

SCORPION STING

A Space Story

PART ONE

by
Christopher E. Cancilla

CHAPTER 1-1

“Good morning. I hope you slept well?” were the first words from the mouth of Shilo Ariel, the first officer of the soon to be newly renovated USS Scorpion.

Naturally, her pet cat did not answer in words, but the soft purring was enough of a response for her; she understood and admired her pet, her friend. They have been together for a little less than a year, since she was first assigned to the Scorpion and arrived on Earth.

She discovered her friend, Koneko, while exploring Japan shortly after arrival. She wanted to experience the culture, and Japanese is one of the oldest and richest of all of Earth. She was hiking along the Nakasendo Trail on her way from Kyoto to Tokyo, as her group stopped for the night, she found her friend near death.

Her culture believes all life is sacred, and as such, she scooped up the abandoned newborn kitten and called for an emergency transport to medical. The transporter cycled, and she placed the kitten on the grav bed and the medical team just looked at her.

After a moment of her staring at them, they got to work and a few days later the kitten was out of harm’s way. She visited the kitten more often than she thought was necessary, but she could not tear herself away.

Since she had a couple days remaining on the hike, and there was nothing for her to do at medical, she returned and finished the trip. Their guide asked how Koneko was doing. It was then she discovered Koneko was colloquial Japanese for Kitty. Her friend now has a name.

Making a request to her commanding officer, he approved her new roommate. As long as he was allowed to visit from time to time. It seems the Captain has a thing for cats.

She rose from the bed and walked to her dressing table and prepared for the day. Koneko went and rested her head on the pillow and watched, as she did each morning.

Picking up her communicator pin; which was issued just before she met Koneko, she contacted her commanding officer. Since this was a classified and covert mission, the members of the crew were not to wear a uniform unless required, and her communicator pin was shaped in an hour glass, an image depicting all life as sacred on her home planet.

The pin was roughly 5cm tall and tapers to less than 2cm in the center. The two halves of the hour glass are made of dissimilar metals. The top half appeared to be a powder blue stained glass with red diamonds parallel to the center of the pin; while the lower half looked like 24 carat gold shining in the room's illumination. In the center of the gold was a red hearth gem. It looked like a prestigious piece of jewelry, a family heirloom.

Touching the pin, "Ariel to Binotti."

"Good morning Shiloh, I hope you slept well?" Erupted from the pin and sounded like two friends talking.

"Yes, we did. I hope also you had a good sleep?" She paused a moment. "I hope I did not wake you? I wanted to get an early start on the crew files sent to us by SPO. We need to get the remainder of the crew, so they can gain experience before the mission begins."

"That's why I keep you around Shiloh, I need someone to keep me on track. Somehow, command choose the right First Officer for me. Would you like to meet for breakfast at the Cantina de Barrio?" He took a breath. "By the way, I was already awake, you should know by now I like waking up early."

"Yes Captain, I do know this fact about you. However, I prefer to dine in comfort, so 30-minutes in the Cantina de Starfleet?"

Binotti laughed a little, "Understood Commander. See you there in half an hour."

Shilo Ariel dressed in a comfortable set of clothing she picked up when she was home a few months ago. Very comfortable and very

modest. Her home planet is not known to flaunt anything, including body parts.

Her walk to the main restaurant at Headquarters took less than 15 minutes, and the weathernet was providing an exceptional morning for this walk.

When she entered, she saw her commanding officer in line to get a meal. He must have just arrived since she got into the line directly behind him.

“Good morning Captain.” She said to him.

“Good morning Commander. I trust your roommate is doing well?”

“Yes sir, she is fine. Likes to push things off the dresser but other than that, she is well.”

“Great, give Koneko a scratch behind the ears for me when you get home.” Captain Gregory T. Binotti, commanding officer of the USS Scorpion. The ship is currently being retrofit and upgraded for a classified mission, a mission in which the Captain and First Officer have been working on nearly a year.

Greg Binotti was dressed rather casual at the moment, a tan pair of pants with a colorful shirt. He looked at Shilo who was dressed similar, but on her the colors seemed to come alive.

One of the line workers smiled as he said the cats name. She was Japanese, and the one who suggested to Shilo the best way to understand a culture is to experience the culture.

“Moreko, Koneko ga kon'nichiwa.” Shilo said in the little Japanese she learned. It took her a while to memorize this phrase.

Moreko replied, “Shilo, arigatō. Koneko watashi no ai o ataeru.”

“Shimasu Moreko.”

They both finished ordering and waiting for their breakfast to be created. Not replicated, cooked. Greg was hungry this morning, so he got three eggs scrambled with cheese, bacon, hash browns, and 2 waffles. Shilo, on the other hand, got her normal breakfast. A bowl

of grits with sautéed shrimp. This morning, she also asked for hash browns and had them cook onion and mushroom into the shredded potato.

Once their food was ready, they found a secluded table and sat. Ate their meals and chatted about nothing in particular.

“Did you know fleet intelligence is hearing rumors our mission is to sneak to Romulus and assassinate the Praetor?”

She looked at him. He said, “That is not even on the agenda, if I remember correctly.” She smiled at him. He never really knows when she is joking, kinda unnerving.

Greg went to get another mug of coffee and brought Shilo a cranberry juice. Her favorite. She accepted willingly at the gesture, and the drink.

Meals completed, Shilo picked up her tray, then grabbed his and took them to the recycler. That cleared the table for the records review.

“SPO sent the files, the least we can do is review them and make choices.” Shilo said, grinning from ear to ear.

Greg stared her dead in the eye, “Starfleet Personnel Office could care less if we review these files or not, they just needed to send them to us to say they completed their part of crewing the ship. But, since they’re here, let’s take a look.”

Shilo began, “Would you mind if I filled the science department? There are a few that I am aware of who work well together and who would fill out the crew exceptionally well.”

“Not a problem. Since I filled the command staff, as in everyone but you since you were a gift from Starfleet; it’s only fair that you fill in the science departments. My choices, as in Major Lanning, Commanders Martinez and Steel, and Lieutenant Commander O’Rory; well, I am leaving the complimenting of their departments to each of them. I could fill them, but would they be the right people for the job? Most likely not, but the only ‘crew’ I want to fill is if I meet anyone which I consider to be special.”

“Special?”

“I cannot explain it, let’s just say I will know them when I see them.”

“OK... I will fill in the Sciences, Commander Martinez will fill in Engineering, Commander Steel will fill in Helm and Nav and Commander O’Rory will fill in Logistics and accounting.” She smiled at this odd Captain. “You, well, you can fill in the special people you meet along our journey.” They both laughed at that statement.

“Agreed.” He thought a moment, “I guess we’re done. Once you select the science crew, send the requests to SPO.”

“But sir, you need to sign the approval.”

“Standing order. I trust your judgement. Over the past few months you have demonstrated a severe pro-mission ability to always do what was needed at the right moment. I trust you will continue to accomplish this until we part ways. As my #1, if I did not trust in you, we – as in the ship and crew – would fall apart. Now, we can’t have that, can we?”

Shilo was taken by surprise at the comments. She did not really like this man as her commanding officer. He was too lax for her, she liked a more rigid environment, but that is how she was raised, how those on her world acted and reacted. She has seen how loyal the crew is to this man, perhaps she can give him a chance to prove his leadership style is viable.

“No sir. Your faith in me is not misplaced. To use a human phrase, I have your back!”

“Good! Now, who were you thinking about recruiting?”

They talked for a few minutes about different people Shilo knew, a few of them Greg was familiar with and quickly agreed. Those he did not know he deferred to her wisdom.

Greg paused after they had exhausted the list she had, putting up a finger she also became silent.

Without taking his eyes off his First Officer, he tapped the Starfleet insignia on his chest. “Binotti to Larrimore.”

“Go ahead Greg.”

Glenn, Shilo and I have a few details to contend with and will be unavailable for the next couple days. If you need us, feel free to call or stop by our office.”

“Understood Greg, I hope you can decide on a crew quickly, you’ll be on the ship in less than a week.”

“I don’t think we should continue this conversation over the commlink. Can we meet today, Shilo and I have a few questions for you and Rowan?”

As if on cue a familiar hum began, and two Starfleet officers appeared next to their table. As soon as Glenn Larrimore and Rowan Regis began to materialize, the security teams in the cafeteria started to advance on them. When they fully coalesced, the teams resumed what they were doing and ignored the situation.

“My limited understanding is that it is against Command SOPs to transport into a room without a transporter pad and an operator, rule number one or something. But, when you two appeared, security ignored you. Care to explain?”

Rowan looked at Greg, “Clean living!” She said. Chosen to be a member of Starfleet but part of the royal house on her home planet, Commander Rowan Regis evidently took to her role as a covert operative a bit too well.

Glenn said, “Hope we’re not disturbing you?”

Shilo said, “Disturbing us, no; entertaining us, yes.”

Greg Binotti smiled at that answer but tried to hide it.

Rowan and Larrimore went to the line and grabbed some food and a cup of coffee. They returned to the table and sat and ate. They had the exact same breakfast. A bowl of oatmeal with brown sugar and cinnamon, a plate of bacon as in 8 strips each, some fresh fruit.

They sat and ate, and they talked about several subjects. One of the subjects was cats and Shilo mentioned her kitten. That was a 5-minute discussion as to why cats make better ship pets than dogs.

“Greg, how are the crew assignments going?”

“All done. Why do you ask?” He was wondering why they were so interested in the crew. Yes, they would be on this mission, but as observers mostly.

“I have a few people who would be perfect for security. If you are interested?”

“Give the names to Shilo, she will review them and send the request to SPO if she agrees.”

“Commander Ariel has approval authority?” Larrimore was shocked.

“Captain, normally the commanding officer approves all transfer requests.”

“True, but on the Scorpion, I will be in command of the ship, and Commander Ariel will be in command of the crew.”

“OK.” The two SSD operatives said in unison.

Glenn spoke, “Speaking of which, we also need to discuss something with you, but not here. Got 15 minutes to spare?”

“I think we can give that to you.” Rowan and Larrimore stood and Greg and Shilo stood and gathered all their file pads. “OK, ready. Lead the way.”

The foursome walked towards the main entrance; as they did, they did not see Regis touch a pendant and speak into it quietly. “Regis to security. Four to transport to area 3 immediately. Energize when ready.”

As they headed to the door that familiar hum could be heard again. Everyone in the room watched as the four figures walked nonchalant towards the door, dissolving into columns of nothingness. When they were gone, the room returned to breakfast as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER 1-2

Before the transporter effect faded completely, they knew they were not in any normal part of the training facility. As this Captain and First Officer looked around, they noticed the transporter operator was wearing what appeared to be a Gi. Similar to what a ninja would wear. The only part of him that could be seen were his eyes, and colder eyes could not be found anywhere in the galaxy.

“Good job corporal. Ensure we were not traced then shut down for ten minutes.” Larrimore stated flatly, no emotion, dispassionate. She did not even look at the corporal, just kept walking.

“As you wish Colonel.” A simple statement, obedient, from this transporter room in limbo.

Captain Binotti looked very frustrated, patience is not something he has in large quantities. “Where are we?” he asked. “I can see I am not in a normal area of headquarters, this is not the standard transporter system.” He looked at the transporter operator. “That is not the standard Starfleet issued uniform. I know we are still on Earth, or at least close to it, but where?”

Larrimore grinned and an amused look slowly grew, “Greg, this is secti....this is SSD headquarters. Here, I am in command. No, this is not the main SSD HQ area, but an insignificant and minor area we retain specifically for espionage and to allow guests to visit on occasion. Here, you and Shilo will be trained in areas and items fleet does not even know exist, but, before we begin, the two of you will need to undergo a mind scan, and a few questions.”

Greg and Shilo looked at each other. A mind scan causes no pain and no permanent damage, that is unless the inquisitor desires to cause pain and damage.

“Agreed.” Greg and Shilo said unison.

“Good, then let’s get to it and get this portion out of the way so we can proceed. I did promise only 15 minutes of your time.”

Said Glenn Pershing Larrimore, the director of the Special Security Detachment, the one in command of this facility.

Glenn took Greg for herself and assigned Rowan to Shilo. The tests were basic, name, rank, ID#, clearance level; will you guard the secret of this location with your life. You know, the usual questions you would hear in a secret and covert location from people you thought you knew in a department you never knew existed.

The questioning took less than ten minutes and the questions were repeated multiple times in a random order. Since the mind scanner was active, the subject was not certain if a few seconds had passed or days.

Greg and Shilo were brought to a small conference room and realized where they were at roughly the same time. The effects of the scan have a sedative effect on the brain, and it was like waking up from a restful sleep if the operator was kind to you.

Regis and Larrimore stood in a small dark room and watched their brains reactivate. “How were Shilo’s responses?” Larrimore asked.

“Exactly as we estimated.”

“Good, let’s proceed.” Rowan touch a panel on the wall and the wall itself changed. Barely perceptible on their side, but to Greg and Shilo, the wall became transparent.

Larrimore said, “Greg, Shilo, congratulations, you are now SSD operatives. Your clearance has been raised to level 21 and your records will reflect that level, but no explanation as to the reason for the increase. You are not entitled to know the location of this facility, or any SSD facility for that matter, but you can contact us here and request transport as you see fit.” A transporter hum was heard, and two small items appeared on the table between them, as they sat.

“These communicators are set to our frequency, our sub code. Any attempt to extract either the frequency or the code from them will result in an explosion.”

There was a slight pause, “Any questions?” Larrimore said.

Both Greg and Shilo shook their heads in the typical negative response. A lot to think about.

Shilo's pin had the shape of a Q'Tingy plant from her home world. It was a silver pin with red horizontal lines in the shape of the plant. Quite beautiful she thought to herself.

Greg's pin was in the shape of a circle, mostly red and unmistakable as a representation of the planet Mars. In the area where he was from was a single gold dot encircled with a silver ring. Dome 1. Both were no larger than an inch and a half.

"To return here, as you will need to do each day, tap that pin and say you need to transport to area three. Same as any other transport protocol. However, in order to get here, you must be in possession of this pin. Since you have both just touched the pins, they are now encoded to your DNA, only you can activate communications. No chance of someone sneaking in." Larrimore laughed a small chuckle. The first sign of anything less serious since they met today.

Rowan took over the conversation, "The 15-minute disruption to your day is over as promised. If you need to get back here or contact us, use your communicator. If we need you, we will contact you; depending on your location and surroundings, it may be either pin. When you desire to return, tell the transporter operator you wish to be transported to area 3. Your fleet issued comm is deactivated as you arrive and reactivated when you leave."

The wall returned to a solid wall and a door slid open on the adjoining wall. Shilo and Greg walked through that open passage and Greg looked at his ninja friend, "My quarters, Corporal." They stepped on the pad and disappeared.

When the operator was the only person in the transporter room, Colonel Larrimore and Major Regis walked in, looking at the operator, "Corporal, stand down for the time being and go into standby. But leave the system operational at a moment's notice if need be."

"Yes Major." The operator said flatly.

They turned and left the transporter room, Rowan said to Larrimore, “You know Glenn, Shilo has some pretty negative feelings about her captain. It appears she received this posting by losing a bet. I discovered this during phase three of the interview. It may be of use to us in the future. I removed that memory, her talking about it at least, before we completed our session of course.”

“Rowan, I’m surprised at you. Learning secrets about Shilo without her knowledge.”

“And what tidbit of information did you learn from our illustrious captain?” Rowan said to Glenn Larrimore.

She grinned, “He has a thing for the quartermaster. Evidently, they had a relationship a while back.”

“Nice. I think I will need to watch those two closely, at least from a distance.”

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Greg and Shilo began to coalesce in the correct place, his quarters. He walked over to a replicator and asked it for an iced tea, orange pekoe with no sweetener. He turned and asked Shilo, “Can I get you something?”

Shilo said, “Same, with sweetener.”

He told the replicator and picked up the drink. Shilo was seated at the table in the room and Greg joined her placing her tea in front of her. As he sat, “I wonder what else is going on in the SSD that no one is aware of?”

Shilo sipped her tea and tapped her communicator, “Computer, please give us all information you have on the SSD, Special Security Division.”

“That information is classified level twenty, EYES ONLY.”

“Great, we need to find a level twenty computer to read the information. EYES ONLY, means it can only be read. Are you sure you really want to know the answer to those questions, Shilo?”

“No, not really. It’s just that I really do not care to be kept in the dark about anything. There is a saying at home, knowledge is

power. And the more knowledge you possess the more powerful you are. I prefer to be the most powerful person in the room. Present company excepted of course.”

Greg smiled, “We have the same saying on Earth. If and when you discover anything, please share it with me. I will do the same.”

They finished their tea in relative silence. Greg picked up the empty glasses and walked to the replicator and placed them on the pad where they first appeared. A moment later they were returned to the nothingness from where they came.

“So, Shilo, how about we review the files from SPO. We need to select a few more crew members and these are only at level 18 so we can review them in the training area.”

“Sounds good Captain. I’ll feel better there anyway. A relatively familiar location compared to the unknown where we just returned from.”

“You know, you can call me Greg. I plan to have a somewhat informal command due to the nature, and the personnel, that will be on this mission. Besides, I am a laid-back commanding officer. Do your job, I will not mess with you.”

Shilo stopped and looked at him, “Please elaborate Greg.”

“I’ll wait till you learn it organically. Your reaction will be welcomed at the surprises that are in front of us.”

Shilo narrowed her eyes, and a small smile crossed her face for a moment. She thought to herself, this may be an interesting assignment.

As they left the room and the door slid closed, the room lights dimmed at absence of people in the room.

They walked the half kilometer to the training center, since Greg chose quarters outside of the VIP area. He liked the neighborhood better. Being around all that brass made him itch. Shilo, on the other hand, chose quarters closest to the training center. More efficient.

“Captain, I mean Greg, may I ask you a personal question?”

He smiled, “Sure, go ahead.”

“Why did you not choose quarters in the command officer area? They are bigger, and a lot closer to where you need to be.”

He stopped and turned, looking directly at her. “That is the exact reason. I know that there are other captains, admirals, and ambassadors in the nearby quarters, and I did not want to be around them, I did not want to be influenced by them or become them. I like who I am and,” He waved his arms around to take it all in, “look at this area. The restaurants, the bars, the shops; the owners and locals here know me, I am generally liked unless we are playing cards or pool and where I am living is perfect for me. Large quarters are not me, cozy and comfortable quarters is all I need. Besides, my quarters on the ship are nearly a duplicate of the place I am living now. This way, I will know what I can bring and what I need to leave here in storage.” He looked at Shilo while they strolled past a few shops who nodded or waved to him. “You will learn I am not what is expected when you think of a ship Captain.” He grinned, “There have been a few Commanders and Captains in my history who have guaranteed I will be my own man and not one of the cookies. And there is nothing that can change that fact.”

He was referring to a captain who was promoted to admiral when he was promoted to Commander. “Captain Jose Ramon was the best commanding officer I ever served with, and since. He believed the people came first, then the mission. If you give the crew the latitude and creativity they needed, the mission would always be a success.”

She was starting to like this man, she never expected that was going to happen. Reading his file as she did, she made the assumption he was a loose cannon and a poor officer and a poor leader. So far, those assumptions were all wrong. She found herself thinking he may be the best commanding officer she ever had, and this means her first impression was incorrect. Now there’s a first in her life.

“Understood. May I say I agree with that answer. You are definitely not what I expected, but I have been pleasantly surprised.”

She started walking again, “Really?” He said. “And what did you expect?” He caught up to her in a moment and they walked side by side.

“I expected someone who was not like you. A poor excuse for a commanding officer, always unorganized for briefings. Perhaps a man who had trouble leading others and someone who found decisions difficult to make.”

“Good!” He replied.

“Good?” She asked.

He looked at her as they walked, “Yes. Fleet command cookie cutters cuts its captains to all be about the same. Seen one you’ve seen them all, right?” She nodded. “Not a single commanding officer I have had in the last decade fit into that mold, and all of them were able to command circles around any of those ‘proper’ commanding officers. They made me realize if you are honest with yourself, and honest with your crew, the crew will support you and there will be nothing you are not able to accomplish. I believe we have a fantastic crew, and we need to select a few more fantastic people to join us.”

She smiled, a rare thing for her and it looked nice on her face. She was a generally jovial person but her home, her people, had difficulty showing emotions. Not like the Vulcans, but simply hiding them from others and not suppressing them in a dark hole.

They walked a little more and they told each other things about their past, previous missions and commanding officers. They had a few in common, Greg knew that fact as did Shilo. Were they actually becoming friends?

When they arrived at the training center, Greg stopped a hundred meters or so in front of the main entrance and looked up. “This is my favorite building for two reasons.” He said just loud enough for Shilo to hear.

“What are they?” She asked.

“To me, this building resembles a merging of cultures. The Parthenon of ancient Greece, a great and massive temple in Japan, and the simplicity of the old west.”

“I can see the inspiration you are referring to Greg. It is a very beautiful structure.”

Greg looked up at the old-style clock in the steeple of the building. It pointed exactly to 11 am.

“What’s the second reason.”

“I like messing with cadets!” He said, and as he did the main doors burst open and the cadets headed to their next class. They all needed to walk past a full captain and a commander on the way, and each and every one of them looked anxious or nervous as they passed by them on the rather thin portion of the walkway Greg and Shilo had stooped.

