

Bellerophon

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Rating: [Teen And Up Audiences](#)
Archive Warning: [No Archive Warnings Apply](#)
Category: [Gen](#)
Fandom: [Expanded Universes \(General\)](#)
Character: [Randy Duke](#)
Additional Tags: [Starfleet Academy](#), [Kobayashi Maru](#), [Post Dominion War](#)
Language: English
Series: Part 2 of [Star Trek: The Quarterdeck Breed](#)
Stats: Published: 2023-09-15 Words: 9,071 Chapters: 1/1

Bellerophon

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

Part Two of The Quarterdeck Breed:

Stardate Unknown: Sometimes, life at Starfleet Academy isn't all it's cracked up to be, especially for command cadet Randy Duke.

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Notes

This story was originally published on the classic Ad Astra site on 23 February 2009, however, it was originally written and published on FanFiction.net on 13 October 2002; both published under a different name than my current nom-de-plume.

Historian's Note: Although no Stardate is included in this story, the events take place after the events of the seventh season of Deep Space Nine.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Quarterdeck Breed **By Lord McCovey Cove**

Part Two: *Bellerophon*

NCC-74705 (USS *Bellerophon*)
En route to Starbase 375, near the Romulan Neutral Zone
Main Bridge
Condition Green

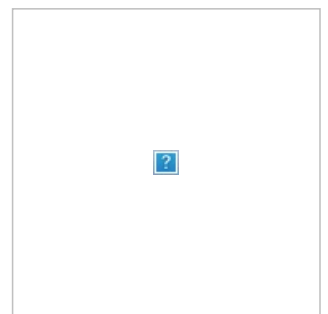
Biting his lower lip, he seemed to slouch into the captain's chair more than usual this time. To his left, his executive officer peered at him with a disapproving glare. Instead of correcting his actions, her eyes made him want to crawl underneath the chair and hide. Even he could not go that far, no matter what he wanted to do. He was the captain of the Intrepid-class *Bellerophon* and it would only hurt his crew more if he were to act exactly as he felt. He knew it was not courage that prevented his fear from taking over; it was simply the fear that his executive officer would find him later and give him an earful.

The executive officer shook her head in visible disgust. Rather than putting up any more of his ineptitude, she pressed forward with her duties, "Helm, report our position and estimated time of arrival to Starbase 375."

"One moment, sir," the helmsman tried not to chuckle at her. She was right; the captain really had no place sitting there. Touching his fingers to the helm console, he called up the requested information and replied, "We are heading along a parallel course to the Neutral Zone near Galorndan Core, and at our present speed of warp seven, we should arrive at the starbase in five hours and forty-three minutes."

Rather than wait for the executive officer to turn her attention in his direction, the man standing at the tactical position volunteered, "Sensors are showing a few civilian vessels along the commercial spacelanes coming in and out of the Core. No other traffic detected on long-range sensors." His tone was tired and bored. It was the mission from hell, and it kept replaying over and over again for him.

"Hey," came the stern voice of the exec. "Pay attention. This isn't a pleasure cruise."



The bored voice from tactical replied, "Aye, sir."

In the center seat, the captain continued to slink down into his seat, trying not to be seen. That is, until his exec ordered him to sit up straight. He let go of his lower lip and did as she said, straightening his posture and trying to look a little less uncomfortable about being there.

Then, the dreadful announcement came from the operations. The girl standing there was not surprised. "Captain, we're receiving a distress call from a civilian ship."

He opened his mouth to whisper an order, but the exec just shouted it out for him. "On screen."

There was no further discussion, though the captain was beginning to slink into the chair once more. The screen blinked and showed a very poor quality transmission from the freighter, where just the outline of a being could be seen.

A voice from the speakers, presumably from the being shown before them, spoke, "To any ship... my voice... this is Captain... of the fuel carrier... *Maru*. We have hit a... mine and are... -questing assist-..."

The cadets on the bridge had heard the distress signal before; the fuel carrier *Kobayashi Maru* had hit a gravitic mine somewhere in the Neutral Zone and it was the duty of the Starfleet vessel to drop whatever it was doing and rush to their aid. But every time the ship entered the Zone, they were met by three Romulan warbirds and their simulated ship was reduced to scrap in record time.

Each attempt on the no-win scenario brought a few more seconds of life, but nothing more substantial than that. Today marked their fourth attempt at a rescue, and this time, Senior Cadet Leanne Norrah was not going to let the bumbling captain lead them to another death.

Without waiting for Senior Cadet Randy Duke to say anything, Leanne turned her attention to the helm, "Take us out of warp, and prepare to enter the Neutral Zone." She made her strides to the tactical station and leaned in, "Be ready for anything, mister. Yellow alert for now, and then punch it up to red once we cross into the Neutral Zone."

"You got it, sir," the tactical cadet was a little less bored, now. It was clear that "Captain" Duke was not going to interfere with Leanne's rise to power over the ship.

"Let's get a lock on their position, and transfer that information to the helm," she continued. "We'll proceed at warp nine."

Everyone on the bridge agreed to those orders quickly. Information was transferred and the helmsman responded appropriately. Soon, the *Bellerophon* was at warp nine, crossing over into the Neutral Zone. No one warned her about the violation of the treaty, no one warned her that she might be precipitating a war. There was no need to, it was not as if this were not the first time they had attempted this. It was now a routine. The "crew" had embraced this break from that routine.

As expected, they lost the signal of the freighter almost a second after entering the Zone. Within a minute, the first three Romulan warbirds arrived on the scene and locked their weapons.

