNA on two of them, related to two fingerprints we found of his, one each on two tricorders, within the same crate. They were both identical, being full perfect copies of his left index finger. But we found the DNA of Crewman Johnson here on the outside of each of the four crates found by the security team. We also found a skin cell in the inside the crate in which Comeau's fingerprints were found. It didn't make sense to me why Comeau would have opened one of the crates and touched two tricorders with one finger. But, if I wanted to frame someone, I might open up a crate and put the copy of their fingerprint I had inside of it."

Ariel appeared stricken by Wilson's briefing, while Comeau's fury knew no bounds. The marines struggled with him.

Leone snapped her fingers toward Comeau and barked, "At ease, Boats!" When he calmed down under her order, the captain walked to Johnson and said, "You're entitled to counsel. If you want, I'll call down to our local JAG and have him come up to talk to you about this."

Otherwise, if you would prefer, you can waive your rights and we can discuss this."

Johnson squirmed under the captain's scrutiny and managed to squeak out a quick, "I want a lawyer."

"Very well. You'll be held here so you can talk to your lawyer, while we figure out your Article 32A session for a general court-martial. There'll be no Mast for you on this one, Crewman."

"But sir, this is my first offense," whined Johnson. "I'd prefer non-judicial punishment."

"It's one thing to commit a crime, and another thing entirely to try and implicate one of your crewmates in the attempt. I have no tolerance for that kind of behavior from anyone serving under my command." She turned and ordered, "Marines, please release the Boatswain's Mate from custody. Ariel, why don't you walk him back to his quarters, and on the way there, you can apologize for your unkind words."

Ariel nodded soberly and rose up from her seat. "Aye, sir." The marines allowed Comeau to join her toward the exit without either of them trailing behind as they had in the previous twenty-four hours.

Before Ariel left the lounge, Leone called out to her, "Once you're done, report to my ready room. We need to have a chat."

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