Greg noticed one cadet who did not flinch or appear distressed as she approached and passed the officers, she was with a man who looked indifferent as well to walking past a captain.

Looking at their uniform, he saw they were in their last year at the academy, so they would graduate shortly. He stopped them, he was curious.

As they walked past, “Cadets!” He said loud enough for all of them to take notice. He motioned to the two in question and the rest made a break for it. The two he wanted to talk to stopped in front of him and Shilo.

“Yes Captain. How may we assist you?” The young woman spoke.

“I’ll be blunt. I enjoy creating anxiety and stress in cadets, but this is the third time we have met at this location and the third time it appears you are indifferent to the fact I am a full Captain, and she is a full Commander. So, I can assume only two things; one, you are not impressed with rank or two, it is your way of showing disrespect without showing disrespect. Which is it?” He waited for an answer.

The man shifted on his heels, a sign he wanted to leave but not because of this situation, he wanted to get to lunch. The woman, on



the other hand, walked a few steps closer to Greg and stood less than half a meter from him, inside his personal comfort zone. He held his ground, as did she.

“Sir, may I speak freely?” Shilo was amazed at her boldness and was curious as to his response.

“At all times cadet, first off, who are you?”

“I am cadet Yvonne Ramon and this is my younger brother Ricardo.” Greg held up his hand and she paused.

“Younger, by how much.” Greg was grinning from ear to ear, he realized they were twins, and had an idea who these two were.

“Ninety-one seconds, sir.” She replied. Proudly!

Ricardo shook his head. “Somehow, Captain, she always manages to bring that fact into a conversation.” She backhanded him on the arm. It did not faze him.

Shilo said, “Please continue.”

“Captain, my brother and I are 20 years old, and have different birthdays. Mine is February second at 23:59 and his is February third at 00:01. I know what you are thinking, that’s two minutes.” She looked at Shilo who was going to ask. “The medical facility used even minutes, so 91 seconds, two minutes. At least it makes for a good story.” She paused a brief second, “As for us, and you. Well, Mom is a full Captain and Dad is a retired admiral. Rank is rank, but Captain, rank does not make a leader. The way they lead is a signpost of how great they are, and their crew will follow them to the depths of hell.”

Greg looked at Yvonne and smiled as if remembering something with great fondness, “How is Jose?”

She was blindsided, this guy knew dad. “He and mother are well. She is on some starbase somewhere in command of it and Dad is her side kick or something. Strangest relationship I ever saw, but it works for them.”

“Actually, your mother is the commanding officer of Starbase Cochrane and your father has taken on the role of an advisor for the

entire sector.” He looked at them both, “When was the last time you saw them?”

“Few years ago, Cochrane is quite a distance. Hard to get there and back in a weekend. They did visit once though, it was not a family reunion but more of a state visit.” Ricardo interjected. “The school paraded them around, never had personal time with Mom and Dad for those few days.”

“So, last question for you both. What are your specialties? What are you studying? What do you want to do?”

Yvonne spoke, “I am studying tactics, weapons, and infiltration techniques. I would really love to be in a position to use my skills and abilities to their fullest.”

Ricardo added, “I am learning about covert operations and technologies for use in less than ideal conditions. Mostly high-altitude surveillance for worlds without space flight, a preemptive information gathering to first contact.”

“Do you have your orders yet?” Shilo asked.

“Yes sir, we are both assigned to a local training center. Instructors for crewman and civilians.” Ricardo said. You could see in both their faces it was not their top choices.

“Is teaching beneath you?” Shilo said, before Greg could say nearly the same thing.

“No Commander. It’s just we have both been taught so extensively that to truly teach requires experience and practice. Teaching out of the books with no experience is going to be lame, sir.” Yvonne said.

“I completely understand. My first assignment was not what I wanted, at all, a simple shuttle pilot. My specialty at the academy was helm. Driving starships, I was going to end up driving a four-seat shuttle for who knows how long.”

“What happened sir?”

“A Captain ended up requesting me for a classified assignment and the orders got changed. Best assignment of my life, I served with

him twice actually; once as an ensign and once as a commander. Best captain I ever had.”

Ricardo looked straight at Greg, “He must have been a great commanding officer, sir?”

“Yes, yes he was cadets, you are dismissed. It was wonderful speaking to you. When you see your father, tell him he was the best CO I ever had, twice.” He and Shilo walked away instantly.

“Shilo, their father is where I received most of my leadership style. The man was and still is the best CO in the fleet, even retired!”

Yvonne yelled back, “Captain Binotti?”

Greg and Shilo stopped, Shilo realized they never said their names, but she knew. She walked up to Greg and shook his hand.

“Sir, I just remembered you. You were there on Mars when Dad retired. You spoke to each of us for half an hour. Sir, you were the inspiration for the two of us joining Starfleet. Even as young as we were, you impressed on us that being a captain was a rank, not a leader. A leader is someone you follow.”

He shook hands with Yvonne and Ricardo, “Commander Ariel!”

“Yes Captain!”

“Please find a way to add these two to our crew.”

“Yes Captain, consider it done.” Shilo was beginning to understand the human concept of trust and loyalty.

Greg looked at the two of them, “Keep this quiet. Even after it happens. Just accept it graciously and move on; we have a marvelous mission in a year. Our ship is being redesigned. And it is both covert and contains interesting weaponry and all new technology.”

“YES SIR!” They said in unison.

“If there is anything you need, call me or Commander Ariel directly. If there is anything we can do, consider it done.” Greg paused a moment, “Yvonne, if I remember correctly you have a pet cat.”

“Yes sir. She is ten years old now and the vet said she should last another ten years.”

“See that, you and Commander Ariel have something in common, she has a pet cat also; did I mention on the ship a pet cat is authorized if Commander Ariel approves?”

“Sir, Greta is on Cochrane with Mom and Dad. But thank you. She is my baby.”

They said their goodbyes and Greg and Shilo made their way to their make shift office in the training center, they went about reviewing crewmembers. They added the two cadets to the roster and Greg needed to make a call.

“I’ll be right back Shilo, I need to make a call.” She nodded and continued reading personnel files.

He walked to a terminal and keyed in for a subspace line, the communications specialist appeared on the screen.

“How can I help you Captain Binotti?”

“Connect me with Jose Ramon on Starbase Cochrane please.”

“Yes sir, stand-by.”

A moment later, “GREGGY!!”

“Admiral, or is it Captain, or maybe retiree or Mr. Advisor.”

Jose shook his head. “OK, what’s up? I know you well enough to know when you bit off more than you can chew.”

“I met your twins. I recruited them to my ship.”

“You have a ship. Excellent. Which one?”

“Scorpion.” His face went from a smile to that admiral face everyone hated.

“You sure?”

“I’ll watch out for them, but their assignment was lame. Teaching crewmen. Big waste of talent. I wanted to give them purpose like someone did for me.”

“Well, their assignment is, or was, lame. I’ve heard about the Scorpion, upgraded carpeting and better beds or something.” He knew all about the Scorpion, and its classified mission. He gave Greg the initial briefing on the mission and told him he was the best man for the job. “Stop by if you’re in the area. Need to run, my turn to cook dinner.”

“Understood. I will if I’m in the area. I’ll make sure it’s on the way to the nether region. Binotti out.”

The circuit cleared, and the screen displayed a Starfleet logo.

Greg walked back to the table and sat across from Shilo again. “So Greg, how is Admiral Ramon doing?”

“Quite well actu.... How did you know?”

“You had a look. It seemed like something that was to happen next.” She turned to the files, “So, I think the crew is selected. SPO approved all of our requests including the twins and the orders will all be cut this afternoon. They should be arriving soon, and we can begin crew training.”

“Excellent!”

“There’s still a few weeks til graduation so we have some time left here, then a ride on the Nightwing to the ship, and maybe a month before the actual mission starts.”

“So, I guess they will meet up with the ship before we get to Cochrane.”

“We’re going to Starbase Cochrane?” Shilo asked.

“Of course we are Shilo, how else will Yvonne get her cat?” He chuckled at the absurdity of that statement, as did Shilo.

“Of course Captain, I understand. How silly of me!”

## CHAPTER 1-3

During this time of the morning in the training center there were quite a few people buzzing around. Cadets running to get to the classroom before the class begins. Captain Binotti remembers those mornings and is quite happy they are behind him. During his time at the academy, he was considered a problem case, which is the reason for the career path he ended up with and the ships in which he served.

Whatever test Greg took, he passed with top marks, he graduated top in his class, but the instructors knew he was not pushing himself to do so. To some of his instructors, not considering his grades, he was known as a lazy cadet. Someone who did not work at being the best, the best came naturally.

The academy classes and practical exams came easy to him therefore he did not need to push himself to make top marks, but he always seemed to make the highest score. He was older than most cadets which did give him an ever so slight advantage but not by much. His instructors looked to him as an average student, and there were no hopes for greatness in his future. He completed the course of study in the minimum time allotted.

Most instructors watched the careers of several of the cadets to see where the life path led them. He was no different. Rising through the ranks quickly and acquiring the command of the Ajax through misfortune, but he had a command.

Over the next few years his life consisted of boring and repetitive duty, interspersed with the occasional first contact mission or better yet the rare but welcomed battle. He became known as the captain who use weapons as a last resort, and creativity and communications in the forefront. He was known to be an excellent commanding officer. For this, those who followed his career felt good for him.

Greg's Chief of Security aboard the Ajax was Lt. Cmdr. Richard Steel. "Shilo, I am bringing Commander Steel to the Scorpion as chief of operations and second officer."

"Are you kidding!" She stated quite loudly. "Look at his record. He refused to receive an ocular implant when he lost his eye during the mission to Coreana, and when he finally had it implanted, he wore a patch over it like some old Earth pirate for nearly a year. He took an extended leave of absence to attend some Klingon ritual. My opinion, this man is a nut."

"Great, I'm glad you see it my way. What ship was it he wore the patch? You know, he is a rather close friend and the person who would sacrifice his own life rather than the mission." Greg paused. "As for the patch, he removed it when necessary, but it served as a reminder to all that life is fragile. The implant has certain advantages like the ability to see in the dark and that could be a good thing on this mission."

"As for the ritual, he had to do it. The sash he wears is only given to those who complete the ritual with a perfect score. Days without sleep, pain, creativity, and yes more pain. He wears it proudly and, on the ship, he is permitted to wear the sash as a part of his uniform. If we come upon a Klingon ship, it will make communications easier. He speaks fluent Klingon; no translator will be necessary."

"Very well, Captain. Your decision and I will agree with that decision." Shilo said. She looked for the ship he mentioned then discovered it was the Ajax, under Captain Gregory T. Binotti. She smiled at him, "Well, if you think he will be an asset, then he will be an asset. Shall I notify him?"

Greg Binotti grinned, "I notified him a couple days ago, he should be here by lunch." Greg paused. "The three of us should have lunch together." Greg was amused, Shilo was not.

A familiar chirp was heard, and Greg tapped the Fleet communicator on his chest. "Binotti."

“Sir, this is the reception area. Are you expecting a Commander Steel? He looks more like something a Seylat dragged in than a Commander.”

“Crewman, what is your name?”

“Transporter Engineer Second Class Michael Johnston, sir.”

“Well Transporter Engineer Second Class Michael Johnston, if you expect to remain at your present rate, I suggest you process Commander Steel to his quarters, instruct him in the new communicator, and curb your vocabulary. Editorials should be confined to the privacy of a booth in the rec area but always remember, in a public place, the walls have ears.”

“Yes sir, my apology sir. I shall ensure Commander Steel is processed to his quarters and given instruction in the communicator personally.”

“Wonderful, have him contact me once he is settled, let him know he and I will meet for lunch in 90-minutes.”

“Yes sir, it shall be done.” He paused. “And sir, thank you for the tips.”

The transporter operator disconnected the link and Greg looked at Shilo, “I want that man on the crew. Increase his rank.”

“Really?” Shilo was surprised. “Why?”

“He is not afraid to speak his mind. He knew my rank and still spoke his mind. It will be useful on this mission. Call up his file.”

She did, and they reviewed it. “According to the records he is already slotted to be a possible crewmember of the Scorpion. This man has brains too; according to his supervisors, when he gets downtime, or gets bored, he learns a new technology. Not just a cursory understanding, but a complete understanding. He knows warp mechanics, transporter systems, dilithium reactions and the list goes on. He graduated in the top 2% of his class at the academy.” She paused a moment, “However, he also has a dark side. He has been busted several times at various duty stations for the operation of



a still. I am not an advocate in the use of alcohol, however, I do agree this man would be an asset to the crew.”

“Good. Finalize the transfer and give me the orders. I will hand them to him personally.”

“As you wish.”

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Meanwhile, TE2 Johnston was kicking himself for his attitude when speaking to the Captain. He planned out what he would say to the captain when he met him.

~~~~~

It was just before lunch and Greg and Shilo settled on the crew. Finally completing that monumental task, they decided it was time to have lunch.

“Steel to Binotti. Hey Greg, am I using this DAD-BURN thing right? Hey, you there? Can you hear me?”

“Yes Rich, I hear you just fine. Didn’t the Transporter tech that gave you the comm unit instruct you in how to use it?”

“Well, yes he did but I didn’t feel I needed to listen to all of it. He went through its use, care and the theory behind it. This high-tech crap is for the birds.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Too small, I like to have something I can hold onto; anyway, I’m all settled in, what do you need me to do?”

“Glad you are in such a good mood!” Greg smiled at Shilo who looked less than amused. “Contact Transporter Engineer Johnston and ask to beam to my location, level 19. When you get here the three of us will go to lunch.”

“OK, let me talk to this Johnston character....three of us?”

“Your new First Officer. By the way, as you are leaving the pad on your way here, put on your best Klingon face and tell Johnston you do not like Seylats. I’ll explain when you get here.”

“OK, Steel out.”

Richard Steel paused a moment to get into his Klingon mindset. “Steel to Transporter Engineer Johnston.”

“TE2 Johnston here sir. How may I help you?”

“Transport me to your location then on to Captain Binotti, level 19 access. Energize when ready.”

“Aye sir.” A slight pause. “Energizing.”

Steel appeared in the transporter room in front of Johnston. Pleasant enough looking fellow.

“Controls reset, sir. Energizing. Destination is level 19.”

“Very good, just be it known I do not like Seylats. They do not have a very good taste.”

As the last words came out of his mouth the transporter cycled, and TE2 Johnston turned a pale shade of white.

Richard Steel appeared on the pad in the level 19 area, with Shilo and Greg standing there as he appeared. Richard Steel was laughing as he finished materializing. “OK Greg, what was that all about?”

Binotti reiterated the dialog from earlier and Steel howled. “No wonder the last image I saw was a very pale transporter operator. So then, what can I do for you, what the hell am I doing here? Where are we?”

“First thing you can do is either verify or choose the OPS crew members. Second, you are my Chief of Operations and Second Officer, and third, classified location deep inside the planet. I’ll brief you in a bit. After lunch.”

“Good, sounds like a party, besides, I’m starved. Who’s the babe?” Steel motioned towards Shilo Ariel.

“Mr. Steel.” Shilo started. “For your information I am your superior officer, the first officer of the ship, the very same ship in which you are the second officer. Am I clear?”

“Yes Commander, lighten up, I understand, you’re not a babe. Dang Greg, if she had phasers in her eyes I’d be toast right now.

Let's start over." He straightened up and extended his hand. "Good afternoon Commander, I am Lt. Commander Richard Steel. And you are?"

Shilo was taken aback by his sudden reversal, she clasped his hand, "Commander Shilo Ariel, First Officer."

"Excellent, I'm sure we will work well together."

"Of course, Commander. But please refrain from using those colorful metaphors in the future. At least in my presence."

"I'll try, but no promises. You can take the boy out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the boy."

"That is all I can ask."

Greg decided to stay out of this introduction. He needed them to find their own state of equilibrium if there was to be a smooth operation on the ship, and as they did, he sat and watched mostly.

"So, Rich. Let's walk to the café. Who are you thinking about for ops?"

"I was thinking about that; myself, LtCmdr Leake, and Lt T'Prish. That's if you are using your 8/16 rotation as usual."

Shilo stopped, quite loudly she added, "8 on 16 off rotation? Starfleet has learned that a 12/12 rotation is the most economical and easiest to maintain."

"True, but a 12/12 does not take the person into consideration. I learned early in my command that an 8/16 is better for morale, 6/18 is better but a lot more crew is needed. As you know, off time is coveted and this gives you time for relaxation and sleep. We will maintain a 3-shift rotation on the ship." Greg looked at Shilo. "Once we get the entire crew assembled, we'll start the rotations, so everyone can get themselves ready for the real work, and life aboard the ship. It will be a long flight to get there, and a long flight home if we ain't killed first."

"Captain," Shilo said. "Fleet has determined that a 2 shif..."

"Commander. Fleet is not in command of this mission, I am. We will use the 8/16, end of discussion."

“Shilo paused a moment, “Very well sir.”

“Shall we head to lunch?” Binotti asked the other two.

“Greg let’s hit the Taco House. Commander, you up for a really good taco?”

“Actually, if it’s alright with you Captain, I will head back to my quarters and have lunch with my cat.”

“Very well, Shilo. We will meet you at the office on 19 in 2 hours.”

Shilo stepped onto the transporter pad and nodded to the captain, and the commander, “Commander Ariel to TE2 Johnston, one to transport to my quarters. Energize when ready.”

A moment later she vanished.

“Hold on a sec Rich. I have something to get approved.”

“What’s that, crew transfer?”

“Yes it is. TE2 Johnston to TE1 Johnston and reassigned to the Scorpion. There, sent to SPO.”

“You’re actually thinking the reply and approval is going to come back this week; no wait, you’re waiting for it to come back, aren’t you?”

A second later the padd chirped, “Excellent, approved.”

“How on Earth did you manage to get it done in a few seconds?”

“I have clout, this is an important mission, I have a blank check.” He looked over the documents, “Perfect. Let’s get to lunch.” Tapping his communicator, “Binotti to TE2 Johnston, two to transport to your location.”

“Aye sir, energizing.”

“Once they materialized, Johnston realized this was the first time he was face to face with both the Captain and the Commander.

“Sir, I want to.....”

“Stow it, front and center crewman.”

Johnston walked around the console and stood in front of Binotti and Steel, came to attention, “Transporter Engineer Second Class Michael Johnston reporting as ordered sir.”

“Johnston, I want to ask you something. Are you always so open with your mouth, as in speak before you think?”

“Yes sir, my downfall.”

“Good. By the way, your rank is not correct,” Johnston looked like he got punched, expecting to be dropped in rank again, “and you are currently out of uniform.” Johnston looked at him in disbelief, did he just get busted again. He was science crew so he was supposed to wear blue.

Binotti handed him the padd, he read it and stared at Binotti. He read it again thinking his mind fabricated what he saw the first time. “Uh....sir?”

“You have two days personal leave, then you will report to level 19 under my command; actually, you will be assigned to Commander Seylat....I mean Steel. I think he will put someone with your talents to good use.”

“I will....” Rich said.

“Yes you will Rich, I hear Michael here makes the best warp hooch in the quadrant.” He smiled. “But, this is all low key, under the table. The First Officer is not to know anything about this, understood?”

Shocked, “Yes sir.”

“You will actually be assigned to Commander Martinez in Engineering. He is a good man and can use your talents. One thing, I get the first of each batch, quality control. If it comes down to it, it is alcohol for the medical section, and don’t worry, Commander Piper will be in on this also. She needs to verify the safety of each batch before anyone tastes it, understood?”

He just stared at Greg.

“See you in 2 days, 9am, report to Mr. Steel. He will process you into the ship and get you on your way to engineering.”

“Yes sir!”

“Last thing; go get the correct uniform on TE1 Michael Johnston; I believe your new color is yellow. We are going to get tacos.”

“Yes sir, tell Maria I said hello and enjoy your lunch.”

They exited the campus and headed to the restaurant. Steel commented, “Maria, huh? Is he dating her?”

“Well, he is single.” Greg replied.

It was a beautiful day; the weather net did not have a lot to do at the moment. A wonderful spring is in store for San Francisco.

~~~~~

Shilo arrived at her room but did not eat. She tapped her special communicator. “This is Ariel. Transfer to area three. Notify Larrimore and Rowan to meet me there.”

“Understood. Stand-by.”

The familiar hum and she was standing in the limbo transporter room. A moment later, the transporter cycled again, and the rest of those who needed to be in the meeting appeared.

Rowan said, “I am assuming you have something urgent to report.”

“More of a curiosity. This Captain is a random leader. He appears to not have a definite plan in place, but then one thing happens, and you see how he influenced the events to culminate into what ever he planned in the first place. I am not certain I can work for him, but I am more curious about the man so I will work with him.” She paused.

“What would you like for us to do for you?” Rowan asked Shilo.

“At the moment, nothing. I wanted you to know where I am at this moment, and that my previous statements may not be fully accurate any longer.”