"All right, Mister Zito. You may return fire. Helm, engage evasive pattern Norrah-beta-one," she said proudly. She did not want to go back to her chair anymore. Her place was as captain, not executive officer. She hoped that the instructor would realize that, now, once and for all. Cadet Duke should not have even bothered himself with showing up today; she smirked to herself as she thought that.

The ship ducked and weaved as the warbirds opened fire. Amazingly, they evaded the first three ships, all of which turned around to pursue the Intrepid-class starship. Folding her arms and beaming with pride, she nodded to herself. She programmed the computer with a random pattern of evasive techniques she spent hours devising. Pouring through manuals, schematics, and stacks of books written on the subject from the best at starship piloting.

"Uh, minimal damage so far, sir," said the engineering cadet in shock.

"Trouble up ahead. These first three must have been the welcome wagon. There's another five up ahead," the tactical cadet warned.

Leanne had expected that. "Helm, engage evasive pattern Norrah-gamma-three." It was all planned, now. Her legs tensed up as the inertial dampening system lagged behind, the ship performed a weaving pattern from side to side, using the docking thrusters for added maneuverability. The computer was good, she knew that; her faith was placed within her ability to anticipate the firing patterns of the standard Romulan warbird, which appeared to be the only ship the computer knew how to put in their way. From three to five, or even a million ships, it did not matter anymore. They all suffered the same firing rates and the same patterns of attack.

It was getting to be too easy, but the cadets on the bridge were astounded by how far they had come. More and more warbirds appeared in their path as they drew closer and closer to the *Maru's* last known position. The numbers grew into the hundreds, all of them trying to hit the lone ship with a fierce storm of energy and projectile weaponry. The ship took only a few glancing blows, and with the computer adjusting the power output to enormous proportions, it was certain that a direct hit would destroy the *Bellerophon* entirely.

"Approaching target coordinates," reported the helm cadet, whom Leanne knew to be one of the best pilots in his class. His tone was one of sincere excitement, making minor course corrections to the flying pattern to better ease the ship out harm's way.

On the main viewscreen, it looked as though the entire Romulan fleet has assembled to prevent them from rescuing this poor fuel carrier that hit a gravitic mine. Looming large behind the fleet was a space station of enormous proportions, and within seconds of spotting the structure, it was all over. It was as if the station reached out and slapped the ship out of existence, every severe angle seemingly a weapon of some kind.

The computer intoned their doom, "Program complete. Simulation elapsed time is seventeen minutes and forty-seven seconds. Results will be examined in the Robert April Pavilion at fourteen hundred hours." The Academy holodeck cleared the destroyed bridge from view and returned the silver and gold lines that housed the omnidirectional holographic emitters. All seven cadets seemed to take a deep breath before exiting the room without a word.

Randy wasted very little time, being the last to leave and wanting not to look at the other cadets as they went their separate ways. The mission review would take place with all the other members of his class, and they would all relive the horrors of their deaths together. If he could avoid it, he would, wanting only to be alone with his thoughts in his bunkroom. The other three cadets he shared the room with would be at their classes, as opposed to sitting around and picking on him. He cherished the fleeting minutes he had to himself when there was a lull in his studies in the middle of the day. It was during those minutes that he would write letters to his family; to tell them about how much he was enjoying his time learning about space travel and how to be a good officer in Starfleet. He wanted to assure them beyond any doubt that he was not miserable; they did not need to worry about him.

Today was definitely a day that he needed to write to them to tell them about how well he did on his mission. It was like a therapeutic measure he took to center himself. Counteracting a dismal performance by deluding his family into believing that he was an exceptional cadet, when in reality he was astonished that he had come so far. It was not the studies that he had difficulty with, in fact, all of the subjects that required comprehension and memorization he excelled at and attain high marks. He was the darling cadet of the history department, taking to the historical archives on campus and also those that resided at Memory Alpha, the Federation's primary memory storage facility. Randy often found himself in debates over many subjects with his professors, and all of them knew he would do well as a research officer in a quiet post somewhere.

Starfleet Academy placed all of its cadets in the general educational centers during the first two years of studies. They all bunked together in cramped quarters, and all of them shared in the same classes. They would learn the basic officer training courses that all Starfleet officers take. It was here that they learned the basics of self-defense, engineering, space sciences, piloting, navigation, and leadership. During the last four months of a cadet's sophomore year, the various specialty colleges, such as Command, Engineering, Space Science, and Tactical, would begin to poll the cadet classes for those who would best suit a degree from the respective training center. Each college would span the final two years of their training, and their degree marked as a graduate of the Academy with a specialization in that particular school.

It often confused Randy as to how he ended up at the Command College, rather than in the sciences. He had never envisioned himself acting as a starship commander, leading hundreds of people into space. He felt more at ease with his books and the images of the past than he did with the present. He wanted to study history, not create it. When the Chief Instructor of the Command College had him report to his office to discuss his career options within Starfleet at the end of his sophomore year, he was astonished at the invitation he had extended to him. He presented Randy with dreams the cadet never thought were possible. But then, that was the point of Starfleet to begin with, the commodore told him. The dream of space exploration had been the guiding principle of the Federation. Why not share in that?

His junior year placed him in many classes, most of them dealing with the studies of leadership and command. History played a large role in his understanding of how starship captains arrived at their decisions. Randy studied the likes of Robert April, Christopher Pike, Ronald Tracey, and James Kirk. He enjoyed watching mission records of their tenures at the helm, and it mattered not to him whether they were good captains or poor leaders. The lessons were there for him to learn from. He often wandered into the student holoreams, loading historical records for playback. During a particular unit on the Prime Directive, he studied the voyages of the fifth starship *Enterprise* closely.