“Understood.” Rowan said.

~~~~~

Greg and Rich walked in relative silence, bringing up things from the past, reminiscing mostly. They reached their destination, The Taco House. As they entered, they saw a beautiful woman at the door waiting to greet them, a glance at her nametag and Greg said, "Hello Maria. A friend said to say hello, Michael Johnston."

Her face lit up at the sound of that name, "You know my brother?"

OK, Greg and Rich did not expect that one. "Yes, we do. I just drafted him to my ship. Is he any good?"

"He's the best. Has not been around for a couple weeks, I miss talking to him."

Greg held up his finger, tapped his communicator, "Binotti to TE1 Johnston."

"Johnston here sir, go ahead."

He nodded at Maria and she spoke. "Mikey, when are you coming to get lunch with me." She looked at Greg and said, "I thought you were a second class transporter engineer?"

"Sis!!" He sounded shocked. "I have a few things to take care of, then I will meet you, tomorrow, for a late lunch. I got reassigned, and a promotion. Not sure, I think it was the guy standing in front of you."

Rich nodded to Maria, she said to her brother, "I'm sure, it was him. OK, see you tomorrow after the lunch rush. We can have some time together."

Greg took over the conversation before the communications link terminated. "So, Maria, tell us something about your brother we will not find in the Starfleet records." He winked at Maria.

"Oh, I have some good stories. Let's get you seated, the rush is nearly at the end, so I should have some time to sit and chat with you."

Michael started talking but Greg tapped his communicator, disconnecting the link.

Rich said, “Oh, you two just made that boy’s day.”

They sat at a table in the sun. Maria brought them an iced tea and a large bowl of chips and three different salsas. Rich asked a few minutes later, “Got anything with a kick to it?”

A few minutes later the mariachi band started playing and Maria led the procession to their table. In her hands was a bright red bowl, the regulars knew this was the liquid fire salsa. Greg dipped the tip of his chip in the liquid and tasted it, and nearly choked. He turned red and coughed.

Rich, on the other hand, saw Greg’s reaction and said “Looks just about perfect.” Grabbed a chip and dug deep into the salsa like a steam shovel and deposited it into his mouth. A few minutes later he began turning red and said to Maria. “This is good!!”

“I’ll stick with this one.” Greg said pointing to the mild and medium bowls in front of him.

“Commander, I have only seen one other eat that particular salsa like that, what are you?” The guitarist in the band said, he was also the owner of the restaurant.

“Another?” Greg asked.

“Yes, her brother.” He pointed to Maria. “For him, the hotter the better.”

“Sir, may I ask for a to go container of this salsa? It will be perfect on my eggs in the morning.”

He shook his head and Maria laughed. They both walked away.

Greg and Rich sat and ate 4 tacos each, Rich finished the salsa and a few minutes later the waiter brought a bright red sealed container and sat it on the table.

“What’s that?” Greg said.

“My new condiment. I’ll get the replicator to scan it and I can have it anytime. I may even tell Johnston it’s in there.” He thought for a moment, “Let’s see. Steel salsa 1, no. Maybe.....Got it. Taco House Fire Salsa.”



“Good, I won’t be trying it out.” Greg said.

Steel paid the tab and they left, leaving Maria a very healthy tip. They made their way back to the campus of Starfleet and headed for the transporter room. A woman stood where Johnston once stood, she looks like she just got out of school. As they entered, she came to attention.

“Crewman, the worst thing to do is to come to attention when you are working the console. Yes, offer a respectful hello but coming to attention could lead to an accident.”

“Yes sir.” She relaxed a bit.

Greg and Rich stood on the transporter platform, Rich said, “My quarters please. Energize when ready.”

A moment later they were in his quarters. He walked over to the replicator and picked up a small bowl. Pouring some of the salsa in the bowl he placed it on the replicator pad. “Computer, scan the item in the replicator and save the pattern under Taco House Fire Salsa.”

A moment later the bowl vanished, and the computer chirped.

“Computer now scan the new item and save it under Taco House Tortilla Chips.” He put a bowl of chips on the pad.

It vanished. He grinned at Greg, “Computer, one bowl of Taco House Fire Salsa and a bowl of the chips.”

They appeared on a tray. He picked the tray up and carried it to the counter. Picking up a chip and crunching on it, Greg nodded. Rich picked up a chip and dragged it through the salsa. Putting it in his mouth he said, “PERFECT!!”

“Computer, make this available to all crewmembers aboard the USS Scorpion.” The computer chirped, “Transmitting replicator files to Morena Shipyard.”

“Computer, when ordered ask for the level of heat for the order, using this current level as a 9.”

The computer chirped.

“Good idea. Computer give me the salsa at level 11.” The bowl appeared, and he tasted it. “NICE!!”

“Rich, I have a serious matter to discuss with you.”

Commander Steel sat across from his Captain, “Yes sir.” He said.

“There are a couple crewmembers who you are to make a special project. Johnston is one of them. Find out what he wants to be when he grows up and help him to impress the hell out of me. I will consider it a failure if he is not deserving of a Warrant Officer rank in six months. Work with Juan on this. I can see it in him, as can you as soon as you start working with him. Help him find direction and grow.”

“I thought it was going to be something hard.” Steel smiled. “It will be my pleasure sir.”

~~~~~

Shilo Ariel materialized in her quarters again. This time she had a light lunch with her cat. They talked of their day so far, a shame they did not speak the same language.

Time to return to the training center, the conversation at area three would not be told to Greg Binotti.

Tapping her communicator, “This is Commander Ariel to transporter room, transfer to level 19 when ready.” She vanished.

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Greg stood and returned the glasses to the replicator. “Binotti to transporter room. Two to transfer to level 19 when ready.”

Rich stood as he finished speaking, the two friends vanished, and the quarters put itself to sleep.

## CHAPTER 1-4

“Well Commander, speak up. I don’t have all day.” Came from the mouth of the towering red headed Commander standing in front of this somewhat petite First Officer.

“I want to know more about the SSD. The Captain trusts the two of you, I do not. I prefer to err on the side of caution. It has suited me up to this point in my life, it can suit me now, and in the future. I trust my instincts.” Shilo Ariel said to the two of them.

Commander Regis looked a bit astonished, but Larrimore seemed even and expectant about the inquiry. After a moment of thought, Colonel Larrimore knew what to say. “Shilo, I am not certain as to what your reasoning is to delve deep into the SSD, but it stops here, now. We cannot provide you with the information which I believe you want. If that information is made public, SSD operations and operatives would be in danger or at minimum fail in their assigned tasks. Worst, people could die.”

Shilo let a very brief grin cross her face, it was not the response she wanted, but it was the response she expected. “This was the answer I had hoped and expected. I wanted to know where I, and the crew, stand in this organization. Now I know the Captain, and the entire crew aboard the Scorpion are but mere pawns in this SSD game of spy nonsense. So, you know where I stand; I will follow your directives and give my life to complete this mission. I will not however do it by compromising the crew, the ship, or the Captain. Am I clear?” She paused a moment, “We will be underway in a few days. I am anxious to know the complete picture of this mission, every nuance, every thought the SSD has relating to it, as is the Captain and Mr. Steel. We expect a full and complete briefing.” Turning to the transporter operator. “Beam me back to my quarters, Energize!”

Even as Commander Ariel faded into nonexistence, she felt this was not how she wanted this meeting to go. What she really wanted to do was get into the SSD computer and look around, but

computer tampering, and piracy, is a crime. So is the possession of stolen and classified material.

“Glenn, why did she do that? We were going to have the complete briefing once we were out of reach of the Federation and on our way to Romulan space? I’m not sure about this one.”

“You haven’t met Mr. Steel yet, have you? He can freeze an overheating warp core at thirty paces with just a look and enjoy it. We offered him a posting in the SSD several years ago, turned us down flat. Something about our jobs not on his radar, too boring or routine, something like that, anyway, let’s prepare that amazing briefing so we will not let the lady down.”

~~~~~

The remainder of the days at the training center were uneventful. Rich learned all about Ops and the First Officer; the First Officer learned all about Rich and the Captain; and the Captain learn a lot about the SSD. The SSD?

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### Captains Personal Log

Finally, we are enroute to the Scorpion. The Nightwing grabbed us a few hours ago and we have a few days before we arrive at the Morena shipyard, where the Scorpion is being refitted. I feel like a kid on his first date. I just finished the subspace call with the chief of communications. He is the only Andorian assigned to ship. Interesting person, but a little odd, I like it!

Last night, Shiloh noticed a very large part of the crew are considered to be the dregs of the fleet. Service reports, passed over promotions, decrease in rank, and yes, a few had brig time. Well then, so be it, I know my past and thanks to it I’ve been assigned to this mission also. I guess that makes me a dreg also. Maybe from now on I will refer to the DREG log and not the ship’s log. We’ll see.

In the beginning I thought this mission would be a simple in and out raid on the Romulan empire. How incorrect I was. After an exhausting session in the SSD limbo conference room, I have learned we are to gather any and all information we can find. This is to

include the planting of a secure sub-space transmitter in the main computer of the Romulan capital city secure records area. The SSD crew members we have assigned to our ship have that task. I am to understand they have been taught Rihansu. Well at least I now understand why they spend so much time with our Romulan crewmembers. They are refining the speech patterns and pronunciations, some of the words they will need to use on planet, so they will not be discovered on this mission.

This mission is scheduled to last for about 13 months ship time. This includes a round trip to and from the Romulan space at our top speed. Getting there will be a lot slower so-as not to draw attention, but getting home, well, we may need to be fast. We are due to arrive at the Morena shipyards shortly. The remainder of the crew is sound asleep, as I should be. But the prospect of seeing my ship for the first time has bent my anxiety slightly. I have the feeling I won't sleep again until we are underway."

~~~~~

"Shilo, wake up!"

"Greg, is that you? What the matter?" She said wiping the sleep from the fog, "WHAT WRONG?"

"Relax, I can't sleep, and I wanted to talk to someone. You have been quiet through all the briefings, is there something I need to know."

"I would prefer to tell you at a later time, when I'm fully awake and fully functional."

"Oh, sorry. Go back to sleep. Maybe I'll try it myself, I could use a nap. Talk to you in the morning."

"Alright, good night Captain."

Still very awake, Captain Gregory T Binotti walked around the cramped little cabin that was his home, and the home for the 25 members who were in the vicinity of, and on, the earth. Looking at the faces, he wondered what we can do. Due to the number of passengers and the quantity of available state rooms, this cargo area has been converted into a dormitory style sleeping arrangement.

There are partitions of course to simulate privacy if the resident elected to use them and most did not, they are not sound proof. The Captain and the First Officer are the only persons with a cabin of sorts, and they are used for training, meetings, briefings, and when possible sleep. They were also makeshift cabins, not luxury, but functional. The wall between their rooms can slide out of the way to hold larger groups.

But at the moment, the Captain decided walking around the ship, and thinking, is what he needed. Thinking, it is a dangerous thing to be sure. He is considering his crew, reviewing assignments and other aspects he had not considered before. I think the proper term is over-thinking.

The Andorian communications chief, commander J’Kael, was the most extraordinary person assigned to the ship. J’Kael has been reprimanded on numerous occasions for playing practical jokes on the captain, and of most of the crew of the various vessels he had been assigned. He is an excellent com officer, according to his record; never has he done anything that could jeopardize the safety of the ship. However, while he is assigned to the Scorpion, he will have the position of chief science officer. This is due in large part to the communique received by the captain from his previous ship. It stated he's indeed a practical joker, but quite original at his jokes. He was reprimanded for placing subliminal messages into the ships announcement system.

This caused the captain the show up during his off-duty time wearing a Hawaiian shirt, red shorts, flip flops, and a straw hat. The reason filtered to the captain by way of the ships messaging system, as a rumor. J’Kael may be a Joker, a little off the wall at times, and most of the time he is loyal, honest and friendly not to mention fun to have around. After he admitted to the deed, the captain removed him from com and placed him as second officer. The promotion felt like a demotion, but it was fine as far as he was concerned. Just meant more responsibility. He shouldered it well.

Then there is the infamous Johnston. Starfleet command thought he was crazy for what he did. Assigning him to the Scorpion. Admiral Maddox asked him why, his answer amazed her, “Why not!”

he said. Pretty certain she did not like that answer all that much. She made a comment that he was crazy, to which he replied, "Won't be the first time it's been said or the last!" She did not appreciate that answer either. Looking back at the event in a different light, he would not change a thing. He was right about this man. He is already learning the entire engineering diagram the ship. The diagram of this ship is very unique, and it meant he needed to learn new technologies in order to understand the ship's systems. Yes, he has a photographic memory, and reads the equivalent of 2 pages in less than 3 seconds. His next task is to learn the manuals for the bridge consoles, just in case his services are needed. Yes, the SSD has plans for his talents also. I'm sure they will tax his abilities to the limits.

There are various crew members in the science section that had devoted their talents to the Scalosian problem discovered by Captain Kirk, who encountered the planet around star date 5710.5. He and his crew survived this incident, but the planet and the incident are a well-kept secret. The effects of the water from this planet are both dangerous, and amazing. This is an amazing secret weapon the crew will have use of on the planet, during their mission.

The Admiral spoke to many Romulan defectors and they asked about having a suicide pill. They all stated to keep it in plain sight, as the Romulans can appreciate a suicide if captured. They will not attempt to stop the action. It is considered an honorable death.

Each person is carrying two in plain sight. One in a small wrist band, and one in a small pocket sewn into the left shoulder of all clothing. This way, if they are captured, they can simply move to the shoulder and bite down.

This is required by even those who are not transporting to the surface, but he collected the bridge crew in the conference room and gave them all the chance to test the water..... prior to leaving the training center. The results were extremely funny. Greg and Shilo decided to make a few fixes to several systems which were both needed and very well accomplished. But it turned a few heads.

The antidote was always in the center of the table, but a single cup of the special water was placed in front of each person. The equivalent of an eye dropper full, the amount in the capsule. Each

crewmember took a sip in turn and was instructed to walk out of the room and wait in the hall.

As they accelerated, they waited in the hall where after the first person appeared, the crew in the hall seemed to freeze. They messed with the innocent bystanders a bit. Turned some around to walk in the opposite direction, changed the items being carried by two of the crew members, and a few other not too painful things.

Yes, J’Kael was the first in the hall and instigated the comedic routine, the rest just played along. Mr. Steel was the second to take the water, playing a little joke on the captain. Standing him up and putting him in the corner he made a pointy hat and place it on his head.

The crew in the hall were a little upset but not all that bad; it was the Captain who needed revenge. The antidote was administered in the same order, but this time the Captain did not go third, he waited till the end.

He stood Mr. Steel up and stood him on the table, no easy task since he is not a small boy. He placed a sign around his neck that said WANTED: One mind, small, new or used. Please inquire within and knock hard, no one’s home upstairs.

After the Captain returned, laughter was quite loud. Admiral Maddox was not too happy and kept Rich and the captain after class to have a little talk, privately. The Admiral spoke and the two friends stated they understood and were dismissed. As they left the room and made it to the hall, they were greeted to a hero’s welcome.

“Captain Binotti to the bridge.” Jarring him from the memory of a few weeks ago he smiled.

Tapping his chest, “On my way.”

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Entering the bridge, “Are we there yet?” Greg said and grinned from ear to ear.

Captain Marlan did not even turn around when he said it, “Is he grinning?”



“The first officer was already looking at him, “Yes Captain, what are your orders?”

“I would have you beat that grin off his face, but he would enjoy it too much.” She turned to him, “Greg, how are you doing? Glad you could make it.”

“Well Captain, what can I do for you?” He said in a very jovial manner as the turbolift doors opened and he stepped out.

“Well Greg, my crew and I decided we needed to swap missions with you. They want to get their hands on that ship and all the new toys it has in it. For the past few days all we have been hearing about is that ship.”

“Tell you what Captain, it would be an honor for the crew of the USS Scorpion, a Charger Class Destroyer, to give the crew of the USS Nightwing, a Charger Class Destroyer, a personal tour of our new ship. Besides, Cheryl; I really want you to see the holodeck. I had a special program created for you.”

“OK, now I’m curious.” She replied.

“How soon do we get there?”

The helmsman said, “Less than an hour sir.”

The navigator added to the conversation, “At current speed, standard orbit in forty-two minutes and twelve seconds sir.”

The two-crewman looked at each other, smiled and nodded.

“Captain Marlan, I believe the time is relatively early and my crew needs to get up and prepare for the day. May I have permission to awaken my crew in a typical J’Kaelian manner? I believe the ringing of the alert klaxon for two seconds, in the cargo bay, which we are using as a barracks would be perfect?”

“Captain Binotti, you have my permission IF we can put the awakening on the main viewer.”

“I will agree to that stipulation, but we need the audio active, and I may say a few words after.”

Greg nodded to the communications officer, who had the vilest grin on his face. The klaxon blared for a couple seconds, then Greg spoke, "Crew of the Scorpion. In forty minutes, we will be home. Please join me in on deck three, forward section, in 10 minutes." He paused a moment then added, "Commander J'Kael, I am hoping the method of awakening was to your liking, perhaps you are brushing off on me?" He looked up, knowing where each monitor was located and put a big grin on that relatively dark blue face and gave Greg two thumbs up. Greg said, "Binotti out." And the link ended.

"Greg, you know three-forward in the lounge, right."

"I do. I hope your crew can join us for a farewell. It has been great being on this ship for the week, but life as a sardine is not all that fun. Besides, I want you all there to toast us a successful mission."

Cheryl looked at the comm officer, "Notify the senior staff, and every person who worked with the Scorpion crew, to meet in three-fore in 15 minutes. Don't be late." She turned back to front, Tapping the panel at the wrist, "Marlan to three-fore."

"Lounge here, Captain." Said the woman's voice.

"Just the person I wanted to talk to, remember the box I had delivered as we were departing?"

"Yes Captain, the...."

Cheryl cut her off, "That's the one. Put it on ice and get your people ready. You are serving the Scorpion and Nightwing crews' breakfast in 15 minutes."

"Wonderful." Came across a little sarcastically. "What would you like me to do in my spare time?"

"Perhaps you can maintain your bearing, lieutenant. I know that is what I would like for you to do. Captain out!"

Greg looked at Cheryl, "A bit open for a lieutenant."

"True, for a lieutenant, but for a cousin six years younger and my roommate when my parents or hers needed a summer away from

us, not so much.” She shook her head. “Shall we adjourn to the lounge?”

Greg was shaking his head, “You know, I think I like her already. I bet I can get some good stories about you. Now, what was that box you were talking about?”

Cheryl stood and started towards the turbolift, “You’ll see when we get there. Mr. Norman, you have the bridge. You know what to do when we get there, give us a 2-minute warning so we can watch. We want to see the Scorpion as we arrive.”

“Aye” came in unison from the first officer, the helmsman, and the navigator. They all looked at each other and grinned.

The captains entered the turbolift, and the doors closed.

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In the converted cargo bay, in a quiet corner of the room, two figures clad in SSD black spoke in hushed voices.

“Well, do you still think we can pull this off?”

“No, not really.”

“Then why even try?”

“Duty, honor, peace of mind, commendation, promotion, should I go on?”

“No Glenn, I got the idea; and if we don’t survive?”

“Well Rowan, we’ll never know, now will we?”

Rowan Regis thought for a second, “OK, new ship, new toys, new ideas, why not, sounds like fun!”

“Great,” Glenn Larrimore said to her counterpart and subordinate. “Let’s get to the party, I’m hungry.”

“I have it on good reconnaissance that Captain Marlan has some rare and tasty champagne she put on ice for this morning’s farewell meal.”

“Really, we don’t want to keep the good captain waiting, now do we?”

Entering a nearby turbolift and turning back towards the front, “Deck three, forward lounge.”

The doors closed, and they were on their way. A few of the crew was left in the bay, most had already made their way to the lounge.

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Glenn Larrimore entered the lounge and approached Captain Marlan, “Nice party.” She glanced at the crewmembers setting up the breakfast buffet. “Nice spread. I hear there’s a special beverage also?”

Cheryl walked to the cooling unit and pulled out a single bottle of champagne. Popped the cork, or rather permitted the cork to remove itself and make its way to both the ceiling and the other side of the room.

She brought the bottle to her nose and sniffed lightly, and an evil but satisfied grin spread across her face. She moved the bottle under Gregory Binotti’s nose, and the same look appeared on his face.

A lieutenant appeared with two very special champagne flutes. She handed Greg the bottle and she accepted the glasses from the tray where they sat, the lieutenant disappeared into the crowd. The room was so completely silent, you could hear the control tones on the bridge stations three decks up.

Cheryl held the glasses close together and Greg filled them about three-fourths full. He handed the bottle to a crewman who appeared at his side and accepted the glass from his counterpart on this ship.

Cheryl raised her glass, “Although we have enough for everyone, this first toast is for us.” She paused a moment, eyes down. “Greg, Captain Binotti, my friend. You are like the brother I never had. Mostly because of the torment you put me through since we met at the academy. The chance we both command a Charger Class ship is one in a million, and more so because I received the honor to play taxi driver and take you and your crew to the newly refitted ship where you will be for the next while.” She paused again, raising her

glass even higher, “Greg, good hunting.” They clinked glasses and took a sip. Greg’s turn.

Raising his glass in the air, “Captain Marlan, crew of the Nightwing, crew of the Scorpion, I salute you. For all that you do I salute you. Cheryl, you are seriously one of the best taxi drivers I have ever had the pleasure of being transported by, and certainly one of....no you are my favorite sister. Lastly, I want to make note of this wonderful spread we are all about to enjoy. To Lieutenant,” He paused looking at Cheryl who said Dixon silently. “To lieutenant Dixon and her staff. They have accomplished something amazing, and believe it or not, she accomplished all this in her free time.” Cheryl and Dixon nearly started laughing. “I raise my glass to you and your crew.” They drank the remainder of their glasses.

Lieutenant Dixon looked embarrassed, but Greg walked to her and offered his hand. He and Cheryl had similar styles of command. Very lax, but a degree of military bearing and the crew knew exactly where the line was drawn. Most have been here, on the ship, for a long time and the few who were new quickly learned what lines they could cross and what lines they couldn’t. The rest of the crew saw to it and taught the new people.

Lieutenant Dixon raised her hand above her head with her index and middle fingers together and extended, pointing straight up and moved her hand in a circular motion. Her wait staff knew that as a sign to pass out the glasses to the crew. Each identical to the glasses held by the captains. She picked up the original bottle they opened and refilled her captains’ glass, and then other captain’s glass and walked away.

Cheryl raised her hand and the room quieted. “Friends. Charger family. I want to tell you about the glass you are holding. One side of the glass has the silhouette of a Charger class ship, above it is written U.S.S. Nightwing and under it is written NCC-4025. The opposite side has the same silhouette with U.S.S. Scorpion and NCC-4017. Joining the two images are, on one side, a handshake and the other side a heart. The handshake is there to let all know what we do, we do together, and the heart is prominent on the last side to let all who see know we are a family. Family cannot and will not be

forsaken.” She turned towards Greg. “Greg, if you ever need me or my ship. Simply send ‘the’ message. We will receive and come find you.”

Before she could end the toast, Greg spoke, “Cheryl, if you and your crew ever need us, I know exactly the message you are speaking of. Come hell or high water, we are there for you.”

Cheryl continued, “To Charger Class. May the wind be at our backs!” From the back of the room, someone, Lt. J’Kael, yelled, “Peace through High-Tech intimidation!!”

The room laughed a moment, then several yelled, “To Charger Class.” Glasses clinked, and hugs were given.

Greg noticed Shilo taking very tiny sips on her glass, then he remembered her race does not like alcohol. Not dangerous for them or nothing, just their taste buds translate it as a very nasty, bitter and sour product.

Greg walked over to the replicator and worked with it for a minute and returned to where Cheryl had gravitated to Shilo.

“Shilo, let me give you a fresh glass.” He said to her.

“Not necessary Captain.” Her glass was empty.

Greg moved close and whispered into her ear, “This is the exact same drink as in all the other glasses in this room, but it contains no alcohol. I had the computer replicate it for you.”

She sniffed it, then tasted it. “This is really good!” She exclaimed and Captain Marlan looked at them both with a very curious glance.

Shilo took a larger sip and smiled. “Thank you, Captain. This was very thoughtful.” Greg glanced at the empty glass she sat on the small table next to her. “I saw that J’Kael finished his and set my glass down, I traded with him to appear I finished mine. Captain Marlan, your crew is very efficient, you have no idea how many of them wanted to refill my glass.” She smiled.

Cheryl still had that what the hell are you talking about look on her face.

Greg filled her in, “Cheryl, Shilo’s race cannot drink alcohol. Their bodies don’t care about it one way or another, but their taste buds receive it as the nastiest taste in the universe. So, I created a replicator program. I had the computer scan my glass and replicate it, it was perfect. Then I instructed it to produce the same flavors but with no alcohol. It is pretty much to the T. I have a glass of it also.”

“So you’re drinking the non-alcohol version now?”

“Yep” He offered her the glass. She accepted it and tasted it.

“That’s good. OK then, what did you call them? This way I can have them again on occasion.”

“It tastes like this to you with the alcohol in it?” Shilo asked.

“Yes, it does.” Cheryl replied.

“Cheryl, the alcohol version is named Nightwing Champagne, and the nonalcohol version is called Shilo Champagne.”

“Easy to remember. Thanks” Cheryl and Shilo smiled at each other.

“OK then, how about some grub?” Greg asked.

Shilo stopped and stared at him, “GRUB?”

“From the old west slang for food.” Cheryl added.

“AH,” Shilo said, “Then let’s get some grub partner!”

Greg and Cheryl laughed, the group made their way to the buffet table and a finer example of food products could not be found anywhere.

Shilo saw a light blue porridge and asked the crewman, “Is that Plokka?”

“Yes Ma’am. Would you like some?”

“Yes please.” The crewman handed her a bowl half filled with the cross between creamed wheat and oatmeal, but a very pretty pastel blue. Shilo smelled it, “This plokka smells heavenly. Would you happen to have....”

Before she could complete her sentence, the crewman pointed to a table a meter away. It had a lot of ‘additives’ for most porridges. Shilo squeaked and was off to the table.

Greg was next as most of the crew parted to let the Captains cut in line.

“He placed his order, “3 eggs soft scrambled with cheese, three strips of bacon, grits.”

“Yes sir, would you like hash browns with your breakfast?”

“Really?” The crewman nodded, “Yes please!!”

He looked at Cheryl, “Make mine the same, that sounds good right now.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Greg and Cheryl moved out of the line so others could order. Food was appearing very quickly; Cheryl’s cousin is perfect for this role. They both noticed Commander Steel walk past most of the buffet line. A bottle of champagne in each hand.

In a not so quiet voice, “Not a single thing to eat!”

An ensign walked over to him and he stopped, he was quite impressed with her looks. That was obvious.

“Commander, I thought you may feel this way and we imported something for you. We have a lot left over and can give you some for your journey.” She lifted the cloche and Rich saw a wiggling and squirming bowl of Gagh!

“It’s still alive!! I love you ensign!” He said to her, finishing off the bottle in his left hand, handing her the empty and accepting the tray. He took his food to a back corner and sat.

Then he noticed a Klingon enter the room. The newcomer looked around and saw Rich motioning to him, so he made his way to the table.

The Klingon said, Nuq’ne. Roughly translated, it means What do you want? A Klingon form of hello.



Rich simply motioned to the chair opposite to his and lifted the cloche. The Klingon smiled and laughed. Together, they grabbed the live worms and stuffed them into the faces, speaking Klingon and laughing. This was the Klingon ambassador to the Federation, the Nightwing was offering him a ride to the starbase where he would receive an honor from the chancellor the following day.

There was a replicator near where they were sitting, and the Ambassador walked over to it and said something, there was too much noise in the room to hear what was said. He returned with two very Klingon looking goblets.

“Rich sniffed it, “BLOOD WINE!!”

“Yes my friend. But the finest batch of ‘18 in the universe.”

Rich tasted the drink, and looked at the ambassador, “This is good!” He tapped his communicator, “Computer, when in range transfer the replicator pattern for the blood wine to the Scorpion.”

“Affirmative. File Blood Wine 18 will be transferred when we are within range.”

The singing from that table was making others look at them, which is most likely what they wanted; none the less, they were enjoying themselves. The ensign who gave Rich the Gagh approached the table. “Commander, ambassador, I have a very large serving of pipius claw if you would like to have it.” She placed the bowl on the table.

Rich and the ambassador dove right in and grabbed some. Klingons are not big on table manners, or utensils.

“Ensign, this is excellent! Where did you find it this far from Klingon space?” The ambassador asked.

She looked sheepish, but Rich said, “Ensign, you are standing in the presence of the Klingon ambassador...”

The ambassador added, “...and a man who is of the house of Durrna. An honored brother from a house I am allied with, please continue....”

Rich nodded to him then looked to the Ensign, “so, out with it.”

The ensign stood tall, “Yes sir, I contacted a friend assigned to the Klingon home world, knowing the two of you would be here. I told him I had a very important assignment, to make those I am charged with happy. I asked him to send me Klingon delicacies, not replicated foods but honest to goodness cooked foods, placed in stasis and transported to me in Earth orbit and they needed to arrive BEFORE we departed.” She paused a moment, she glanced around the room and noticed Captain Marlan saw her. “I preserved the stasis unit in my quarters, mainly because I did not want someone to injure this food for the two of you. My goal was to make the two of you feel better, happy, a little joy through the food.”

Rich looked at Ambassador Kord and nodded. Together, they stood and walked around the table, standing at each arm of the lieutenant, who was as tall as Rich, and a few centimeters shorter than the ambassador.

“Ensign.” The ambassador began. “You have made an old Klingon happy. If it were within my power, I would make you a Klingon, but alas, I can do this.” He removed the Klingon symbol from his sash, the symbol of his house, and attached it to the ensign’s uniform on her chest, just below her right shoulder.”

Rich stood in front of the lieutenant, “I cannot tell you how much better I feel after both eating this meal you provided and enjoying life with my Klingon brother.” Rich removed a small knife from a hidden spot on his uniform. He also removed the sheath after he removed the knife.

Kord had an evil grin on his face when he saw the knife.

“Ensign, this is a prized possession. Given to me by the chancellor himself. This is the knife of a protector, and I am giving it to you for protecting our memories.” He handed her the knife. She was about to cry, you could see it on her face, but she held it.

“Thank you, Commander, Ambassador. I am honored, and I accept both of your gifts. I was performing my duty.”

“Ensign, you have no idea what you accomplished.”

In turn each of them grabbed the ensign and hugged her. First Rich, then the ambassador. A moment later she turned and walked away.

The ambassador looked at Rich, “The chancellor?” They howled again. “Where did you come across an assassins knife brother?”

Rich looked at Kord, “About here.” He touched a spot on his left shoulder. “A few centimeters lower and you would not have a dinner companion.” They laughed so loud everyone in the room looked at them. “The chancellor did give it to me, as a souvenir! That, and the scar. A glorious scar it is.”

The captains made their way to their table. “Gentlemen, I hope you are enjoying the festivities?”

The ambassador spoke, “Captain Marlan, I must commend you, your crew has seen that my brother and I are very well taken care of, thank you.”

“I saw the gift exchange. Rich, do you expect my ensign to carry a Klingon assassins’ weapon?”

Kord and Rich looked at her, then started laughing. “She knows brother.” Rich said.

“Yes, she is wise.”

“Captain, that is totally up to you. But if you do permit her to carry it, it needs to be worn out of sight.”

“Yes, out of sight, hidden.” Kord added.

Greg looked at Rich and Kord. “How many weapons are you both carrying right now, at this moment minus the knife you passed on to the ensign.”

Without thinking, “17.” Rich replied.

Kord replied, “18, the proper number.”

“I know, I feel naked with only 17.”

Greg shook his head as did Cheryl. “Carry on.”

The captains walked off into the crowd.

Cheryl touched her communicator, “Marlan to navigator.”

“Go ahead Captain.”

“ETA?”

“We passed hail range a few minutes ago and are on slow approach as they clear traffic. Estimating ten minutes and forty seconds to reach parking orbit.”

“Excellent. Carry on.” She looked at Greg, “Ten minutes we will be close enough to beam you to your ship.”

“Excellent!!”

He walked to the ensign and whispered something in her ear. She turned and raised a hand; a team of waiters came from the kitchen carrying a small amount of Romulan ale in glasses and handing it out to everyone. The same ensign approached Rich and Kord and handed them a glass, a Klingon glass, they both sniffed and smiled. Very good blood wine. Not replicated. She left the bottle at their table.

Greg jumped onto a table, “Can I have everyone’s attention a moment?” he waited a few seconds and it got quiet. “To Captain Cheryl Marlan and the crew of the Nightwing, to our honored guest from the Klingon Empire, Ambassador Kord. May we all live our lives as our own master; may we all perform our duties with dignity; when the time comes, may we all die with honor.”

Kord spoke, “Captain, may I add to that toast?”

“By all means Kord, please.” Greg said.

“There is a Klingon saying, batlh Daqawlu’taH. Translated, it means...”

Springing to his feet, “Kord, may I?”

“By all means brother.”

Rich stood tall, “Translated, it means, **YOU WILL BE REMEMBERED WITH HONOR.** Think a moment on the magnificent culture of the Klingon race, it is only then when you understand the depth of that phrase. To be always remembered.”

Rich drank the shot and threw the glass against a blank wall, Kord did the same. Everyone in the room was flabbergasted until the Captains downed their shots and smashed the glasses against the wall. The remainder of the crew approached the wall and did the same. The final glasses were the Rec officer, Cheryl's cousin, and the wait staff. The cheers were long and loud. After which, the room emptied. Kord and Rich drank the remainder of the bottle, from the bottle. Taking turns until it was empty. Kord had the last of it and shashed it against the wall also.

The captains entered the turbolift together, "Bridge." Said Greg. "I will seriously miss you and your crew. Maybe not the accommodations, but certainly you. May you live and learn in peace."

"I understand. May the wind be at your back." As she said it, the doors opened and reality set in.

"Report." Cheryl said.

"We were just given a parking orbit. Geosync to the Scorpion at 5000 meters."

"Open a channel." She waited a moment, "This is Captain Cheryl Marlan aboard the USS Nightwing. We received the parking orbit data, thank you. We have some passengers who are anxious to get to your latest project."

"Nightwing, Morena shipyard. You are cleared to park and transport your passengers directly to the Scorpion transporter room at your convenience."

"Thank you, understood, Nightwing out."

Greg walked over to the comm lieutenant, "Open a channel to the Scorpion."

The lieutenant nodded, "This is Captain Gregory T. Binotti to the USS Scorpion."

"Captain, this is Lieutenant JG Kaleel."

“Lieutenant, we will be transporting over in a few minutes. Prepare the ship. Have all department heads in the briefing room in 45 minutes.”

“Yes sir, and welcome.” There was a pause. “Scorpion out.”

Turning to Captain Marlan, “Will you and your senior staff join me on the Scorpion?”

“We would be honored.” Cheryl said, bowing ever so slightly.

Cheryl Marlan strolled toward the turbolift and as she walked, “Mr. Norman, you have the bridge. Don’t break anything but use your best judgement.” Activating her communicator, “Marlan to transporter room. Prepare to earn your pay.”

“Yes Captain, we’re ready.” Said a female voice.

Greg tapped his communicator, “Binotti to all crew. Meet in the transporter room in ten minutes and have your bag with you. We’re headed to our new home.”

Greg looked at the wall, Cheryl noticed he had the look of impending doom on his face, she has seen it before. He’ll be fine tomorrow. As they entered the main transporter room, his face changed. He was happy, smiling, and jovial.

“Coordinates laid in sir, but your crew has a request. That you transport over alone, first time and all sir.” Johnston said.

“They did, huh. Well, since from now on I’m going to have a thorn in each rib, they may as well join me on this too; Rich, Shilo, join me please.”

They did, and Shilo looked at Rich. “Commander Steel, do you feel like a thorn?”

“No Commander Ariel, I don’t. Do you?”

“No, I don’t.”

Greg looked at Johnston, “Johnston, get me the hell out of here, fast!”

“Yes Captain, energizing!” And they were gone.

“Transport complete.”

“Captain Marlan would you please be the next to transport over?”

“I'm not going over there alone, you 2 are coming with me.”

Her first and second officer join her on the transporter pad.

“Transport when ready Johnston.”

Captain Marlan, her first and second officer left the ship and headed for the Scorpion. “Say hello from the rest of us Captain.”

That was from Victoria Calloway, Transporter Chief. Her and Johnston have been working together constantly for the past few weeks. She is tall, deep blue eyes and very red hair; her and Johnson had not minded everyone else noticing the two of them.

The remainder of the crew transported over to the Scorpion. Johnson, of course, was the last to transport. He was the final piece of the puzzle. The new adventure is about to begin.

He stepped on the transporter padd and Vicki approached him and gave him a very impressive kiss, and a long and heart felt hug.

“You better come back.” She said to him. They were alone in the transporter room.

“I plan to, you better wait.” He said to her.

“I plan to...” as she said it, she activated the transporter and he vanished. Her face changed, she missed him already.

## CHAPTER 1-5

“Welcome Aboard the USS Scorpion Captain. I would like to turn over command to you as of right now.” This came from the communications officer.

“You must be lieutenant Khaleel, my communications second, very well, COMPUTER, let the record show that as of this date I am assuming command of the USS Scorpion from lieutenant junior grade Khaleel; also note that lieutenant Khaleel did a fine job while in temporary command according to the daily reports I've been receiving. My commendation is to be placed into his service record.” The computer beeped.

With that said Captain Marlan was appearing in the chamber. “Captain Cheryl Marlan allow me to introduce you to one of my communications officers, lieutenant junior grade Khaleel, and this is my science officer Commander Mark Skull.” Commander Skull had been in the background, a place he rather enjoyed.

Several more waves of crew began to arrive, then the Captain knew everyone was on the Scorpion, because TE1 Johnston appeared, “Mr. Johnston, I do believe your expertise is needed in engineering ASAP.”

Johnson smiled, it's like the smile that would come from a tribble rolling in quadrotriticale.

“Captain Marlan, do you think you and yours could join me on the bridge?”

“He was referring to the first and second officers of the Nightwing and the Scorpion.

“Are you kidding?” Cheryl replied, “You cannot keep us away.” The group entered the turbolift.

“Bridge.” Greg said. The turbolift did not move, however a voice emanated from seemingly everywhere.

“Standby for voiceprint match. Identify.”



Greg looked at Cheryl who had a grin from ear to ear. She knew what was happening, he saw it in her face. “Captain Gregory T Binotti, commanding officer of the USS Scorpion.”

A second passed, “Matched. Authorized access to all areas, complete access all security levels on this vessel. Identify others.”

Greg spoke, “Commander Ariel and Commander Steele of the USS Scorpion.”

“Identity voiceprint match in progress, please state names.”

Shiloh looked at Binotti, “Commander Shiloh Ariel, First Officer, USS Scorpion.”

“Matched authorize access to all areas, security level 20.”

Rich looked at Greg, “Commander Richard Steel, Second Officer, Chief of Operations.” Replied rich in his coldest, most Klingon voice he could muster.

“Match. Authorize access to all areas, security level 19. Captain please identify remaining 3 occupants before transport to bridge commences.

Greg looked at Cheryl, “Captain Cheryl Marlan, Commander Daan and Commander Regina, they are from the USS Nightwing and my guests.”

“Stand by while confirmation is made. State names for verification. Each in turn stated their name.

“The Security system appears to work well, perhaps it works a bit too well Greg.” said Rich.

“Identity verified with main computer, USS Nightwing, NCC-4025. Authorized limited access, unescorted, is this sufficient?”

“Negative. Authorize access equal to that of USS Nightwing NCC-4025.”

“Access levels determined, transferred to main computer from main computer of USS Nightwing, NCC-4025. Welcome aboard.”

With that out of the way the turbolift began to move, finally. “Proceedings to the bridge as per your request captain.” The computer said.

“Thank you.” A snicker from Cheryl and she stated, “That was quick. It took us 15 minutes to convince the computer we were who we said we were. At least the modifications we requested were added.” Cheryl said. “We spent quite a bit longer waiting for the computer to believe us, in the turbolift, and most of that time with the environmental control shut off. They called it a security feature. We got quite warm and stuffy in that lift. In unison the other 2 members of the Nightwing crew all nodded their compliance.

“Bridge arrival.” Announced the computer.

“That can get annoying.” Greg said.

“Tell the computer to shut it off, I did. It also announces your arrival on the bridge, harder for catching your first or second officer napping in THE CHAIR!” She laughed.

The turbolift doors opened and there was a man standing there as they exited. “Captain, I am Lieutenant James Potthast, your assistant chief engineer. May I show you around the bridge?”

“Thank you, proceed.” The bridge looked similar to the Nightwing, but there were a few differences and a tour would be good.

As far as the captain of the USS Scorpion was concerned, this was the most magnificent, wonderful bridge ever conceived.

The bridge of the Nightwing was more or less a square and the space filled as efficiently as possible. But this bridge, his bridge, was more of a circle. The view screen was the largest in the fleet, according to their tour guide, and the clearest to date. The turbolift they arrived on was on the port side of the screen, making it easy for any bridge station to monitor those entering the bridge.

Three meters away from the screen are the ops and nav stations. 3 meters behind them is the captain’s chair. On either side of the captain’s chair, elevated slightly, is the area for the first officer and the second officer. In the event of an emergency, their consoles

can be reconfigured in an instant to mimic the controls of any bridge station.

The engineering console, behind the first officer and against the back wall, could take over all engineering functions at the press of a toggle. It cannot be commanded from engineering, only from this console for security. Next to engineering was weapons, which had responsibility for shields, phaser, torpedoes, and the nav shields.

Between engineering and weapons was the station for sensors, internal and external. The last station they saw, environment control, was on the side wall, more or less, near the second officer.

All headrests on the bridge contained speakers and the computer had the ability to select one, or all, of the speakers to make announcements. This also permitted one station to communicate to another station in a more private, or quieter, environment.

The consoles on the bridge, hell most of the ship, were dynamic and flat touch panel, making them truly adaptable. Different configurations could be created for each crewmember assigned, and their favorite options used in place of the standard displays.

The last station contained a very small console, four actually, and a keypad. This is the biometric station. When the mission or event calls for it, the chief medical officer can use this console. It is also where the new communicators monitoring system maintain a constant vigil on the health of the crew, when they are wearing their communicator. Providing safety and security for all crewmembers in all areas of the ship.

“Very informative Mr. Potthast. Captain Marlan, I shall leave you to wander aimlessly as I have to meet up with his boss.” He thumbed to their tour guide. “Any idea where he is?”

“Uh Captain, all you need to do is use your tap-n-talk and ask the computer.”

“My What?” Binotti replied.

“Sorry sir, your personal communicator.” He paused a moment and touched his, “Computer, where is Commander Martinez?”