The start of his senior year brought about the formation of his "crew." Traditionally, all senior command cadets were assigned to lead a team of seven cadets. A fellow senior command cadet would serve as the executive officer, while the other senior and junior cadets would assume the responsibilities of the various positions they specialized in. The more experience in the simulators that each cadet received went toward his studies. In return for spending a high amount of hours and marks in the holoreams at the Academy, a cadet would earn him or herself a denotation on their service record. Upon graduation, that denotation would provide their prospective commanding officers an understanding of how much simulated experience they had. Randy and his team held the semester record with over seventy hours, but the second lowest marks so far.

As the time neared fourteen hundred hours, he felt a sense of dread at having to weather another poor rating from the class' instructor, Commander Patricia del Toro. The Robert April Pavilion, located in the Command College's small complex at the north side of the campus, was a short walk from his bunkroom at Nogura Hall. The Pavilion was generally used for lectures that would draw large crowds, as well as the commencement ceremonies for graduation. Randy always thought of the Pavilion as the firing grounds. It was where he and his fellow cadets were often ridiculed and shown to be utterly incompetent at what they were training for. Once again, he would have to endure it, and the subsequent torture of having to plan the next mission with the same people who thought he was the source of the incompetence.

He had never seen Leanne take the reigns like that before. She had often voiced her displeasure at his lack of leadership skills, but she maintained her place at his side. Perhaps she would prompt him from time to time, in that very short tone of hers. Maybe Commander del Toro will recognize that she has the proper leadership ability that he lacks and make a change in commanding officer. Randy thought it over as he walked out of his dormitory and joined some of the other cadets with similar destinations. It was obvious by their behavior that the result of his simulation had already become common knowledge. He felt their stares on him; he knew they were discussing him while pointing and laughing.

By the time he arrived at his destination and sat down in his designated seat, he realized that his first instinct of not even bothering to appear was the correct one. Nothing could be worse than the silent treatment from his own crew, in his mind. Even expulsion from the Academy would remove the burden he felt on his shoulders. Now more than ever did he begin to question his presence at Command College. Maybe he could talk to Lieutenant Hastings at Science for a transfer, which he was sure to grant after today.

Commander del Toro arrived and the class of cadet rose up as she walked to the podium. The review process often took anywhere from three to four hours, and every single detail of every single simulation was dissected and analyzed. "Take a seat," she said. Moving a hand to brush her dark brown bangs out of her eyes, she gave a brief summary of what she had already seen. She praised the top group of cadets, the crew of the simulated starship *Potemkin*, led by the natural leader Cadet Leone.

Leone was a Starfleet legacy, just like Duke. Leone's mother was a famous starship captain, while his father held a directorship at the Daystrom Institute. Randy's parents were both living in San Francisco, working out of Starfleet Headquarters in Sausalito. Both of them worked as aides to various Admirals, his mother was a lieutenant commander for one of the rear admirals in the security division. His father held the rank of commander, and worked for the Commander-in-Chief in public relations. Neither of them had much space experience. Randy grew up in San Francisco, but Dominic was born on his mother's starship and grew up among the stars.

"And now let's turn our attention to the intrepid crew of the starship *Bellerophon*," del Toro looked over toward his group. Luckily, she did not request they stand as she made her commentary. "This is the fifth time that Captain Duke and his crew have attempted the *Kobayashi Maru* simulation. Let's watch the record, and then we shall go through the routine." The large viewscreen switched from the Starfleet Academy insignia to the bridge of the simulated starship. Randy did not watch the record, but he noticed that Leanne Norrah's face was unashamedly proud.

Once the record ran its course, the hall erupted in applause at the turn of events. Commander del Toro shot a glance at the class, "Settle down, people." She looked over the cadets with a curious glance, "I see that all of you agree with the action by Cadet Norrah to assume command of the situation and what she felt was the best interests of the ship?"

The response was in the affirmative. Cadets seated behind Leanne were patting her back to express their admiration for her choice.

"Cadet Leanne Norrah, front and center," called del Toro. She indicated that she wanted the cadet to stand up in front of the class.

Randy sighed, slouching back in his seat just as he did on the bridge. He did not want to be there any more.

Leanne's excitement could barely be contained. She looked like she had touched a live wire and electricity willed her down to the front. The executive officer stood at attention, waiting to be praised.

del Toro smiled at her, "It was a courageous move, Cadet, to usurp command like that. You moved into the Neutral Zone, you evaded a great number of enemy vessels in what was sure to be a brave attempt to reach that vessel."

"Yes, sir!" Norrah was practically shouting her answer.

The commander's smile dropped. "So what exactly did you think you were accomplishing, other than premeditated mutiny?"

Randy looked up, his expression one of surprise.

Leanne's face betrayed her shock. "Sir?"

"Mutiny, Cadet. As in the illegal relief of your commanding officer," reiterated del Toro in a much sterner tone. "I'm waiting for your answer."

"Sir, I just thought that Cadet Duke was not competent enough to carry out his duties," Leanne said.

"I see. Your class instructor appointed Cadet Duke as your commanding officer. Are you standing before me right now telling me that your judgment is superior to mine?"

Leanne began to sputter, "Sir, I-I-I just thought..."

Commander del Toro did not allow her to complete her sentence; "You just thought that my appointment was some sort of a mistake, right? That he does not possess the skills of a leader, and therefore you overstepped your authority as his executive officer and betrayed every regulation you swore to obey when you accepted your appointment to the Academy." She looked over the cadet class, "Lest we not forget that the Uniform Code of Military Justice applies to cadets as well as the enlisted and commissioned members of Starfleet."