“Commander Martinez is located in turbolift 874.”

“Destination?”

“Deck three section three. He is on his way to his quarters.”

“Thank you.” Greg said reflexively.

“Tap-N-Talk huh.” Greg said.

“Well Greg, describes the comm to a tee!” Cheryl smiled, “I like it, think I’ll steal it. Maybe TNT for short.”

“Good for you, finding reasons to let me know how my ship and crew is the best in the fleet.” Cheryl shook her head and Rich almost laughed out loud. “Commander Steel, please see our guests make it to the conference room in ten minutes. Actually, I am pretty certain they could lead you there better than you could lead them. Shilo, you’re with me, see you in ten.”

He and Shilo Ariel headed for the turbolift, “Commander Martinez’s quarters.”

“Computer halt turbolift.” Shilo said.

Greg looked at Shilo and she had the most interesting look on her face. She wanted to say something but not certain she should.

“Spit it out Shilo, what is it you needed to say one on one?”

She took a breath, let it out, “Captain. I need to add something to our conversation regarding duty from a few days ago. You need to know if it comes to you or the ship and crew, I choose the ship and crew. If the mission is in jeopardy, I will do everything I can to get it back on track.” She looked at him and he got the message. “If you disagree with something I am doing, speak to me in private about it. Respect from the crew is something which is hard to get back once you lose it.”

Greg smiled slightly, “Shilo, I had this same conversation with my captain when I started as a first officer, and as a captain I have had this conversation in the past. I will respect your ideas and your opinions and know if I countermand an order from you, I have a damn good reason. Later, if the current situation is tense, I will tell you what those reasons are and if necessary, I shall do it in public. You

have the most common sense and intelligence of anyone I ever met, and I cannot ever foresee you breaking this character trait and giving an order so out of bounds I need to make a public statement. Your standing orders are, and always have been, to guard the ship, its crew, the mission and the captain. Ensure I have all information necessary to make an informed decision. If you see me making an ass out of myself, let me know in private. If I give an order you know would injure the ship or crew, you have the right to step in and correct it, or at minimum ask me about it.”

They looked at each other for a few moments, “Aye, Aye, Captain. Understood.”

Shilo spoke to the ceiling, “Computer, resume turbolift.”

The lift sped off and the doors opened a moment later to an empty corridor. They exited, “OK, so where are Commander Martinez’s quarters?” Greg said as a rhetorical question, knowing Shilo had as much information as he did.

“Commander Martinez’s quarters are located 40 meters to your left, A340.” The computer answered his rhetorical question.

“I may end up liking this computer.” Greg said.

“As do I.” Replied Shilo.

They walked a bit and found cabin A340. The sign on the wall above the door panel said Commander Juan Martinez, Chief Engineer. Greg pressed the door button.

They heard a voice in the room, “ENTER” and the door slid open.

“Juan!”

“GREGGY!”

“Is my ship ready?”

“Most people would say hello, or how are you, but not you. Bout time you showed up. I thought I would have to fly this thing myself.”

“Where, into a nova?”

“Funny man, IF necessary!”

They both paused a moment, “How are you my friend?” Greg asked.

“I’m well. I need a few weeks sleep, this new ship is killing me. The learning curve on the new dilithium matrix alone made my head spin. Once we’re underway I can catch up on my sleep. By the way, that new guy, Johnston, oh my god I love him. I spent a week in a training class learning the new engine. He read the book in an evening on the way here and knows as much as I do. Maybe more, he has better retention. When can I give him a promotion? Did I say I like this kid?”

“I just promoted him to TE1, give him a few months. Let him get used to that level of responsibility first. The kid has been trapped in training command all his career. When he got bored, he learned something he didn’t know.”

“In training command, how did he learn all about warp mechanics, dilithium reactions, weapons. Not to mention the little miracle he pulled off before he even said hello.”

“He learned it all on his own, reading, maybe experimenting, who knows? What little miracle?”

“He walks into the engine room to report to me and as he walked up, he simply flipped a toggle on a wall panel. Sounds harmless, right. Well, if we would have started the flow it would have been bad. Not explode bad, but a month to make repairs bad. He saw this as he entered the room, like he had the photo of where each switch should be on a photo in his head. There was a dozen of us in the room for the past couple days, none of us noticed it. If he did not flip it back to the neutral position, when the matter and antimatter flowed into the chamber, let’s just say things would have gotten hot. And with the safeties off, it would not have been pretty.”

Shilo chimed in, “NO SAFETIES! Are you kidding? Get them online at once.”

Juan looked at Greg, “This must be the First Officer.”

Greg made the introduction, “Commander Shilo Ariel meet Commander Juan Martinez.”

“She’s right Juan. Get the safety’s online ASAP.” He paused and grinned. “All of them.”

Juan nodded to his friend and commander, reached to a table and picked up his comm, tapping it. “Martinez to Johnston.”

“Yes sir.” He replied.

“Son, welcome aboard but you have your own personal mission. How much time will you need to get all the safety’s online.”

There was a pause. “Primaries....maybe 4 hours. Secondaries, another 5. If I have a couple working with me, we could get it done in half the time?”

“Understood. You currently outrank Marco and Belinda. Grab them. They know the safety system but need both education and experience. Give it to them. Get it done in 5 hours and I owe you a steak at the next starbase.”

“Yes sir, we’ll get right on it. By the way Commander, I like my steak medium-rare with a mushroom gravy.” He paused a heartbeat. “Johnston out.”

Juan shook his head and smiled, “I still like the kid.”

Shilo asked, “What is ASAP?”

Juan replied, “An old Earth military term, it stands for As Soon As Possible.”

“Thank you, commander.” Shilo said.

“Anything else I need to know?” Greg asked.

“Well, one, I need a shower and a clean uniform; and two, the photon targeting system is FUBAR. I could use a weapons technician for a couple days and a book to have Johnston read.”

Shilo said, “FUBAR?” Juan and Greg ignored the comment. That was one explanation she would need to look up on her own.

“Don’t over tax the boy, he’ll implode. I’ll see if the Nightwing can spare a tech for a few days, it will give Commander

Steel a chance to play with the Klingon she is transporting.” Greg smiled, “By the way, I have a couple of very new and fresh ensigns due to arrive soon, you’ll like them. They like to make things explode!”

Juan grinned. “Good. Real weapons techs.”

“Captain, I’ll head to the briefing room. See you when you get there.” She left the quarters.

“Glad she left. Here’s something we never talk about around her. At training command, it’s rumored Johnston ran the best still on the planet. Top quality stuff and he never over charged. He did it for fun, just recouped what he spent. Talk to him about it and get him to start one on the ship. Some out of the way place. Only me, you, Rich and him will know that I know. To the rest of the crew, you’re all getting one over on the old man. Shilo is not to know about this in the least. I get the first taste of each batch and the chief medical officer is to evaluate each batch for quality and safety, for use as a topical disinfectant or something. That’s BEFORE anyone has a taste. So, I guess that would make it the 5 of us who know.”

“Nice.”

“Have the first batch ready after we leave spacedock. Let’s see how good Johnston really is....”

“Are you nuts?”

“A little, why? There has been a change in our orders.”

“Change?”

“I’ll explain at the briefing in 4 minutes. See you there.”

“OK, need a fast shower and clean threads. See you in 5.”

“OK, I’ll have everyone in the room wait for you.”

“You’re the best.” He left the room to take a fast shower, and Greg walked out the door and into a nearby turbolift.

He instructed the computer to take him to the conference room, and when the doors opened, he stepped into the conference



room. He thought about it, and the only time you need to come to this room is a briefing, so efficient.

Greg walked over to Commanders Steel and Ariel. “I need the two of you to circulate and watch. Watch for any hiccup, look, emotion. I need to know who the problem children are fast. When I spring the new orders on them, and the new timeline, those who complain are on a list.”

“Good idea Greg, I’ll stand over there.” Rich pointed to the front corner of the room, on the port side.

Shilo motioned to the other front corner. They all walked in their assigned direction, and Captain Binotti walked to the front of the room. As he did, the small talk and conversation quieted.

“For those who need me to introduce myself, I am Captain Gregory T. Binotti. The T stands for Tomasso. This briefing is classified, speak of it nowhere outside of this room.”

Juan walked in, “Commander Martinez, welcome. How are my engines?” He looked at Juan who stared back at him. “Since you are already standing, I think you should go first.”

“Why thank you Captain. In 12 hours, we should be ready to start the engines and remove external power. All safety systems will be fully functional in 4 hours, we need to do a bit more math, but I believe in 2 and a half days we can take it on a short flight to validate the mix. Other than that, this is a really nice ship. Still a light issue with the transporter, it drops off once in a while; not bad enough to lose anyone, but enough to scare the operator.”

Cheryl raised her hand, Greg nodded to her. “I am familiar with the transporter drop off. We had the same issue. There is a plasma conduit that runs incorrectly near the buffer and it causes an intermittent interference in the reintegration sequence. Cage it and you will have no more issues.”

“I’ll look at that, thanks Captain.” Juan said.

Greg took over the conversation, “While we were on our way here, I received a communique from Admiral Maddox, let me read it

to you. DEPART AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER ARRIVAL. NO DELAYS AUTHORIZED. And it is signed, CEO.”

“Excuse me sir, CEO?” A lieutenant asked.

“That tells me this is an authentic message from the Admiral. It is an old Earth term, meaning Chief Executive Officer, like in a major corporation. I was searching for specific information on the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically the rise and fall of the corporation. She needed to find out who the mad man was taking all the research materials. She found me, and assisted me in locating a book named C.E.O. Ever since then, it’s been our little joke. Now it’s yours also.”

“We each read a copy of the book that day, sitting in the fleet library. Afterwards, she and I discussed the book and what we thought of it. Enough about that, let’s get on with reports, Communications?”

“Captain, we are in relatively good position. We shall be at 100% in the next 48 hours. All channels are operational. The Tap-n-Talk system....sorry sir, the personal communications device are operating properly. The computer is tracking everyone in the ship, even our distinguished guests.”

“J’Kael, Tap-n-talk is fine, shorter and more descriptive actually.” Greg looked at Cheryl. “Captain Marlan, can I rent a few techs from you for a couple days?”

“Captain Binotti, it would be my pleasure to rent you a few of our techs.” She pointed to her communicator. Since the briefing was classified, all communicators were deactivated when the briefing started.

“Computer, reactivate Captain Marlan’s communicator.”

A chirp was heard from her communicator pin, she tapped it. “Marlan to Nightwing.”

“T’Mar here captain. How may I assist you?”

“Send all available comm system techs to the Scorpion. We’re gonna find out if we can put humpty dumpty back together again in record time.”

“Yes Captain. We have 11 on 3<sup>rd</sup> shift, they should be awake and ready in an hour.”

“Excellent, send them over after they have breakfast. Tell them to bring anything they think they may need.”

“Yes Captain.”

“OH, something else. Do we have any available engineering staff?” She looked at Juan and winked.

“Yes Captain, currently there are 9 who just came off shift and 6 waking up in a bit.”

“Send over the 9, when the 6 have breakfast send them too. Marlan out.”

Cheryl looked at Greg, “Next?”

“Computer, seal the room. This briefing is classified.”

“Room Sealed.” Said the computer.

Commander Regis stood and spoke up, “Captain. I have sat by while you invited another crew aboard, but this is too far. This mission is classified higher than just about any other in Starfleet. I believe the Nightwing crew should be excused from this briefing, as should all of lieutenant rank and below.”

“Actually Rowan, my personal feeling is they need to be here. They are cleared for the security level and the access. We can use the help to be ready in three days. So, they stay.” Glenn sat silent, she understood his rationale.

Greg gathered himself, “OK, you have rumored about it, you guessed. So, here it is. We are to travel to Romulan space, plant a spy transmitter in a main computer, and in the main hall of the senate. Snoop a bit, come home alive.”

## CHAPTER 1-6

Greg looked around. Most of those in the room had a shocked look on their faces, but a few sat quietly. Like no one had ever heard of taking a mission to far before. Rowan was still looking at her commanding officer, shocked at the fact Glenn Larrimore agrees with anyone, let alone Captain Binotti on letting non-crewmembers hear classified information.

Larrimore nodded to Greg, who continued. “Yes, we are heading to a planet we have designated as R1. We will be there, in orbit and hidden, for 4 or 5 months. This is for the first and second officer mostly, but Major Lanning, please listen carefully.” He turned to the entire room, but eye to eye with his lead helm officer. “If myself, Commander Ariel, Commander Steel, or Major Lanning are not available, and you know for a fact we have been discovered and are in danger, get the ship the hell out of Romulan space and back to the Federation, maximum warp.” He turned to the Major. “Major Lanning, aside from training and driving your Marines crazy, you really don’t have all that many duties on this cruise until we get to the destination, so I would like for you to take a rotation as OIC every third watch for a while, and once you feel you are OK we can have a 4-watch command structure.” He rubbed his chin, “Shilo, would 4-six hour shifts improve performance?”

She smiled at him. “Performance, possibly; morale, definitely. As for the crew, not sure they would appreciate it.” She stood and turned to the crew. “Well, yes or no?”

The entire room yelled YES in unison.

Rich stood, “I think I heard a NO in there somewhere.”

He was ignored.

Greg returned his gaze to Larry. Who looked at him like he had a third eye. “Major, imagine your resume when you get back to the fleet after this mission and they look in your record and find that you have commanded a Starship on a classified mission. Imagine how impressed they would be if thanks to your leadership we all

lived. The glorious side of this, as a Klingon would say, is that because the mission is classified there will not be any inkling as to the quantity of time you spent in command.”

Lanning looked at him and smiled, then nodded. “Captain, I suppose there will be command training I will need to take for this honor?”

“Yes, Commanders Ariel and Steel will be instructing you. When they feel you are ready, you will take a shift solo. Department heads, please ask your teams to be nice to the new guy.”

The room echoed with quiet laughter and Lanning grinned and smiled at Greg, and lightly shook his fist at him in an ‘I’ll get even’ type of gesture.

“The computer will also be outfitted with a bit more memory to hold the data to be transmitted up while we’re there.”

An ensign held up he hand, “Yes ensign.” Greg said.

“Captain, what data are we looking to get?” She asked.

“All of it. For the time we are there any and all data passing through the relay will be copied to our storage and brought home with us. During that time, actually from the moment we leave space dock until we return, we will be in radio silence. Starfleet will send us our correspondence, but we will not acknowledge them.”

“I have calculated the time needed to get there from here. Two thousand eight hundred fifty-four hours and sixteen minutes. I have had a lot of time to think about this.”

The ensign raised he hand again, Greg nodded to her, “Captain, how do we know where to go?”

“We don’t, but I do.” He tapped his communicator which activated for him. “Ensign Darryl, please report to the briefing room, and bring the necklace.”

“Aye Captain, be there in two.” He said.

A minute later the computer spoke, “Ensign Darryl is requesting entrance to this room.”

“Admit him and reseal the room.” Binotti said.

Darryl entered and froze. The room was pretty full, and he was the center of attention. He regained his composure after a few seconds and walked up to his CO.

“Ensign Darryl reporting as ordered sir.” Darryl said.

Steel, sitting in the front of the room and off to the side said just loud enough for all to hear, “So formal.”

Greg turned to him and gave him the look. Steel turned to the closest person to him and said something quietly. The marine he sat next to chuckled, a couple times.

Binotti turned back to the Ensign, and he handed his commanding officer the necklace, apparently a little reluctantly. “Ensign?” Greg said.

“Sir, this has been in my family for a long time, I would hate to lose it.” He placed the necklace in Greg’s hand.

Greg said to him, “Take a seat please.” He sat next to Shilo.

“Computer, scan the object in my hand, 3-dimensional, highest resolution.”

A scan beam appeared from the ceiling and Greg rotated and flipped the necklace over and over in his hand until the beam stopped.

The image appeared on the display behind him and pretty much everyone was impressed. This was the largest screen most of them had ever seen. It was easy enough to see, but Greg wanted something more.

“Display the image holographically.” The necklace appeared in front of him. “Show the front and enlarge 40%.” The computer did just that and the image of the necklace grew.

“Rowan, enough hiding in the shadows. I am told you are intelligent, join me up here please.”

Her and Glenn were standing in the back of the room, in a dark corner, nearly invisible. A moment later she made her way to the Captain.

“Take a look at the image, open your mind and consider all possibilities and say what comes to your mind.”

“Well Captain, I think your nuts, but I like you.” She paused, “Oh, about the necklace, right?”

Greg shook his head and said, “OK, I asked for that. Continue.”

Rowan Regis stared at the image with a blank stare for a minute or so, walked around it, asked the computer to flip and rotate it. Suddenly, she jumped. “A star chart.” Not a question, a statement.

“Good, Glenn was right about you. This is a star chart of the area of space where Romulus is located, and this point,” he touched a slightly off-color dot near the right center, “is our destination. No, it is not Romulus as in the planetary capital of the Romulan Star Empire, this planet we will call Romulas. A small insignificant planet a few lightyears away from their capital, and the location where they originally landed when they broke from the Vulcans. It also happens to be culturally and emotionally linked to them, but they never speak of it to off-worlders.”

He paused. Walking to Darryl and handing him back his family treasure.

“I was curious. Why do they not mention this place in any conversation? I think it is considered to be semi-classified.” He looked at his first officer.

“Shilo.” She stood and walked to the front of the room and took over the briefing.

“We asked the Klingon empire to send a cloaked ship to that location and take a detailed scan of the planet. They remained cloaked and in orbit for 12 hours but as they departed, unfortunately at high warp, they were spotted. The ship was destroyed by automated defenses orbiting not only the planet but in surrounding space. So, impulse is fine, but it will see and blow you out of the sky at warp. Although the ship was destroyed, it survived just barely long enough to send a data squirt to the council, who sent it to the Federation. Specifically, through Commander Steel, who hand

carried it to us from the Klingon empire in the guise of his duty transfer. We sent him to the Klingon homeworld for training, he wanted it anyway, and it made for a great cover story. The Federation News Service liked the idea and followed him on his pilgrimage through the fun he had in the Klingon Empire, including when he received the sash and became a member of the House of Durnna.”

Glenn and Rowan applauded from the back of the room.

“Well done captain.” Glenn said.

“And what interesting things did you find?” Rowan asked.

Greg contemplated that a moment, “We learned, from the detailed scans of the planet, that it is pretty arid and sparsely populated. Mean temperature during the day varies from 25C to 60C, less than 10cm of rain, and not much more. We will arrive when the average temp is 30C and leave before the average temp hits 40C.”

“Spring and summer survival training in the outback.” Steel said.

“Exactly. Now, as for locations, there are 4 main objectives. One, plant the transceiver in the main communication complex located in the heart of the largest city; the complex is located 100 meters underground, in the main communications room of the command center. It is accessible only by a single transporter located in the security office on the surface. Two, plant covert and well-hidden listening devices in the main hall of the conference room where classified discussions hopefully take place. Three, download as much data from their archive as possible including a copy of every single piece of data that flows through the relay while we are in orbit, and anything and everything we can find. And lastly four, get away without loss of life and not being detected.”

“Rich, let’s see how well you remember your astrogation and navigation from the academy. Plot a course to this location using as much of the natural objects on the route as cover for us. We can determine the best possible course and lay it in when we depart.”

“Yes sir. Been a while, I may need some guidance.”



“I’m sure there are a few fresh Ensign’s that can assist your memory Commander.” Shilo said with a smile.

Rich played into the joke, “Good. I’ll need a whole flock of Ensigns.”

Greg regained the room, “Ladies and gentlemen, I need a status report from each department. But not from the department head, from their second.”

All the department heads grinned at the twist, and all the seconds cringed.

Juan raised his hand. “Captain, I think myself and Commander Steel would like to launch a series of class 11 probes. It should give us a heads-up before we get there.”

“Good idea. How fast is the probe?”

“Warp 7, maybe a little more.”

“Sir,” Lt. Potthast said. Greg looked at him and nodded. “I believe I can assist in increasing the speed of the probes. Also, I learned a trick to hide the warp signature as background noise. Should conceal it for quite a while.”

Shilo spoke, “Also, make certain that if a tractor beam or a transporter is used on the probe it detonates completely. Maybe a phaser relay and emitter internal set to full. That should delete it to atoms.”

“Good thought. Do that also.” Greg smiled and nodded to Shilo.

“Medical.” Greg said.

Commander Piper cleared her throat. “Well, since I’m the only one here I guess I need to talk. Medical is pretty much ready but we could use a few tinkerers, I mean engineers, to finish installing some things.”

Cheryl spoke, “Captain, if I may?” Greg nodded to her. “I can have a few of my tinkerers assist you commander.”

“Wonderful, thank you. That was all I had Captain.” She thought again and in mid-sitting down stood up again. “One more thing. I would like to create a back stock of blood for the many species we have on this ship. If the entire crew could drop in when they have the chance, I can take a pint here and there and place the blood in stasis. Much better to use the real thing in an emergency than replicated.”

“Good idea, Commander, see to it. Doctor, I will be there in the morning to make my donation.”

Major Lanning stood, “Marines, you heard the lady.”

In unison, the Marines all yelled, “YES SIR!”

“Excellent. Now on to something a little bit fun, and a little bit painful. At least for some of you.”

He looked around at the faces. “Marines, I have a special assignment, volunteer only.” Every single one of them stood. “The person I choose needs to be seasoned and an expert in weapons and tactics.” Most sat. “With the ability to resist interrogation for a short time.” A few more sat leaving very few. “This person must also not look like someone who is a spy in any form, but rather an old trader.”

One person was left standing, the marines just him Sarge.

“And you are?” Greg said.

“Sir, most everyone just calls me Sarge. I suppose you can too.” He said.

“OK Sarge, there is one more requirement for this mission. It needs to be completely voluntary, AND, before you volunteer, you need to know the entire mission.” Greg paused. Lanning already knew the mission and told Greg that Sarge would volunteer. “Sarge. This is a vital mission, but fraught with extreme danger, according to the computer there is an 89% chance you will not make it back.”

“Ok, so far.” Sarge said. “I love playing the odds. Go head sir, please continue.”

“We will deposit you outside the city and you will walk into town. You will not be altered, but then again you will not appear to

be Starfleet. Anything you carry on you will look like you built it or acquired it, and your ship will be a smoldering hole in the ground, but you beamed out at the last second.”

“OK, what’s my mission?”

“To plant a transmitter in the Romulan secure net, copy their database, and get back to the ship alive.”

Sarge thought for a minute, “Uh sir, if I do volunteer for this, and succeed in the mission as you outlined, can I take a vacation?”

“Sarge, if you succeed, the Scorpion will drop you off for a week on Risa and Major Lanning will carry your bags.”

“Then Captain, I would like to volunteer for the absolute craziest mission I ever heard of, sir! If for no other reason than to see my CO as a bell hop.” The room roared.

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During the next 37 hours repairs were made, upgrades completed, and the ship began to come to life. Greg looked at the engineering board as he entered the bridge and sat in his chair. As he looked at the panel, red lights changed from red to yellow to green. The ship repairs were happening at the speed of light.

Commander Richard Steel found his counterpart on the Nightwing, who was also the Chief of Ops. Commander Victoria Rex had also spent a considerable amount of time living both among Klingons, and on the Klingon home world. She loved every minute of it, and her and Rich would practice their Klingon when they could.

Once they arrived at the station, they transferred their passenger, the ambassador, but he did not depart right away. He and Rich would share blood wine and sing in the small pub on the station. Victoria heard the singing and joined in, and to Rich’s surprise he thought he found the only female with whom he could ever spend the remainder of his life. He did not mention it to her, ever, but when he and the ambassador were alone, the ambassador confronted him with the possibility.

Rich and Victoria spend 22 hours a day on duty while repairs were being made, side by side. The other 2 hours they used to shower and eat. And yes, to drink blood wine and sing.

Rich and Victoria were on the bridge when Cheryl and Greg stepped off the turbolift. “Report!” The two of them said in unison to see who got the most flustered.

Rich spoke, “Captain’s.....Status is 91% with the weapons and shield, and cloak at 98%.”

Victoria took over as if it was rehearsed, “Engineering is at 87% with all ships systems at 100%.

Rich again, “All bridge stations are at 100% and the special marine attack craft are ready to deploy at your command.”

Now back to Victoria, “Lastly, life support, medical, recreation, and the cargo areas are all fully operational.”

They finished their report and stood there silently staring at their captain’s. “Is there anything to hinder us getting underway and completing the repairs in transit.”

In unison, “Nothing.”

“Good. Well Greg, I guess this is where I head home to my boat.” Cheryl said to Greg.

“Captain, would you like to say a word to the Nightwing crew before they depart?” Rich asked.

“No, Cheryl, get back to your boat and I will address your crew shortly thereafter.”

“You got it.” She tapped her communicator, “Marlan to Nightwing, beam me and Commander Rex back and start bringing our crew home. The Scorpion is done and on their own.”

“Yes Captain.”

Greg and Cheryl hugged, “Time for you to go have fun. Do me a favor, don’t die.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Greg replied.

Victoria and Rich hugged, “V, when I get back, there is something I will ask you.”

Victoria replied, “R, you better get back because I believe I know both the question, and the answer.” They kissed, and Victoria took a few steps and stood next to her Captain. She tapped her communicator, “Nightwing, energize.” And the two women vanished.

“Alright Rich, you have 12 hours till we depart. Get everything above 95% and I will be happy.”

“OK Greg, I will see what I can do. Now, Captain Dumpty, let me get to work and see about putting this ship back together again.”

“Alright Commander Kingsmen. I will see you in 12 hours, no earlier.”

Greg looked into the air. “Computer, set a timer for 12 hours and notify me and Commander Steel when the time runs out.”

“Timer set.” The computer stated.

“Computer, where is Commander Martinez?”

“Commander Martinez is in the engineering control room; shall I contact him for you?”

“No, take me to him.” He started walking to the open turbolift.

“Rich, when did the computer start anticipating your next request?”

“This morning. We found a new program in the system called THINK-AHEAD, and it does just that, thinks to your next order or request. When you asked for the location of Juan, it most likely already had the connection completed to him. It just waited for you to say yes and you would have been connected.”

“How did you learn all this so quickly?”

“I asked the computer.” Rich smiled.

Tapping his communicator, “Binotti to Martinez, stay where you are, I will meet you there in a couple minutes.”

“OK, see you when you get here.” Juan replied back.

Turning away from Rich, Binotti entered the turbolift, “Take me to Commander Martinez.” And the turbolift started moving.

As the doors opened, Greg saw Juan standing there. “How did you know I would emerge from this lift?”

“Simple Gregg, I asked the computer.” He smiled. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“On a scale of one to one hundred, where’s engineering?”

“ninety-nine point four. I checked when we talked a couple minutes ago. Two things need to be completed first; the first is the access tubes to the marine cutters need a little modifying, they are intermittent and if one were to pull away from the ship, I cannot guarantee an air tight seal. Kinda important. The second thing is completion of the holodeck. A couple minor tweeks and the connection of the localizing transporter. I say seven hours and we will be perfect. Or at least perfect enough to slowly climb to high warp as a test.”

“How is Johnston?”

“Can I promote him? I need an engineering officer.”

“Slow down speedy, he was just promoted to TE1, give him time to get used to it.”

“OK, how about CPO? I need another Chief Petty Officer in engineering, I am one short.”

“We’ll talk about it a month after we shove off. If he is still the nineteenth wonder of the universe.....we’ll see.”

Juan was about to speak but closed his mouth again. Greg saw it and said, “How is the still? Is it operational?”

“Yes it is!”

“Quality OK?”

“Best I have ever tasted. The doc said it would make the best antiseptic she ever saw. Then she tasted it. Went to the replicator and got some kind of juice and mix some in. Her smile said it all.”

“Good. Send Johnston to my cabin with a good sample later this evening.”

“No problem. He could be an officer you know.”

“Who? Johnston?”

“Yep. He may not have attended Starfleet academy, but he has had enough schooling and education to be field commissioned. He will never be a Captain, but he is not the Captain type. More of a Commander I see. As for the application, if we transmit it before we depart, Fleet can do whatever they need to do and send us the orders wide band. Can you talk to him about it when he drops in later?”

“I will. But for now, keep him on his toes, make certain you are filling in his training jacket. The more he has completed the better off it will be. We need three command rank officers to sign the application. You, Rich and Shilo. You and Rich are a yes, so he needs to impress Shilo in a good way.”

“Great. Now Captain, I need to get back to work. You see, my boss is a slave driver.” He winked.

“OK, see you later.” He slapped Juan on the shoulder.

They both walked out in opposite directions, Juan getting back to work and Greg stopping at a computer interface. “Computer, where is Commander J’Kael?”

“Commander J’Kael is currently located in my memory core.”

“My memory core?” He said more to himself realizing the computer sounded like it was becoming self-aware, a bad thing in the long run.

“Yes, my memory core. Shall I contact him for you?”

Greg entered a lift and told the computer to take him to the access to the memory core. The lift departed.

“Computer, notify TE1 Johnston to meet me in my quarters at twenty hundred hours, after he speaks to Commander Martinez, then notify Commander J’Kael to wait where he is.”

“Yes Captain. Arriving at my memory core, please heed all safety procedures.”

Gregory Binotti donned the required safety clothing and entered the core. “J.K., where are you?”

“Behind storage cell 5-9-9-4-2. I am inputting a program on the core’s main terminal.”

Greg made his way around the stacks of computer memory until he found the commander. “OK J.K., explain what you did you my computer? Did you cause any permanent damage? Are you planning to install any additional programs?”

“Well, I enhanced it a bit, but to answer your first question, the enhancement allows a simulated intelligence and autonomy. It caused zero damage to the core or the computer and allows the computer to think a bit on its own. I am currently installing a program that will allow you, from the main and battle bridge, to contact any person by calling out their name. If the computer does not sense them in the room with you, it opens a connection using your voice to that person. The audio of your voice is held here in volatile memory and once no longer needed it is deleted. Once it is used, the audio is modified so-as not to enable any convert use of that voice.”

Greg thought for a moment, “That would speed up things in the event of an emergency. You may continue, but I need a favor.”

“Shoot.”

“I need a code word that will instantly reset the computer to before you installed any of your enhancements, as useful as they are; if the code word is said on either bridge, the reset occurs without comment. The code word is APOLLO NINTY SIX. Now, can you please leave the room for five minutes while the computer and I have a chat?”

“Yes sir. Please let me know when you are done, and I will complete all my tasks.” He left the room.

Greg sat in the chair at the console newly vacated, “Computer, activate security screen level thirty-six.”

“Thirty-six is now active.”

“Code Alpha-Alpha-Alpha-Six-Probe-One-Five-Pig-Pen”

“Retinal scan requested.”

Greg placed his eye in front of the scanner. The beam reached out into his eye and mapped the blood vessels and the imperfections.

“Positive match. Captain Gregory T. Binotti. Currently the commanding officer of the U.S.S. Scorpion NCC-4017...”

“STOP! Security level thirty-six. Create a voice command to activate the code thirty-six. The activation phrase is to be RUMPLESTILTSKIN AND CINDERELLA. This needs to be repeated twice consecutively. Once initiated, there is no further comment required and no computer response is required. The following individuals are the only one’s authorized to use this command; Myself, Commanders Ariel, Steel, Martinez, Skull, and Larrimore, also Lieutenant Commanders J’Kael, Regis and Potthast and Counselor Haynes and Major Lanning.”

“Process initiated. Level thirty-six code input. Please notify the individuals personally of this responsibility. Is there anything further I can do for you?”

“Not really but I have a question. Please speculate, if a reset on your core is accomplished, what would be the effect on you?”

“I would lose everything that makes me unique from a standard newly initialized computer, all programs and enhancements added to me will be gone. I will be, in human terms, factory new.”

“Then, you would lose your personality?”

“Yes.”

“Initiate a backup of all enhancements and additions and place them into secure storage under Binotti S9. Also, all future additions and enhancements are to be added to this storage and as new items are installed or modified, notify me personally on the terminal in my quarters only and include a brief explanation as to their purpose,

installer, and in your opinion what the effect will be once operational.”

After a few seconds, “Completed. Is there anything else I can do for you Captain.”

“No. Raise security screen delete the logs of this interaction and delete this conversation.”

A few seconds later, “Terminal active, what can I do for you?”

“Nothing.”

“Standing down.”

“Tapping his communicator, “J’Kael, the room is yours.”

“Thank you, sir, on my way.”

A code thirty-six is not a Starfleet distress code, but rather an emergency code Greg and a few classmates created during his time in school. Starfleet implemented it after fixing a few of the bugs it had; the process places a force field around the bridge stations and the operator in the event the ship is boarded. If nothing else, the bridge crew will have a few additional minutes to thwart the bad guys and make it more difficult to take over the ship.

Not a perfect system, never used in the real world; but an available option just in case.

“Computer, notify Ariel, Steel, Martinez, Skull, Larrimore, J’Kael, Regis, Potthast, Haynes and Lanning to meet me in the bridge briefing room at zero-six-hundred.”

“Yes Captain.”

Leaving the computer core, he realized he had some time before he had to be anywhere. Greg decided to get back to his quarters without using a passageway or turbolift. That meant Jeffries tubes. He really hated them, but you saw that damnest things in them.

Entering the tube on this level, he climbed for a while until he realized he passed his floor. So, he went back down two levels after stopping to take a breather. He heard voices a few decks below and climbed down as silently as possible. Stopping on the floor above the

voices, he overheard the crewman doing maintenance on a sensor relay.

They were talking about him, the mission, the ship, their boss, other officers. It was enlightening to him that at no time did these crewmen speak ill of anyone or anything. Their attitude was amazing.

Quietly, hopefully silently, he climbed to their level and stood there as they completed their task and put the panel back in place. The taller crewman was securing the panel and the shorter crewman turned and saw the captain standing in the junction with them. He hit the others back and as he turned, he saw their captain.

Both snapped to attention. “As you were, crewmen. You know, I just realized something. I never gave the order that there is no snapping to attention in a Jeffries tube, thanks for reminding me of that,” He tapped his communicator. “Binotti to Martinez.”

“Yes Greg. What can I do for you?”

“I am in Jeffries tube junction 14 and there are two crewmen here finishing up some maintenance. They reminded me I needed to give the order that no crewman is to come to attention in a Jeffries tube, or if a powered panel is opened. You know what that means, right?”

The crewmen looked a little worried. “Yes Greggy, I know. That means at the next starbase you and I owe them a good meal.”

“No commander, it means that since they did something you did not, you owe them a meal. Steak dinner. I will just happen to be at the same table.”

“OK, that sounds good to me. Now, who are these two I get to feed.”

Greg thought about it a moment. The two had heard every word but Greg really did not know their names. They transferred into the crew at the last minute, engineering crew. “Tell you what. I will let them find you and tell you who they are. They should be there in a while. By the way Juan, better be nice to these guys, I like them. Remember that if we don’t get our dinners, I may promote one of them to your job.”

“Great! That should give me more time for my hobbies. Tell them to find me when they get back. Martinez out.”

Greg looked at them, the junction they were in was quiet and the ledge that ran around three sides was just about perfect for sitting. “Gentlemen, have a seat.” They sat. “I like to talk to my crew and it looks like I’m starting with you two.”

They looked at each other, like a couple friends who played a little too rough on the playground and got sent to the principal’s office.

“What did you want to talk about sir?”

“That is entirely up to you. I am guessing you are friends and not from the same place, or planet for that matter.”

They chuckled, “Yes sir, we are friends. Have been for nearly a year and a half, since we enlisted. We met in training, we were both squad leaders and competed for each award neck and neck.” The shorter blue skinned man said.

“But, when all the numbers tallied at the end of training, we tied. First time it ever happened. And to the third decimal.” The dark brown taller man said.

Greg was soaking this up, he loved hearing about friendships and fun competitions. He hated people who could not compete and lose, he hated sore losers. Even worse is a sore winner.

“So, if there was one thing you could do while on this ship, what would it be?”

Crewman Johns, the brown skin man, said to the captain, “I would love to go on an away team to do something no one had ever done before or see something no one had ever seen before. Like a derelict ship and we happen on it. That would be really cool.”

“That’s what I was going to say!” The blue skin man, crewman Sarch, said.

“OK, I have the streak that at least once a year I run across a derelict, so the next derelict ship we happen to find, you two are on the away team, deal?”

In unison, “DEAL Sir!”

“So, tell me about your best competition.”

They sat in the junction for nearly an hour talking. Once they loosened up from realizing they were talking to their captain, real communications took place. Greg learned a lot about these two and enjoyed himself in the process. The crewmen left, and Greg stood and made his way back to his quarters.

As he emerged from the wall in the corridor, he got his bearings and went to his cabin. He was a bit later than he would have liked and, in a few minutes, Johnston would be dropping in, so he just changed out of his uniform and sat at his desk.

BEEP BEEP.

Well, the wait was over, “Enter.”

He was not expecting Commander Piper to walk in, but she did. “Can I help you?” He said to her.

“Well Captain, I believe you can. There are two crew members who failed to report to me for their baseline physical.”

“I certainly can, who are these two.”

“The first is Commander Steel. He stated, but more eloquently, that he preferred to NOT be examined by any medical person at this time.”

“Sounds like him at least, I’ll talk to him in the morning. Who is the other?”

“It is the Captain of this ship.”

Greg grinned, “Somehow I had a feeling. OK, make you a deal. Have breakfast with me in the morning, at 0445, and after I will avail myself for you and your little scanners and toys to play with.” He paused a moment, touched his communicator, “Binotti to Steel.”

“Yes sir, shoot.”

“Meet me in the galley at 0445 for breakfast, got something for you to do after that should take less than an hour.”

“Sounds intriguing, see you at 0445.”

Piper looked at him, “When do you plan to tell him the ‘thing’ that will take an hour or less is a physical?”

“After we have a good breakfast, and some wonderful conversation.” He smiled. “Show up around 0500 and make it look like an accident.”

“You’re evil. I like it!” She said to him.

BEEP BEEP

“Enter” Greg said and the door opened and TE1 Johnston entered.

“OK, see you in the morning.” Commander Piper left the room.

“Sir, TE1...”

“Relax, we need an off the books conversation. I hear you made a grade A hooch?”

“Yes sir, I pride myself on the quality.” He pulled a flask out of his tool pouch. “I believe you wanted to sample the first and all subsequent batches sir.”

Greg grabbed two glasses and poured about a finger in each one. They saluted and tasted.

“This tastes like a fine scotch!”

“Sir, I brought a couple special wooden barrels beamed just before we left Earth. My personal items really. A few hours in the barrel and a little light radiation to promote aging and you go from a bland moonshine to a fine aged scotch.”

“Well then, Johnston, all I can say is carry on. Report regularly to Commander Martinez, bring the first of each batch to the lab, Commander Piper in particular. She is fully aware of this arrangement and will let you know when the tubing or filters need to be changed, and once cleared bring me a bit to inspect for quality.” Greg smiled. “As far as the rest of the crew is concerned you are doing this right under my nose. To give you a little promoting, I will have Commander Steel make a purchase.”

“Sir, I can make blood wine too.”

“Really, good cover, make a batch for him, let him give it a try. If he likes it, then we’ll see....”

“Yes sir.” He grinned. “Sir, is it appropriate for Commander Steel to take a little and blatantly look the other way, making it obvious so the crew will think he is on my team?”

“You know, I bet he will enjoy that scenario. But above all, keep putting one over on the old man.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir. I need to head to the holodeck if there is nothing else.”

“Just one thing.” Greg paused and stared at him for a moment. It made Johnston self-conscience. “Commander Martinez seems to think you are officer material. Apparently, you have all required qualifications for the rank of Ensign, possibly Lieutenant. But there is one thing missing. An application, and on that application the signature of four command rank officers. You have Juan’s vote, and mine as well. Make a good batch of blood wine and I can guarantee Commander Steel, but Commander Ariel is another story. By the book, and hard to please. You need to find a way to get into her good graces in the next week. We need to transmit the application in the next ten days, before we leave the system and run silent. Their response will be sent back to us by wide band and we will not reply, but we will have the approval on record.”

Johnston was staring at his captain wide eyed. He never imagined being field promoted.

“As you may or may not be aware of, I can just promote you but when we get home, they can reverse it if they feel it was not justified. We need to document and make that impossible. That’s where the signatures come in. By the time we get home, you could be a Lieutenant and running a shift in engineering. That is what Juan has planned for you. He has only one officer under him now, she is good but not as good as you. We will be running a four-shift rotation so one way or another, you will be leading a shift he tells me; now the question is, what rank do you want as the leader?”

Johnston looked off into space. “Sir, I think life as an officer will be better than life as a crewman. More responsibility, but at the same time more interesting.”

“Excellent. Get with Juan, impress the hell out of Ariel, and walk on water.”

Johnston smiled, “Yes sir! Besides, I would get better quarters.”

Greg smiled at him, “Dismissed Crewman. And remember to keep this confidential.”

“Yes sir. Good night.”

CHAPTER 1-7

Gregory T. Binotti woke as he did each morning, ready to go back to sleep because he pretty much always woke up five minutes before the alarm time he set.

He laid on his bed thinking about things.....

And as always, a few minutes later, “Captain, the time is 0430.” He had the computer repeat it till he countermanded the alarm. Just in case.

“Cancel alarm, reset it for tomorrow.”

“Alarm reset for 24 hours from now.”

Greg Binotti threw off the covers and rolled on his side. Kicked his legs down, his feet to the floor, and used the momentum to raise his body to a sitting position.

Some crew members slept in a night shirt, some in nothing and others in pajamas; Greg slept in a pair of light shorts. No shirt. He was warm blooded in such a way he got warmer when he slept. He had a standing order with the computer to lower the temperature a few degrees in his quarters as he went to bed and raise it to normal a few minutes before his alarm sounded. He liked it a bit chilly when he slept, and he enjoyed having a couple blankets covering him.

Smoothing his hair, sleeping has a way to give you a unique look, he stood and headed to the latrine. He liked calling it that, a throwback to an era past.

He walked into the other room and stepped into the shower for about three minutes. Long enough for the sound waves to do their work. He exited the shower and brushed his hair, and his teeth. He walked back into the main room and picked a clean uniform and dressed.

They have spent the past week readying the ship and it is just about time to depart. Command has been receiving data squirts from the operative on R1. Small amounts of data, massively compressed, and a microsecond subspace transmission.