Leanne paled, her jaw dropped and she turned to say something to del Toro.

But the commander did not want to hear it. "Remain at attention, Cadet," she told Leanne sharply. "Oh, don't worry," her tone was now patronizing, "I'm not going to move to have you expelled, although by all rights I should. This entire class, with the exception of Cadet Duke, applauded your actions. That means that as an instructor, I have failed to properly instruct you all in the true meaning of what it means to command a starship. We do not graduate mutineers at Starfleet Academy, ladies and gentlemen. Your support of mutinous actions is appalling to me. So, for the rest of the week, this entire class will study this record in detail. Each of you will write a ten thousand-word review of Cadet Norrah's actions on my desk no later than oh-eight-hundred Friday. If you feel that she acted in the best interest of Starfleet regulations, I want to see the argument supported by fact, not emotions. Your grade depends on your conclusions, and this grade will be worth a hefty percentage of your final grade." She looked at Leanne, "Cadet Norrah, since this was your doing, you will report to Lieutenant T'Praya at Starfleet Law, so that her students may make good use of this material in your mock court-martial."

The pavilion was silent as the commander spoke. Randy began to think of different approaches to the assignment she just handed out. He thought that perhaps he could support her actions through a general order he had once read about rendering aid, but then the safety of the ship was definitely in question, as it had been destroyed.

"Return to your seat, Cadet," ordered del Toro. "Cadet Duke, you are excused from this assignment, and instead you will attend a conference in my office at seventeen hundred today. Are there any questions with regard to the untimely demise of the *Bellerophon*?"

No one dared to raise a hand.

"Very well. Moving on..."

A steaming cup of mint tea permeated the air as Randy Duke stood before Commander del Toro's desk. Private conferences within her office did not leave much to the imagination about the subject matter. Regardless of her admonishment of Leanne's actions in the simulator, she still needed to address the drive behind the mutiny. Rather than doing so in front of class, where she knew he had already felt uncomfortable, she opted for a less public setting.

"Cadet Duke, please take a seat," del Toro nodded her head toward the empty chair. "I would like to discuss with you, at length, about your future within the command program here."

Here it comes, he thought. Randy remained silent, not wanting to say anything due to the fact that he did not trust his voice. It was better to let her say whatever it is she has to say first, and then react.

She noticed his choice to not say anything. del Toro had respect for his prowess as a theorist, but not as a leader. "You allowed Cadet Norrah to breach regulations without any interference. Of course, that was probably the smart move, since she had already polled the cadets before the mission and secured their loyalty. That's how a real mutiny works. The captain has to be removed from power by the officers, and they certainly did that in spades. Even if you took your ship back by force, the officers would never have paid any attention to you.

"I did not ask you here to praise your inaction, however. I asked you here to give you options. You can do one of three things: The first is to continue as captain of the *Bellerophon* with your current crew of Cadet Norrah and Cadet Zito, and everyone else. The second option is that I reassign you as the executive officer of the *Potemkin*. Cadet Leone has expressed an interest in wanting to assist me with instruction, and I can see no better method of helping you understand command and leadership ability than by having you work with him," offered del Toro. She took a sip of her tea, as it had cooled off to a bearable temperature.

Randy looked up at that. A chance to work with Dominic Leone and his crew was an opportunity he would welcome. Maybe then Leone would teach him what he needed to know about putting all of this theory into good practice, instead of always feeling as though he were a fraud. His expression indicated his desire to do just that.

"Before you make up your mind, Cadet, please hear me out," she said, watching his eyes. "Your final option would be to resign from Command College, and transfer to any other school of your choice. I understand that the science school has been eager to accept you, and I'm sure that would solve the problem by removing you from command. However, Cadet, I would like to express to you how much it would mean to me if you could stick it out here. I see in you a great potential as a starship commander. Your grades in analysis and history are unmatched, and if we could build a bridge between that skill set and the practice of being a captain, you would be a formidable presence in Starfleet."

Cadet Randolph Geoffrey Duke blinked at Commander del Toro's words. He had no concept or notion of her confidence in him. Presented with those options, and her praise, he thought about what he wanted to do with the rest of his time at the Academy. If he transferred to sciences, he would probably have to spend another year of studying in order to wear the peacock blue turtleneck.

Working with Cadet Leone appealed to him for obvious reasons. Learning from the best in his class would provide him with an opportunity to not throw away the past year and a half, and salvage himself a passing grade and graduate. Wearing the wine red uniform held more prestige and it would satisfy his parents' expectations.

"How long do I have to decide, sir?" Randy asked.

"In lieu of the assignment I gave out, I would like for your answer to given to me this Friday at the same time," she replied with a smile. "I'm glad you didn't answer right away. It says a lot about your character, Cadet. Dismissed."

He rose from the chair and stood at attention before retreating from her office. Randy gave a small acknowledging nod to the administrative aide that served the instructors as he crossed the threshold back out into the California sun. The college's offices were located directly opposite the Pavilion and his destination slowly became the library, where he would seek refuge in history references.

There was a tree in the Academy garden that Dominic Leone liked to lay under with a PADD. It was surrounded on all sides by a flowerbed. After a day of performing in the simulator and then sitting through countless reviews of his peers, it was a small reward to himself to find a quiet spot in the garden to sit and read, study, or just get away from the rest of Starfleet without leaving the campus.

"I see that you've decided to be stubborn," said a very familiar voice.

Dominic looked up from his book and smiled immediately, "Can you give me a break, please? It's been one hell of a day."

Boothby peered at him while leaning on a long gardening tool, "I know. I heard about the simulations from a couple of cadets in your class. But from what I hear, there was another cadet who had an even rougher time of it." The aging groundskeeper only approached the young men and women of the Academy when he felt it was necessary to do so. He had an innate nature about him that bred trust and natural friendship among the cadets that lasted far beyond graduation. Rumor had it that most of the admirals still looked in on him from time to time.

After a pause, "Randy Duke," was all Leone said.

"Randy Duke," Boothby confirmed. "I was in the faculty dining room, and I overheard Commander del Toro saying that she offered him an option to leave the program."

"She knows what's best, I guess," said Dominic.

The head groundskeeper for Starfleet Academy sighed, shaking his head. "She doesn't want him to leave the program. Gave him two other options. One was to stick it out with his crew, or join your group."

"Join *my* group?"

"That's what I said, isn't it?"

Dominic looked away from Boothby to consider that option. He did not know Randy Duke beyond his reputation with the rest of the class. He knew that Duke was considered to be the brightest mind, but one of the poorest captains. Leone was certain that del Toro wanted to help Duke to overcome that problem. "Well... maybe there's something I can do to help him make up his mind."

"Good," said Boothby with a nod. "Why don't you go do that and stay the hell off of my flowerbed!"

The cadet leaped up from the tree as Boothby raised his voice. "Sorry," he said.

"Not half as sorry as you will be if I catch you doing that again. I mean it," the groundskeeper warned.

Dominic moved out of range of Boothby's ranting, and made his way toward the library with his books in hand. His thoughts were on the situation and what he could do to help Cadet Duke come to a decision he would feel the most comfortable with. Looking down at the stack in his hand to make certain that they would not fall to the ground. It was his lack of attention that caused him to intercept his quarry without even realizing it.

It was the southeast corner of the mess hall, where the foliage disappeared on the path and prevented both Randy from seeing around it. He looked up in shock at Dominic, who was busy picking up his things and making an apology to Randy. "Damn, sorry about that. But it's lucky that I found you. Do you have a moment to talk?"

Cadet Duke shrugged after bringing himself back on his feet with Dominic's assistance. "It seems like all I have is time. Maybe this is fate trying to tell me something."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. What did you want to talk about?"

"Boothby's worried about you. He asked me to see if there was anything I could do to help."

"*Boothby?*" Randy's tone was incredulous. He was not aware that the famous groundskeeper even knew he existed. With both hands outstretched, he nearly shouted in frustration and anxiety, "Does the whole school know about this?"

Dominic tried to conceal a chuckle, and the result was a noise very much as though he was clearing his throat. "Boothby's Boothby," he replied, and that truly was all one could say on the subject. "Why don't we head over to the lounge and have a chat about this?"

Randy showed his agreement to that by nodding his head. The walk to the cadet lounge carried the sense of small talk. Leone asked him about his classes and his friends, saddened to learn that he generally kept to himself and tried to stay out of sight. By the time they had reached the lounge and found a quiet corner to hold their discussion, Dominic appeared to be concerned.

"It sounds to me like you feel that you don't belong here," Dominic surmised. "I may not agree with that. You get the best grades in most of your classes." He had seen Randy's name atop the lists in the corridors.

Duke became uncomfortable as a blush settled upon his cheeks. "I know. But, getting good grades at judging others' decisions isn't what command is all about. I think it's more about how I handle myself in a similar situation."

"Don't you do that already?" asked Dominic.

"What do you mean?"

"In class, when you're writing your paper on someone. Don't you put yourself in their shoes and try to imagine what it would be like to shoulder than burden?" Leone tried a different tactic; "I can assure you from first-hand experience, and watching starship captains deal with command. They often look to the past for help. It's not the same as writing a paper, but it's same analytical skill."

Randy's gaze dropped away from Dominic as he pondered that. "I-I never really thought about it that way, I guess."

Leone smiled. "I know you have it in you to be a good leader. We have the same history classes together. I've seen you get passionate about the interpretation of history enough times to understand that about you."

"But I'm not as passionate about command as I am about history," Randy replied, looking at Dominic again.

"Who is? Name me one good captain in Starfleet history who did not possess a passion that had nothing to do with command. Only the megalomaniacal leaders could be described as being passionate about being in command. The egoists, and the boors." It was Dominic's turn to look down at the floor, "My own mother is far more passionate about music than she is about commanding her ship. It's never about the power. To her, I think it's about the mission and the people."

"B-But your mother is a respected Starfleet officer," sputtered Randy. "I'm not like her."

"Yet." Dominic shot back with a grin. "You think my mother sprang into existence with the prestige of being who she is, or the reputation that she has? Just like every other cadet at the Academy and every officer in Starfleet, she had to earn it. You and I are no different than she. She's just further along her career than we are. You shouldn't measure yourself against others as far as leadership goes."

Randy asked, after a long pause to consider the last point, "Do you think it's fair for cadets to follow an untried cadet as their commander?"

"Not any more fair than it is for Starfleet to ask experience officers to follow an untried captain," replied Dominic.

This drew a wince from Randy as that point was driven home. "Okay, okay." He laughed at himself a little bit, thinking about how silly he had been. "Thanks."

"Anytime," replied Dominic. "One more thing, though," he said as Randy stood up to leave. "Don't let this be the last time we talk. If you need help or you just want to use me as a sounding board, come find me."

Randy looked at Dominic, surprised at that. "I'll remember that. It's... much appreciated."