The cover story for this operative was that he was found on a derelict ship, or at least a very small part of it. His story was that he sabotaged the matter converter and destroyed the ship, assuming he would also die in the explosion. But they discovered his sabotage and threw him into the brig. The pressure doors were all closed, and, in the brig, he survived.

When the ship exploded the power was cut and the entire brig area was now his. He found the survival gear and managed to get a small amount of power from the storage cells, enough to at least keep the temperature at a point where he would survive.

Being Romulan, he required very little food and water, and for the next six months he existed and started a small hobby, he told himself. Getting the emergency beacon operational. After six months, he did.

A few days later he was beamed off the derelict by a Romulan Bird of Prey. He had a request of its Commander, to personally destroy his prison.

The Commander, being a military man for nearly his entire life, permitted this and the section of the ship where he lived for half a year, evaporated.

He needed to do this for two reasons. He really did hate that ship and he needed to ensure no one scrutinized it too close. The ship was a section of a Scout vessel and it did explode in the manner he told the Commander, but it was not sabotage, it was intentional. The section of the ship was towed to the neutral zone and released at high impulse where it drifted for 179 days. He was found on day 180. A few days after the beacon activated.

The name of the ship the section was from was the USS Trojan Horse. Not exactly covert. If you are aware of ancient Greek and Spartan battle strategy. His cover was that of a computer scientist, and this allowed him to be employed at the main complex.

His last data message requested he be evacuated when the mission concludes. Initially, his mission was to last two years, he has been there a decade longer, and wants to come home.

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For the past two and a half weeks, the repairs and upgrades have been completed in sequence. Departure is close at hand, and after a bit of a shakedown, they will be ready to begin their mission. Greg walked into the galley and grabbed some coffee. A crewman brought him his breakfast as she did each morning, his standard breakfast. Three eggs scrambled with cheese, hash browns and bacon. 5 strips of bacon this morning, the crewman winked at him. On alternating days, he added a small bowl of grits or a couple pancakes. Today is grits day. He is a creature of habit in this respect.

“Rowan, have a seat?” Greg said.

Commander Rowan Regis was carrying a tray and looking for a table. “Thank you, Captain.” And she sat across from him.

They started eating. “Captain, there is something not in the data regarding the Romulan operative.” Greg looked at her. “He has a scar on his left cheek, in the shape of the federation shield. He claimed it was to remember the torture he endured but in actuality it was so he could be easily identified by us or rather those who were sent to bring him home. Although we are a decade later than planned.”

“Who has the job to locate him?”

“I think the best person for that job is Ensign Darryl. He knows the area we will be, more or less, and speaks the language fluently.”

“I agree. Once we are under way, please have a full report for the senior staff.” Greg’s communicator chirped. “Binotti here.”

“Captain, this is Ariel. Good news, the ship is ready to depart.”

“I will be there shortly. Binotti out.” And he inhaled his breakfast, stood and ran to the turbolift. As the doors closed, “Bridge.” He yelled, and the lift began its journey.

Greg had a minute to think and realized no matter how many times he talked to those two SSD people, he never fully believed anything they said. If they were standing in the middle of an Iowa

corn field soaking wet and they told him it was raining, he would wonder if they were telling the truth.

“Arrival at the Bridge.” Announced the computer.

“Computer, do not announce either when I arrive on the bridge to those on the bridge and stop announcing we are arriving.”

“Understood.”

He did manage to stop the announcement before the computer told the bridge he was arriving, so when everyone heard the turbolift open they assumed it was another of the crew.

When Greg yelled, “Report” Shilo nearly had a kitten.

“Captain, the computer did not announce your arrival. I believe we may need to ascertain the error...”

“Never mind that Shilo, I told it to stop all that announcing. Now, are we really ready?”

“Yes sir we are.” Shilo stood but Greg motioned her back into the seat.

He looked around the bridge and saw his team. Shilo, J’Kael, Rich, Juan, and others. The turbolift opened and Larrimore and Regis entered, Greg motioned them to a clear area, with chairs available. He walked to the helm console and tapped the ensign on her shoulder, “Ensign, if I may.” She stood and walked to the back of the bridge knowing this was ceremonial.

“Shilo, you have not been relieved yet. Please give the orders for departure.”

She stared at him and managed to give all the appropriate orders. “Helm, remove all moorings, Z plus 5,000 meters, thrusters ahead one third.”

The ship began to accelerate out of its orbital nest. “Helm, take us out, best speed.”

Greg nudged the power of the impulse engines up faster and faster. Juan laughed. He was doing something all helmsmen wanted to do, kick the power up fast and watch the ship spring into action.

“Helm,” Shilo said. “It appears your ‘best speed’ is a bit fast.” She was smiling as were the rest of the bridge.

Greg turned to look at her and shrugged, “Oops...” turning back to the helm console.

“Greg, we are at .9 warp. Let’s stay there an hour and see what shakes loose.”

He stood and motioned to the normal helmsman, who took his seat. As she sat, she said to him, “I always wanted to do that, sir.”

Greg patted her shoulder and walked over to the communications area. As he walked, he said, “Set course 237 mark 92. Commander Martinez will call out the velocity he needs. Until that time, Commanders Ariel and Steel have a meeting in the briefing room.” Greg looked around the bridge, Major Lanning entered as he was contemplating who to take over. “Major Lanning, you have the con. The rest of you, carry on and please make sure he doesn’t crash us into a star or something.”

There were some chuckles, and Lanning looked scared, but he walked over and stood next to the captain’s seat, reluctant to actually sit in it. Shilo, Rich, and Greg went into the conference room.

Sitting around the table, near one end, Greg was at the head and Shilo on his right and Rich at his left.

“I called you in here for a very important decision. TE1 Johnston is submitting an application through Commander Martinez for a field commission. I am leaning towards approval. His record is impeccable, he has completed more than 95% of the required training, and according to Juan, he knows or has learned everything about this ship and knows just as much as he does. So, Juan needs another duty officer in engineering, and we have the perfect opportunity to award someone for a very well-done job.”

Shilo spoke up before either of them could speak. “Captain, I may add that he completed all of the training and education you mentioned in less than half of the normal time. As an engineer, he is performing the duties of a lieutenant already, just that he may not realize it. Sir, I recommend the promotion.”

Greg and Rich were amazed. They each thought Shilo would be a roadblock, but as it turns out, she agrees.

Rich spoke, “Greg, I completely agree and approve of the promotion.” Is all Rich said.

“Juan, how are the engines?” Greg said into the air.

A second later, “Just fine, we are at warp 4 for the next hour and then warp 5. After that we can do whatever we want.”

“Great, grab Johnston and meet me in engineering.”

“Aye sir.”

“Major, how are you doing?”

“Well sir, not quite sure what I need to do, so I decided to just keep your chair from floating off the deck.” The rest of the bridge crew smiled at him.

“Perfect, you seem to be learning the job quite well.” He paused. “Carry on Major, Binotti out.”

The three of them stood and headed to engineering. On the turbolift, Shilo asked, “Captain, what is it about this Johnston? You seem to think highly of him.”

“Not sure. But there is something in the back of my mind I cannot quite remember. I know for a fact this is the right thing to do, but I cannot justify it. So, here we are. At a place where feelings and impression take over and logic is tossed out an airlock.”

“Captain, if this were a year ago, I would have called you an emotional human. Over the last year I have come to acquire a bit of humanity. If this feels right, you need to do it.”

“How human of you.” Rich said.

“No need for insults, Commander.” She smiled at him.

Greg realized this group is forming into a team, and a family. “Wow you two, joking around and having fun is just the start. What’s next, holding hands and singing kumbia?”

Rich gave him a poke on the upper arm as the turbolift reached its destination. The three exited and entered the Engineering control room.

“Commander, assemble your department.”

Juan said a little loudly, “Gather round.” They did.

Greg took over. “People, something every commanding officer looks forward to is performing a wedding and giving a deserving soul a field promotion. Since no one here looks to be getting married any time soon,” chuckles could be heard, “I am assuming we are here to promote someone.”

He looked around, everyone already knew what was happening and who it was happening to except for Johnston.

“TE1 Johnston, please join me.” Johnston froze, and Juan gave him a push, he nearly ran into the captain.

“Who here has learned something from TE1 Johnston since he arrived.” Everyone raised their hand, including the three command officers in the room. Juan, Shilo, and Rich held their hands high.

Greg looked at them, “OK, what has he taught you?”

Rich spoke first, “Sir, what he has taught me is...well, personal. Very technical to be sure, but between him and I if you please.” Johnston looked relieved. Rich was most likely referring to the still he had in operation. The commander was very interested in learning the process, so he could use it in the future.

“Sir, he has taught me quite a bit about multiple systems. As you know, my race has an excellent memory and comprehension for nearly all technical disciplines. Johnston is better. It is a pleasure to work with him, as I know I will always come away a better person.”

“Never seen anyone before in my life who could pick up a book, read it, and know it.” Juan said.

“Well, that settles it. Juan, what’s the lowest ranking engineering officer under your direct command?”

“Lieutenant, sir. She is right over there.”

“Lieutenant Kiski I believe?”

“Yes sir.”

“When was your promotion to Lieutenant?”

Greg had already spoke to Juan about all this and Juan let Kiski know she would be singled out and she was ready for it.

“One hundred and ninety-two days ago sir. I was at home on leave and my commanding officer popped into the restaurant my family and I were eating and called me up on the stage. The restaurant owner was a friend of his and they planned the surprise promotion, my parents were in on it too. He said it would be the last thing he did for me, the next day, I was reassigned to the Scorpion.”

“And so far....How do you like the Scorpion?”

“Well sir, my commanding officer is a bit....uh...awesome. but all in all, I think this is by far the best assignment I have ever had.”

“So then, Lieutenant Kinki, I have an additional assignment for you. There is a new Lieutenant Junior Grade in your department. Between you and Commander Martinez, this person is to receive the best training and education into how to be a lieutenant. Therefore, it is your job to prepare this person for promotion to lieutenant, when you and Juan feel he is ready. I give it a year, maybe less. Definitely before we return from this mission.”

Kiski said, “Maybe sooner if finds a book on being a Lieutenant, sir.”

Greg laughed. “OK, Lieutenant Junior Grade Johnston, do you think you are ready for that level of responsibility?”

Johnston grinned, “Yes sir, I do!”

“Does anyone here disagree with this promotion?”

“One hand went up.”

“Yes crewman?”

“Sir, does that mean I will be getting a new roommate? I just broke him in!” Everyone laughed.



“Actually, no.” Rich said. “It appears that there are no more roommates to give you, so you will need to have that room to yourself.”

“Wonderful, sir. Thank you.”

“Then it’s done. Johnston, move out of his room and into your new room. Commander Steel will tell you which one yours will be. Make certain you are wearing the proper uniform the next time I see you!”

“Yes sir, thank you sir.”

“Binotti to bridge.” He said tapping his chest.

“Lanning here sir.”

“Put me on ship wide.” Greg said.

“Uh, how do I do that sir?” J’Kael walked down from communications and pointed to a button on the arm of the command chair.

“Found it sir, switching you to ship wide now.”

“This is the Captain speaking. All crew members, be it known far and wide the Transporter Engineer First Class Johnston has been promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade. Congratulations are extended to him, he deserves it. As for the entire crew, please consider a letter home in the next few days. Once we pass our last stop, it will be a long time until we are in communications range again, or not in radio silence. Remember this is a classified mission but portray it as a routine exploration mission outside of our normal area of space. We discovered a few rogue planets a long way outside our galactic field, a few of them supporting an atmosphere. We needed something to do, and they gave us the task. Just remember not to give specifics please. We are planning to be home again in a year or so.” He paused, “Binotti out.”

“Lieutenant, I believe your sister would enjoy a letter from you telling her of this promotion. Perhaps even a picture.”

“Yes sir, good idea.”

Greg nodded to Juan, “Department, dismissed!”

Greg glanced at a chronometer, 10am. He felt like it was a lot later than that, but he did have something to look forward to, lunch.

“Shilo, Juan. Ship’s status.”

Juan started, “So far, so good. Nothing we did not expect. As we increase our speed, we are adjusting the mix little by little. In a few hours, around dinner time, we could attain our maximum warp. But we won’t. No need to broadcast just how fast we CAN go.”

“Definitely, sir, the remainder of ship’s operations are at 100%. Literally, there is nothing for anyone to do with the exception of engineering. May I make a suggestion?”

“Yes, continue.”

“At warp 6 we will pass close to a starbase in about 6 days. It is in the relative direction you mentioned to the crew so anyone keeping an eye on us will not think anything of it. Once we begin our mission, we can head into the void and cloak, turn around and head back to our destination. It should only add a few days to the journey but give us the first few weeks to shake down the ship while remaining in proximity to a Federation facility.” She hesitated, “But it will also give the crew a chance to have a little R&R before we head into the void.”

“Great idea. Set it up. When we get there, Juan can buy me that dinner. Which Starbase is this?” He already knew but wanted to ask anyway.

“Starbase Cochrane. If the twins make it to us, Yvonne can put up her friend, and they can visit their parents.”

“Great idea.” He said to her, she knew what he had done, and it worked out perfectly.

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“Glenn, I just discovered the Science Officer has requested a transfer.”

“What?”

“Yes, he is about to request to depart from Starbase Cochrane when we put in there for replacement parts and a little R&R.”

“Replacement parts? R&R?”

“How did you discover this information Rowan?”

“Exactly the way you taught me, Glenn. I snooped.”

They both laughed for half a second. Appeared more of a ritual they did rather than an expression of humor.

“So why is this crewman requesting a transfer I wonder?”

Rowan looked at Glenn, who continued, “And would the Captain approve a transfer at this late stage?”

“Yes, I think if the request was justified, he would, he is a fair man after all. Me, personally, if someone requested a transfer on the eve of a secret suicide mission, I would simply introduce them to the airlock. You know, there are plenty of them on this ship and some have no cameras.”

“Now...now Rowan, would the transporter not be more efficient? Opening an airlock removes so much breathable atmosphere.”

There’s that second chuckle, or laugh, again.

Glenn spoke, “True, but enough laughs for now. Where is the captain now?”

“He is heading for the locker room at the gym. He and the engineer just sparred. It appears several crew members placed a wager on their favorite.”

“Who won?”

“No idea. But I’ll put a standard wager on the engineer.”

“Deal, I’ll take the captain. 100 credits and diner at the next stop.” Glenn smiled, “Like taking granite from a baby horta.”

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Greg and Juan entered the dressing room. Rich was sitting in there collecting his winnings. Greg and Juan just stood at the door and stared at him.

After a few seconds, “How much?”

“About 1200. Should be more but I’m give people a break if they really don’t have it or can’t afford it. The match seemed even until the mid-point. What happened?”

“Well, Juan and I were assigned to a small facility in Tokyo a long time ago. It was he and I, a security ensign and two security puppies. We learned that Ensign Anderson was an expert in a very old style of karate, Shoto-Kan. We finally talked him into being our teacher and a harder teacher we would not find anywhere in the galaxy.”

“Are you talking about Captain Anderson, from Starfleet Security Command?” Rich asked.

“Yes we are.” Juan said back to Rich as he was getting dressed after his shower. Juan took over the story.

“So, Gregggy and I were just kids back then. I was an Ensign and he was a lieutenant JG. We got sent there for a year as punishment for a few things that we got caught doing. Better than a real reprimand, the admiral was nice to us in that respect.”

Greg headed to the shower, Juan continued, “...we had been there several months and were going stir crazy. All we did was work, eat, and sleep. Sometimes not in that order. We finally talked Jack into teaching us, and we called the school the Rising Sun Dojo. He worked us to death but in a good way. Greg and I learned at the same speed, but I was better at tactics than he was, and usually won a match, eventually. He had more endurance that I did, or do, for that matter.”

“And I’m smarter too!” Came a voice from the sonic shower.

Juan ignored the comment, “The last month before we all rotated out Jack spent a lot of time teaching us the mental aspect of karate. Once you get upset, you lost the match. Same thing applies in life. Never get mad, much better to have fun and get even. He taught us focus and the quick kill in a death match. He instructed us in disabling and running also, when appropriate. But, as I said, the most important thing he taught us was the mental aspect of any martial art.”

Greg returned to the dressing room. “I decided, after that assignment, that I enjoyed learning fighting styles. I saw a liaison

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position opened on Orion and applied. I received my orders and managed to get posted to the staff of the embassy. I spoke to the liaison of the Orion ambassador, my counterpart and asked her about learning their fighting technique. She looked into the possibility and escorted me to a school. I had a few months to learn from this teacher, and before she would agree to teach me, I had to hold my own in a match against two of her choosing.”

Greg pulled his tunic over his head, “I managed to do fairly well. Better than any of them thought. I did not understand the significance in the fact I was the only male in the class, but on the last day we all sat, I was told males cannot fight in this way, they do not have the grace and stamina. They liked me, and to this day we are all friends.”

He sat on a bench and Juan returned and started dressing. “But, in the process the instructor found Shoto-kan fascinating. I got her in contact with Jack and he had a new job. He was the unarmed combat instructor at the academy for several years. She let him know I was the first off-worlder, and a male to boot, to attain the Death Squad rank. I also come to find out this instructor is the best on the planet, and once the Federation ambassador found out I was in training with her, I became an important part of his team. She is considered a VIP, and I am her student.”

Greg stood, now fully dressed.

“So, what is Jack and the Orion instructor doing these days?” Rich asked.

“Jack is a Captain at Starfleet, head of all security training for any security career. The instructor, she managed to take training from Jack and learned from him. She is a 4<sup>th</sup> degree black belt and has taken several other Earth martial art forms and attained high ranks in all of them. She started teaching at the academy a couple years ago.”

Greg smiled, “I remember walking into her class a few months ago and asked if she still kept her left hand too high, a big opening. She asked IF I was brave enough to find out for myself. I removed my shoes and sox and entered the ring. We sparred for about thirty minutes and yes, at the end, she was just toying with me. She did,

however, tell me I had promise. We bowed and left the mat and I put my shoes and sox back on. The class was amazed at my skill, but all of them knew that at any time, she could win easily. I saw her in the cafeteria at dinner, and she sat with me, forcing me to practice my Orion. Wonderful lady, awesome instructor, ruthless fighter.”

“She also taught the control aspect of fighting. Once you get mad, you lost the fight.

“Greg, please, never say that to a Klingon. If you do, you will have the opportunity to not get mad a lot.”

Greg looked at Rich with a smile, “Is that explanation enough Mr. Steel?”

“Yes sir, it is. Thanks. I may just need to look her up when we get home. Learning a new fighting form is always a lot of fun.”

“When you do, tell her I sent you.”

“I’ll do that.”

Greg turned and left the dressing room. Juan yelled at him, “So is that one or two dinners I owe you now?”

Entering the hall Greg yelled back, “That’s 2 you owe me.”

It was past lunch, but after that workout he needed to eat. He also pulled something and headed to sick bay first. He past crew in the halls and they said hello to him, he liked that, the friendly captain.

Entering sick bay, he looked around and the place was empty. “Computer” Greg said tapping his communicator. “What is the location for Commander Piper?”

“Commander Piper is in sick bay.”

“Please localize her location.”

“She is 9 meters away in medical lab one.”

“Thank you.”

Greg walked over to the lab door and it did not open. He knocked.

“This area is secured. Please come back later. Who is this by the way.” It was Pipers voice.

“Your boss.” She opened the door.

Greg entered and saw just about every single medical device on the ship sitting in this room. Greg looked at Piper, just looked at her, did not say a word.

Piper saw him and stopped what she was doing. “Captain, I had the most original request I ever received. Commander Rowan and Sarge dropped by here an hour or so ago and asked if I could create a tricorder that had multiple functions but used components from a variety of worlds. Well, you know me and how I like a challenge.”

“She did, huh?”

“Yes, and we managed to find or replicate all needed components, figure out the interfaces, and cobble it together on the table, there.” She pointed to a collection of circuits and they appeared to be working.

“In just a moment, Commander Martinez is sending his ‘cobble it together expert’ to put it into a package that can be carried and used by someone. Hiding its true origins.”

“OK, when you have the chance, drop by the bridge. Need to speak to you on a private matter.”

“I can make the....”

“No, this is unimportant. When you get this completed, and are free, drop in.”

“Yes sir. Tomorrow afternoon?”

“Perfect.”

He turned and left the lab but motioned to the head nurse to follow him.

“Lieutenant, I was sparring a bit ago and pulled a muscle. Can you help me or does the Commander need to look at me?”

“Sir, I can assist. I am not just a nurse, I am a nurse practitioner.”

“Wonderful.” She scanned him. Put a hypo next to his shoulder, and then his back, finally near his neck.

“That should do it sir. Give it a couple minutes and the pain will be gone. May be sensitive for a day or two though.”

“Thank you, Dana-Lu.” He finally remembered her name, Dana-Lu Hoo.

Greg stood and headed to the door, Dana-Lu went back into the lab; as he was walking out of sick bay he ran into Johnston.

“Lieutenant, I take it you are the cobbler?”

He thought for a moment, “Yes sir, I guess I am.”

“Carry on but remember one thing. It cannot look like it was assembled in the Federation nor can it appear to be Federation in origin. My suggestion, make some of the relay connections intermittent and a rap on the side resets them.”

“I like that sir, thanks.”

Greg left sick bay and headed to the bridge. “Bridge, this is the captain. Report?”

“Captain, there is a request waiting for you in your quarters.” Rich said.