The holographic Romulan starbase destroyed the *Bellerophon* for the fiftieth time on the display. Following the review, the records of their performances were open to the class for individual study. It was not the first time that Randy Duke found himself in one of library's study areas, watching his own performance as captain in detail. Keeping Dominic's words in mind, he began to understand exactly how pathetic he seemed. Even he would not dare follow such a captain, but then, he would not have dared to cross the captain like Leanne had.

He envied the confidence she held in her ability. She took charge right out from under him, and he recalled his thoughts at the moment as being nothing but a great sense of relief. Not solely relief, he pondered to himself. There was jealousy and annoyance at having been removed without so much as the courtesy or respect of being informed of her actions. How could he stand for that? Why did he not do anything to prevent her from taking them into the Neutral Zone?

Randy's eyes checked the chronometer that flickered in the corner of the screen. The hour was late, but he still had an hour before lights out. Hoping to catch a free holeroom to study his mission closely, he quickly pushed away from the study desk and walked briskly toward the exit.

Entering into the first available holeroom, he loaded the mission record and studied it. It was like reliving a memory for him, and the knot in his stomach danced around as he painfully watched his poor performance with all the realism that the record afforded. He stopped the record, and reset the mission.

"Computer," he called out, "load the *Kobayashi Maru* simulation for command evaluation purposes."

The computer's voice replied, "Specify team parameters."

"*Bellerophon*."

"Parameters set."

"Begin program."

"Warning. Team members are not in attendance."

Randy looked up with a pained expression, "Uhm... can you replace the missing team members with appropriate holographic personnel?"

"Affirmative. Please specify reference."

"Wait, what do you mean?"

"Historical or fictional reference must be determined to replace the mission team members."

Randy smirked to himself, "Historical." Why not? He took the captain's chair and sat down as the computer continued to ask for further parameters. Which part of history? Did he have a particular starship in mind? There was no question in his mind about that. "*Enterprise*."

"There have been six starships with the name *Enterprise*. Please specify which vessel and time period you wish to select as a historical reference."

He could not help his smile. "All of them."

"Working." Figures appeared all around him; every single bridge crew from every *Enterprise* looked at him and Randy cringed at the scene. James T. Kirk seemed to be pressed up against Rachel Garrett, Data found himself locked in between Uhura and John Harriman. It was as though the barriers of time were removed on the bridge and the finest officers in Starfleet found themselves stuck in a type of bridge/sardine can.

"Oh no!" Randy said quickly, closing his eyes. He took a deep breath before making himself clear. "Computer, from the crew of each *Enterprise*, please select the most qualified crewmember for each duty station." He heard the figures disappear immediately, and then the same sound as the computer brought back the appropriate number of people. "Begin program," he told the computer, deciding to be surprised.

Captain Hikaru Sulu called from the helm station, "Sir, we're on course for Starbase 375 at warp seven. We will be passing the main commercial route to Galorndan Core in five minutes."

"Galorndan Core," smiled Commander William T. Riker, seated in the executive officer's position. "It's a pity we can't stop by and visit. They have an amazing recreational facility there."

Randy could only nod toward him. Riker was still serving in Starfleet. He had seen mission records, but this was the first time he got a really close view of the man. Despite his being a hologram, he never imagined he would be so personable. He could only nod toward him as he spoke about Galorndan Core. "I-I-I've never been," Randy stammered.

Sulu chuckled, "It's not exactly a vacation spot for Starfleet officers, sir."

Riker smirked at Sulu, "I never said I was there for a vacation."

"Arcturus is a far better place to get your face smashed in," said Lieutenant Natasha Yar from tactical. "Not to mention it's easier on the eyes."

"Captain," called Lieutenant Richard Castillo from the operations station. "We're receiving a distress call."

Riker replied before Randy could speak, "Audio or visual?"

Castillo looked at his station, "It's audio-only, and it's weak. I'm trying to boost the gain to maximum."

"On speakers," said Randy, closing his eyes as he did so.

A voice from the speakers spoke through the static, "To any ship... my voice... this is Captain... of the fuel carrier... *Maru*. We have hit a... mine and are... -questing assist-..."

"Can you clean that up a little bit more, Lieutenant?" asked Riker.

Shaking his head, "Sorry, Commander. That's the best I can do."

"If memory serves," said a deep gravelly voice from the science station, "the *Kobayashi Maru* is a fuel carrier with the capacity to transport three hundred passengers." Spock looked at Randy with those cold eyes, looking to him to acknowledge his information.

"Orders, sir?" asked Riker.

He chewed at his upper lip in thought. Time was of the essence, here. Randy cleared his throat, "Mister C-Castillo, signal them back, tell them we have received their distress call."

"Aye, sir. Stand by," Castillo entered in the proper commands into the operations station and then began to speak to the air. "*Kobayashi Maru*, this is the Federation starship *Bellerophon*. Please respond."

The speakers crackled with more static, "-phon! We hear you!" But that was all that could be understood.

"*Kobayashi Maru*," said Castillo once more, "please retransmit. We're losing your signal." He continued to try to amplify their weak signal, but it was no use. "I'm sorry, Captain. There's more static than transmission."

Yar asked Spock, "Ambassador, can you track that signal down using the ship's lateral array?"

Randy looked at her for a moment. That was some unusual initiative she demonstrated. Usually, you had to poke and prod his real bridge crew into carrying out his orders. "Uh, Mister Sulu, once the origin of the signal is determined, plot a course to intercept, but do not engage."

"Aye, sir," said Sulu's deep baritone.

"I'm unable to determine the transponder of the ship from this distance," noted Spock. "The signal appears to be coming from within the Neutral Zone, but the carrier signal appears to indicate an ambiguous source transmitter." He made a supposition that it could be a side effect of the damage from the mine.

Castillo yelped, "Got it! They're in the Neutral Zone, way off course from the main Galorndan route."

Spock confirmed those findings, while Sulu reported, "At warp nine, we could be there in five minutes."

Riker frowned, "If we enter the Neutral Zone, there's a possibility that we could precipitate a conflict."

"But the Romulans aren't supposed to be in the Neutral Zone, either, Commander," commented Yar.

Randy let go of a deep breath he did not realize he was holding in. The possibilities were endless and his options were not great. He did the best thing he could think of to do, "Well, what are our options?" It was a general question to everyone.

Yar was the first to speak, "Captain, five minutes is not that long. We could be in and out before the Romulans even realize what happened."

"Captain," said Sulu, "I'm not sure if rushing in there is the right thing to do. We could contact the Romulans and request a joint mission or..."

"That would take too long," Yar said, interrupting him in spite of his rank. "Time is of the essence."

Riker offered, "I agree with Lieutenant Yar, sir. We would be justified in aiding a civilian vessel. They are closer to our border than the Romulans. We could take it in tow and bring it back in ten minutes."

"Captain, I recommend we launch a probe and determine if the ship really exists," said Spock.

Randy Duke looked around. Castillo made no suggestion of his own, merely watching the other members of the bridge discuss the problem. No one else spoke up after Spock, however, and it seemed like the Ambassador provided an option that would not place the ship at too much risk.

"Number One," said Cadet Duke to Riker, quietly enjoying the opportunity to do so, "let's go with the Ambassador's suggestion. Take us out of warp and ready a probe for launch."

"Aye, sir. Mister Sulu, all stop. Ambassador, Tasha, ready a class nine probe for launch," ordered Riker, sitting down in his seat. "Yellow Alert, sir?"

"Okay," Randy nodded; he was far more interested in seeing what happened than being in command. The increase in readiness was communicated by the way of the yellow lighting appearing along the bulkhead and on the status indicator above and below the main viewscreen.

The various members of the bridge crew worked in harmony with one another. Yar readied the forward torpedo tube for a probe launch, while Spock modified the onboard sensor package to his specifications. Castillo continued to track the origin area and passed sensor information to Spock in real time. Sulu made the necessary course corrections to bring the forward torpedo launcher to bear on the target coordinates. Within a minute, the probe was ready for launch. On the main viewscreen, they watched the small object's onboard micronacelle propelled the

tiny object at warp nine toward its destination.

Two minutes later, Richard Castillo reported that the signal from the ship was lost. "I think maybe their communications equipment is no longer functioning. The signal was cut off rather abruptly."

Spock reported telemetry from the probe was incoming and being recorded by the ship's computer. "The probe has entered the target sector, one minute until it reaches the target coordinates."

The main viewscreen was patched into the live feed from the probe by Riker's order. Stars streaked by as though the ship were at warp, and then slowed down when a large field came into view. It looked like a bunch of asteroids from a distance, but then a small cloud of silver and gray material filled the lower half of the screen.

"Initial analysis of the debris pattern indicates that the ship was destroyed by a warp core breach," reported Spock, keeping his eyes focused on the science display before him. "I am also reading the blast pattern of a gravitic mine nearby. The drift rate would support their reasoning."

Riker sighed, looking at Randy, "It's not your fault, Captain. You acted in the best interests of the ship."

"Computer, freeze program." Riker's visage reflected his command. He turned around and it seemed as though each one had a different expression on their face. Sulu was sympathetic, but he looked as though he agreed with Riker. Spock's stony features remained unchanged. Yar appeared to be frustrated, and Castillo kept his eyes on his station. Randy stood from the center seat and heaved a heavy sigh toward it. "Uhm, let's save this program under my personal directory and clear the holoream for use by someone else. Exit."

The computer's audible acknowledgement came in a series of words and noises, "Program saved to the personal directory of Randolph Duke. The program's parameters have been named Duke-seven for future reference."

Checking the chronometer, he ran to his bunkroom realizing that he had only a few minutes before the imposed curfew on the cadets. While his legs moved, his mind began to form an idea of how to handle the problem presented before him.

Unlike the bridge crew he had just interacted with, his was inexperienced. They had not yet learned how to work together as a team, or better yet, a true understanding of their individual strengths and weaknesses. Even though the computer generated bridge crew had never served together, they came to rely on skills they knew each one had. Natasha Yar knew to rely on Spock to access the lateral sensor array for information. William T. Riker responded to information supplied by the bridge crew within his authority. He handled the bridge crew on behalf of the captain, and executed Randy's orders without question. Once he made his decision, that was it, he realized. The duty of everyone on board was to follow the decision of the captain.

Leanne would never act in such a fashion, he thought to himself as he ran through the door to his shared room and ignored the jibes of his bunkmates. He found her to be overbearing and condescending toward him. He knew she carried almost no respect for him whatsoever, and that was a dangerous element to exist within the chain of command. As he lay down on his bunk and closed his eyes, he reasoned with himself that Commander Riker would have never spoken to Captain Picard in such a fashion, nor would any first officer aboard any starship in Starfleet. Not if they valued their career. The difference appeared to be a lack of commitment to the idea of actually being on the bridge of a starship. He understood a little better about that, now.

Where had his lack of confidence gone, he wondered as the lights turned out within the bunkroom. He felt self-conscious of his actions and words at the beginning of the simulation, but then his confidence seemed to appear as time went on and he felt comfortable in working with those officers. Randy wondered about that. Buried in thought, he kept asking himself where the line was that he crossed from stammering to self-assured. His approach to command was the reflection of his peers. The caliber of officer he was forced to work with.

Dominic Leone took his team and built a group that worked well together. Did that happen by chance? Perhaps, but it was more likely that Leone merely cultivated each cadet to be the best they can be. He inspired them to work together. That was leadership; that was how commanders built their loyalty. Loyalty not only to them, but also to each other. Throughout history, it was not simply that officers on a bridge crew would remain at their assignments for more than a tour of duty solely based on the commanding officer. It was the other people they had to work with. That was why captains like Kirk and Picard held onto the majority of their bridge crew. They inspired teamwork.

Randy made his decision.

"Uh, I want to thank you all for, uh, coming down here today on your time off," said Randy, the next day. He stood on the simulated bridge of the *Bellerophon*, looking at each cadet as they stood nearby him. Not a single person met his eyes as he looked at him. "I want to give the scenario one more try, with your permission. I have been trying my best to study and prepare..."

Leanne sighed heavily, "So what? This isn't about studying. Anyone can study their brains out, but it doesn't change the fact that you're not a good captain."

"Not yet," Randy smiled.

"Not ever," Leanne retorted.

Zito smirked at the exchanged, sharing an amused glance with the helm cadet.

Randy tried to put a smile on his face, but he failed. Leanne seemed like such a bully to him, always trying to make sure that he felt as useless as possible. Not today, not if he could help it. "M-My ability to command effectively..."

"... does not exist," Leanne interrupted him, accenting each word loudly to drive her point home.

"That's enough," Randy said, his tone angry. "You stand there and point fingers at the problem, but you do nothing to resolve it. If you're not

a part of the solution, you're part of the problem, Leanne."

She was shocked at his sudden outburst, mouth open and unable to say anything to that. It was the first time she had ever known him to get angry at anyone.

Zito and the other cadets looked between the both of them, unsure of how to act or react in this case.

Randy ignored her, and continued, "As I was saying before I was interrupted by my first officer, the problem that exists here is a lack of teamwork. Before we can follow orders and before you can give them, the most important aspect to working a bridge that I've come to understand is that we have to rely on each other as peers, first. Trust in each other the ability to carry out our duties and not betray that trust by usurping the authority right out from under them." He stopped, to look at their reactions.

Leanne did not stop from looking anywhere but at him, but Zito and the other cadet appeared to regard him a little differently.

Taking a deep breath, he continued, "Zito, I know you're good at what you do. Your experiences at tactical are going to come in handy, but you're part of this team. We have to compliment each other, not conflict with each other."

Zito nodded in response, "I see that. But how do we get to a point where we work as a team?"

"I don't know," Randy said honestly.

Leanne blew air at her bangs, "Well, gee, Fearless Leader..."

"You're relieved."

She blinked, "What?"

"You heard me. You are relieved of your duties as first officer, effective immediately," replied Randy, with a tone so calm that it shocked him. "I'll tell Commander del Toro to have you reassigned."

Leanne tried to hold up her hands, "Whoa, wait a minute. If you do that..." She did not need to say anything further. Her grade in the class would be forfeit, as part of a disciplinary action. She would have to retake the course and probably would not graduate until the end of the fall or spring semester of the following year.

He nodded, "Exactly. You are unwilling to work with the team; you're unwilling to ensure that we succeed. You need to be somewhere else."

"Wait!" Leanne nearly screeched, her voice in a panic. "Wait a minute, you have to give me another chance."

Randy smiled; he had her where he wanted her. "All right. Give me another chance, then."

She looked at the other cadets, who now appeared to move their support behind Randy. They had forgotten that despite his demeanor he maintained the authority as captain to have them removed. Of course, had he removed Leanne, he would take a hit on his personal grade for the course, but not as large of a black mark as Leanne would. Given her attitude, remarks, and actions, it was almost a certainty that the instructor would side with Randy over the debate.

The decision to give him another chance at being her captain took two seconds and it was based entirely upon survival. "Fine."

Randy declared victory with a clap of his hands, "That's great. You're reinstated, then. I'd like to begin today, by trying this one more time. But this time, we're going to try it a little differently." He grinned widely, "Let me tell how much I learned last night, by just sitting in the center seat with experienced starship officers. Computer, load program Duke-seven and run the program."

End Notes

And now, a word from the author...

After I wrote *Agamemnon*, I wanted to do a Starfleet Academy story. Within the theme of *The Quarterdeck Breed*, which was a short-story exercise to explore command styles within the Star Trek setting, I went from a veteran officer to one with little experience. A cadet seemed more likely than using an ensign or junior grade lieutenant. Plus, the opportunity to use the character of Dominic Leone (Krystine's son from *Star Trek: Full Speed Ahead*) was too good to pass up for me.

Randy Duke's namesake is the character Randolph Duke from the movie *Trading Places* with Eddie Murphy and Dan Ackroyd. I needed a character name and it was on in the background while I was writing it. His character sketch, however, was borrowed from my personal experiences in high school as the newest member of the school's marching band. I was so completely out of my depth, I would never forget that complete loss of self-confidence and wondering if I had made a mistake in joining in the first place. I was given the option of moving out of the band, but in the end, I chose to remain and I will never regret making that decision.

In this story, we see Randy having to look for his confidence as well. His forte is research, which might have made him an excellent science officer, but his instructors could see the potential for leadership underneath that timid exterior. As military academies have a way of doing so, they tend to rip apart the subject and rebuild them as they need him or her to be, and Starfleet Academy would be no different (I figured).

Bellerophon is quite probably my most personal story in this series (so far).

Thanks for reading, and if you can, leave a comment. Stay tuned for *Constitution*.

-- McCC

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