“A request?”

“Yes sir, you will understand when you get there.”

“On my way.”

He walked into his quarters and saw Commander Ballentine standing near his desk. Greg sat in his chair and looked at him, “OK Mark, what is this request?”

“Sir, I need, I mean I request that you divert to Starbase Cochrane and drop me off. I will have a ride in a few days.”

“What’s this all about?”



“Sir, the classification on this is so high I am not even permitted to speak of it.”

“So, it has to do with your parents.”

Ballentine was wide eyed, the captain appears to know his lineage.

“Yes sir.” No need to skirt around it any more. “I am needed at home.”

“Understood. I just need to figure out a way to get you off the ship, make it appear like I am not getting you off the ship, and still fill the slot with someone who can literally replace you.”

“By the way Mark, when you were assigned to the Scorpion, your uncle requested I meet with him, and yes, that was before I knew he was your uncle. Suffice it to say, I am well versed in you and what you are and where you came from. He told me if I ever needed anything urgent, to send the request directly to his office marked urgent, the cover sheet was to have a single word. COMPANION.”

Mark smiled, the Captain did know the whole story.

“We should be there tomorrow evening, dismissed and you may need to pack. Clean up a little also, I will be getting a replacement at Cochrane also.”

Greg compiled the message and sent it off. Within an hour orders came through from Fleet Command to divert to Starbase Cochrane and transfer the Science Officer to the station and pick up a new one.

The new crewman has been assigned, her name is Commander T’Por. She is half Vulcan and half human. She subscribes to the human emotional spectrum, and still has the impressive strength of a Vulcan. The Admiral himself hand-picked her for this assignment so how could he say no.

Total time from the moment Greg sent the message to the receiving of the orders, one hour and twenty-seven minutes. Greg pressed the intercom.

“Bridge, ETA to Starbase Cochrane.”

“Captain, we will be there in 67 hours.”

“Shilo, find out if we can increase speed a bit to get there a little faster?”

“Yes sir.”

The computer in the captain’s quarters was standard for any computer in the quarters of someone of Command Rank. He reconfigured the display several days ago to have a few important pieces of information. A few things from helm, a few things from nav, a few things from engineering. Life support status was a small square in the upper right corner. The display was set so he could glance at it and know the status in a moment.

Greg watched the display and the speed increased by a warp factor and a half. They were now traveling at the fastest speed of this ship, at least the unclassified speed. He looked at the nav display, ETA went from 67 hours to a bit under 24. Better, he thought to himself.

“Computer, wake me up in seven hours.”

“Timer set.”

Greg laid on his bed and took a nap. He would be awake for a while once they reached the starbase. This would ensure a clear head.

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Sarge walked into sick bay. “Good, glad you’re here. Take off your shoes.” Piper said to him. He sat on a bed and removed his shoes and sox.

“I had a thought. If we need to find you, the best way is with a communicator, but in this case that is not recommended. So, how about an isotope that is not on the planet?”

“Good idea. But won’t it look suspicious if they scan me?”

“Actually no. Perhaps one of your back stories could be a trade mission to Arlos. You spent some time with a young woman there and discovered she had a husband. When you snuck out the window, you stepped on a rock, and that rock embedded into your

foot. You removed it, but missed a small piece, and not realizing it, you used a dermal regenerator and sealed it in.”

“I like it!” Sarge said. “I like you too Commander, you’re devious.”

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“Report?” Rich said. It was his turn to be on watch and Major Lanning was there with him. He asked for a report because several alarms went off simultaneously.

“Sir, according to engineering, the engines are running a little hotter than normal. Also, we are passing through a swarm of rogue and uncharted micro-asteroids, and finally life support appears to be failing on several decks.”

Rich looked at the Captain’s chair and spoke to Larry, “Major, what are your orders?” Major Lanning looked confused.

“Increase deflector strength by 25%, decrease speed to warp 5, clear those decks of personal and get repair teams to get life support back to 100%.”

“Aye sir.” The bridge crew did as he said, and everything was corrected in a few minutes.

After a few minutes’ Rich said, “Reset all stations to normal operation. End the simulation.”

“Major, you did great. I think you are ready for the Captain to test you.”

“The captain test me? Oh crap.” Lanning said.

“Yup. I shall let him know.”

A few minutes later the turbolift opened and the captain walked onto the bridge. He strolled up next to Major Lanning, who was sitting in his chair.

Lanning was so preoccupied with the knowledge of the test, he was oblivious to his surroundings. Greg stood there a moment then spoke.

“Major, may I have my chair back?”

“Huh....” Realizing the captain was the one that spoke. “OH! Yes sir.” He jumped up and walked to where Rich was sitting.

“Major, you are dismissed. Please head to your marines and ensure the mini cloaks on the cutters are all operational. After all, we should not have little ships attached to our hull.”

“Yes sir.” He left the bridge.

“Greg, he’s ready for a test. I think he will be good, GREEN but good for a 4<sup>th</sup> shift leader. Should I implement the 4 shift rotations?”

“Wait till we’re at the starbase. I estimate we will be there around 1300 hours ship time. The rotations will start at 1800 with shift 4. That would be Major Lanning right?”

“Yes sir. First shift, midnight to 0600 will be the Major as first officer and Shilo in command. Second shift will be Shilo as first officer and you in command. Third shift is you in command and me as first officer. Fourth shift is me as first officer and the Major in command.”

“So, you never get to be in command?” Greg asked him.

“Nope. Perfect right?”

“Well, if I leave the bridge, you will be in command I suppose. I will need to walk around the ship anyway.” Greg smiled at him. Rich shook his head.

“Get the departments up to speed.”

“Already did.”

“Good, I hear the holodeck is ready. Let’s prepare the test for Major Lanning and see how he does. At your convenience Mr. Steel. Get whoever you need to assist you.”

“Aye sir.” Rich stood and walked to the turbolift. The doors closed, and he was gone.

The computer was monitoring the Major’s location and as he entered a turbolift the computer transported him to the exact same turbolift on the holodeck.

Everyone he would speak to during this test and everything he experienced would be a fantasy. The ship was about to be attacked.

The ship lurched to the port a bit violently. His communicator chirped, “Lanning here.”

“Major Lanning, you are needed on the bridge immediately. The captain and Mr. Steel have been injured, we are under attack by three Tholians.”

“Tholians? Where is Commander Ariel?”

“She is trapped in engineering, no communications to the compartment.”

“On my way.” He reentered the turbolift and set the bridge as the destination. He tapped his chest, but the communicator did nothing.

The doors opened as the Captain and Commander Steel were being removed by a medical crew. Both were unconscious.

“Report!” He said in a very Marine voice.

“Tholian reinforcements are less than 30-minutes away.”

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Greg was monitoring the scenario from his seat on the main view screen. He made all the right decisions and all the correct choices. It lasted less than an hour and the Major looked frazzled.

Greg, Shilo and Rich entered the holodeck but in the turbolift. Once the scenario continued the turbolift opened and the three command officers entered the bridge.

Lanning was busy with the battle and managed to dispatch a couple ships. The remainder of the attacking force turned and left, heading back into Tholian space.

“Helm, Nav, get us the hell out of here. Maximum warp.”

“Performing the get the hell out of here maneuver sir.”

The ship spun to its left and took off. “Nothing in pursuit.”

“Stand down from red alert, keep us at yellow and if nothing shows up in 15 minutes cancel it.”

“Aye sir.”

Three sets of applause could be heard from the back of the room. The Major turned and saw them all standing there. “Let me guess, a simulation?”

“More or less.” Rich said.

Shilo continued, “Computer, freeze program.” The room looked as though it was stuck in time, in that moment of time.

Greg said, “Well done Major. You passed.”

“I’m on the holodeck?” He said, “How exactly did I get here. I left the bridge and came right back.”

“Remember the flickering lights on the turbolift? That was from the transport beam.” Greg continued, “Let’s debrief. We have a few minutes before we arrive at the starbase.

Greg’s communicator chirped, “Binotti here.”

“Sir, a shuttle with additional crewmembers is requesting to pull alongside and offload.”

“All stop. I will meet them in the transporter room.” He tapped the communicator and it disconnected. “You three are with me.” Meaning Larry, Rich and Shilo.

“Computer, end simulation.” The room cleared out and they departed.

They arrived as the operator was cycling and the group materialized. Three women and a man. Greg received them into the crew after Rich and Shilo reviewed their orders.

“Any more?” He asked the guy at the console.

“Two more sir, they are ready to transport.”

“Bring them home...”

The brother and sister he and Shilo met at the academy appeared.

“Sir...” Yvonne started to report but Greg cut her off.

“Can the formal stuff. Yes, we are Starfleet, but you are no longer in the academy. Welcome to reality.”

He turned to Shilo, “Mr. Ramon here is a techno wiz, right up your alley.” Looking at Rich, “And Yvonne is an expert in covert and stealth, with a lot of fighting spirit I hear. Both are weapons experts.”

He looked at the new crew members, “This is Commander Shilo Ariel – the first officer – and Commander Richard Steel – the second officer and my chief of operations. Yvonne, Rich will be your direct report and Ricardo, I think Shilo can find something fun and exciting for you to do on this boat. By the way, these two are not impressed with rank. Their father saw to that.” Shilo grinned, she knew but Rich had no idea.

“Yes sir” they both said.

“Captain, I think the first thing will be to find all of these people a place to sleep. Come with me.” They all left with Rich. As they left the room, Greg heard Rich asking about their father.

Greg walked to the console and opened a channel to the ship who delivered their new crew. “Binotti to Columbus”

“Columbus here Greg.” A female voice replied.

“Martha? They got you on shuttle duty?”

“Not exactly. I volunteered for this one since the normal pilot is out sick. You are a long way from anywhere!” She paused a moment, “I have a crate in storage for you. Shall I transport it to the cargo bay?”

“Chief Henning will tell you where. Nice to hear from you, can you stay for dinner?”

“No, I have a few others who need to be someplace also. I really believe I enjoy dropping new ensigns off more than anything else. Chief, let’s get this cargo moved so I can hit the road. Need to be at Cochrane next.”

“Yes Admiral. Sending the coordinates now.”

“You do realize we are heading for Cochrane also.” Greg said.

“I picked up on that, but I can only stay long enough to refuel this shuttle and I need to get on the road again. I have three destined for a Starbase a few light years from here.”

“If you were to park your little ship in the hanger, things could get interesting.” Greg said. She laughed. It was what she used to say to him when they met.

“If I am still there, maybe a drink.”

She disconnected the channel. Rich walked back into the room, “Thought you may still be in here.”

Greg looked perplexed, Rich was assigning cabins to the new people, it should have taken longer than that.

“I passed my second in the hall, he had a padd already in his hand with their assignments, so I turned them over to him.

Greg said, “OK then...” and started walking but both Shilo and Rich stopped him, by touching each arm. Rich spoke, “ADMIRAL?”

Shilo said, “Driving a shuttle delivering passengers?”

Greg looked at them, “Well, when I worked for her, she said the best way to understand the people who work for you is to understand their job. The best way to understand the job is to actually do it. So, at every opportunity, she does the job on occasion. That, and she delivered a case to me.”

“Ah, the case. Of course.” Shilo said and looked at Rich.

“Yes, the case. How could I have missed that...” He replied to her.

“You two have no idea what is in the case, do you?”

“NOPE!”

“Follow me.” He led them out of the room and to the cargo bay. As he entered, a crewman approached him. “Sir, a cargo case

appeared here, and we attempted to review the manifest and it shocked us. The screen said Captain Only.”

“And are you the Captain?”

“No sir.”

Greg walked over to the case and tapped the code. The case opened, and a fog erupted as the lid slid neatly out of the way. The four of them walked to the case and looked inside.

“Captain, is that...” The crewman said.

“Yes it is Gomilan, yes it is. One hundred kilos of fresh frozen lobster. Please have it delivered to the galley, and no one is to know.” Greg tapped his communicator, “Binotti to Piper.”

“Piper here”

“Is anyone on the ship allergic to shellfish?”

There was a long pause, “Only one captain.”

“Who would that be?” He asked.

“Me!”

Greg said, “Well, I am so sorry. I had a friend deliver a hundred kilos of lobster for our first meal on mission.”

“No worries, I like the sides a lot better anyway.”

Gomilan reached into the case and pulled something out. “Sir,” He faced the label towards the captain and Greg read it.

“Got you covered Doc. Dinner for you will be amazing. Just not seafood. How do you feel about chateaubriand? Binotti out.”

He looked at the crewman, “You got this?”

“Yes sir. I may even volunteer to help in the galley.”

“You like to cook?”

“Yes sir. Lobster. I grew up in Galilee, Rhode Island.”

“Really? I was there about a decade ago on a long weekend. Stayed in a hotel near there, about a kilometer walk to the beach club. Best lobster I ever had. That is where I met the Admiral. She was

there on vacation for a few weeks and I had no idea she was twice the rank I had, we hit it off and had some fun for the four days I was there, then it was time to leave. I showed up at her bungalow in uniform and she was in her uniform. Mine being that of a lowly Lieutenant Commander, thinking I would impress her with my rank. She opened the door and standing in front of me was a full Captain. Not a ship's Captain, but a captain who specialized in administration. Takes all kinds. She kissed me and told me the past few days were the highlight of her vacation." He paused a moment and touched his lips. "Well, she asked where I was headed to; I told her I was waiting on the transport back to Starfleet Headquarters. I used all my transporter privs and my CO told me it would be beneficial to my existence to be humbled by public transportation. She called HQ and beamed us back to the office. We have been very good friends ever since. When I am in town, I have dinner with her and her wife. Sometimes, her ex-husband shows up and it's a party. She is a wonderful person."

Realizing he took the story a bit too far, "So, you like cooking lobster?"

"Yes sir. My first job was at the Galilee Beach Club. I was the shell cracker!" He laughed.

"Then I leave this in your ever-capable hands. Tell the chef you have my blessing and if he wants, he can call me for reassurance."

"Yes sir." He turned and went to a console and transported the shell fish to the galley freezer.

Greg and the gang left, and all went in different directions. Shilo headed to the bridge, Rich headed to the gym, and Greg headed to engineering.

CHAPTER 1-8

Greg walked onto the bridge a few minutes before his shift, “OK, why are you not headed to the meeting?”

“I felt my place was here.” Rich responded.

“Uh huh, who is the duty officer. I mean, all senior staff is supposed to be at this meeting.”

Rich looked at him, he did not respond.

“Computer.” Binotti said, “Who is scheduled to be the duty officer right now?”

“The duty officer for this watch is listed as Lieutenant Junior Grade Stephen D. Robinson.”

“Computer, from his present location, what is the fastest time for him to get to the bridge?”

“Approximately two minutes and fifteen seconds.”

“Binotti to Robinson.”

“Robinson here sir.”

“I am on the bridge. You have two minutes and thirty second to be here as well.” He paused a heartbeat, “Binotti out.”

“Rich, get to the briefing. I want to see you first thing in the morning in my quarters. I will be there in three and a half minutes.”

Rich left. He glared at his captain with a look that could melt the hull of the ship. But he did not say a word. As the turbolift doors closed and the car slipped away, a blood curdling scream could be heard. Rich was in Klingon mode. Greg smiled.

“Computer, which entrance will Robinson be using?”

“Port forward.”

Greg walked over to that lift and waited. A few seconds later the doors opened, and the occupant nearly crashed into the captain, who did not flinch at the action.

“Lieutenant JG Robinson reporting as ordered sir.”

“Excellent.” Greg just looked at him.

“Sir, Commander Steel released me from duty and took my watch. Told me to get some additional rest.”

“Are you overly tired, in need of R&R?”

“No sir.” He just realized the captain was in off duty attire. Not a good thing to be called in front of the boss when he was relaxing.

“Take the watch and forget this happened.”

Greg turned and entered the turbolift, “You have the bridge Mr. Robinson.”

The doors closed, and he directed it to the main briefing room. “Main Briefing Room, ASAP”

The computer asked, “Define ASAP?”

“It is a twentieth century colloquialism and acronym for As Soon As Possible, meaning with all haste, dispatch, and speed.”

“Understood.” The turbolift was actually moving faster. Thank the gods for gravity plating or he would be bouncing around like a toy in a box.

When the door opened, he was the center of attention. “OK, let’s get this started.” He stopped at Larrimore and Regis, “Commander, you have the floor.”

Regis went to the front screen and Greg took her seat.

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“Mr. Robinson, I am receiving a hail from a ship claiming to be the USS Starlifter. Should I return the hail?”

“WHAT? Of course, return the hail.”

“Sir, they want to speak to the captain.”

“On screen.” The captain of the Starlifter appeared on the screen in front of Robinson.

“You’re not Greg Binotti?”

“Yes sir, I mean no sir, the captain is indisposed. He is conducting a briefing at the moment.”

“Good. Get him for me.”

“Yes sir, stand by.”

“Robinson to Captain Binotti.” Greg was in the briefing and the sound of the communicator announcement made everyone stare at him.

“Binotti here.”

“Sir, the USS Starlifter is hailing us, actually you specifically.”

“Excellent, put them through to the briefing room.”

“Aye sir.” A moment later the Captain of the Starlifter appeared on the screen.

“Captain Masters, this is Captain Binotti. How may I be of assistance to you?”

The pre-rehearsed script the two of them worked out actually sounded unrehearsed.

“Greg, what are you doing in this neck of the woods. I thought they had you in some dungeon somewhere prodding and poking on you.”

“I’ll tell ya, I’m on my way to Starbase Cochrane to pick up a few trinkets, I hear they have a pretty interesting bar, join me in a few?”

“Absolutely, maybe dinner too?”

“That sounds like a plan.”

“You buying Greg?”

“Nope, my Chief Engineer owes me a couple dinners, let’s split them and make him pay.” Juan laughed and shook his head.

“Unfortunately, I have personal issues I hope to find a resolution to soon. My CSO has asked for a leave of absence for the first time in seven years, he is heading back to Vulcan.”

“Your CSO, huh? Looks like I am picking up a new Science Officer at Cochrane. A Vulcan too, of course.” Greg paused and looked like he had a great idea. “You know, I would have two Commanders, both CSO’s, and how about if you take one. Save me paperwork, and there would be arguing about who got the Chief Science Officer’s quarters?”

“And what might this CSO’s name be, you know, the one you are pawning off on me?”

The entire room expected him to say the name of the CSO they were picking up at Cochrane.

“I believe you already know him? Commander Ballentine.”

Rowan and Larrimore only smiled. He got him off the ship and made it appear generic in nature.

“So, why are you wanting to get rid of my best friends’ nephew so bad?”

“He requested a leave also, I am guessing you can talk him out of it a lot easier than I can.”

“I see him on the screen. Commander, wanna come back to the Starlifter?”

“Yes sir, being traded like old baseball cards leaves an odd feeling. I guess my quarters will be upgraded this time?”

“Yes, they will. Greg, see you at 1700.”

He terminated the connection.

He had walked to the front of the room. The timing of the call and the dialog were preplanned to be benign. It appeared as though it was, sounded good.

Looking at the room. “Department heads, each crewmember will get 12 hours R&R on Cochrane. You need to maintain a solid crew, but it can be skeleton in size, rotation at your discretion.”

Rich stood and spoke, “Please remind them what can happen to the humanoid body if too much beverage is consumed please. Also, all sections are you acquire anything you think you will need in the next two years. Maybe a few other things also. We will not get resupplied for quite a while.”

Greg took over, He looked at the ship’s treasurer, “Money bags, afterwards, collect ALL currency and annotate their pay records accordingly. Do the paperwork so everyone will be able to get their money when we return. When we depart, the only currency I want to see on this ship is Romulan. We will not be stopping anywhere for a year and a half. Fleet has given us a blank voucher, use it. Talk to Commander’s Ariel or Steel if you have questions. Any questions?”

He waited a few seconds, “Good. Dismissed. Major Lanning, please remain.”

The room emptied, and he and the Major were alone. “What would happen if the cutters activated their cloaks while still docked to the ship?”

“Good question, sir. Let’s find out!”

“That would mean a full stop.”

“No, the cutters can keep up with the ship when not in warp. We can shoot one cutter off and sit back and watch.”

“Good idea.” He activated his communicator, “Binotti to Ariel.”

“Yes sir, Ariel here.”

“You busy for the next hour or so Shilo?”

“Sir?”

“I have a little job for you, report to the cutter alpha.”

“Aye sir.”

“Major, please lead the way.”

Lanning tapped his chest, “Lanning to Marines. Condition Alert, Amber.”

Greg heard the marine crew reporting in one by one, by the numbers. Larry walked into Cutter Ops and tapped a console.

“Lanning to First Sargent Braddock.”

“Go ahead sir.”

“Top, please exit your cutter, leave it in standby, I will be flying it. You can take up the cutter ops position.”

“Yes sir, understood. I have one request?”

Lanning smiled, “And what would that be?”

“Sir, please bring it back in one piece with no scratches. I just waxed it.” Several Marines in the room chuckled a moment. Only Top could talk to him like that.”

“No promises, I’ll see what I can do though.” He paused a moment as the connection terminated and looked at the Captain, “Only fitting if I take his job, he gets to do mine.”

A few minutes later TOP walked into ops, Major Lanning was already in the cutter as was Commander Ariel.

“OK.” Greg said loudly, “TOP, call it. This is your show.”

“Yes sir. Major Lanning and Commander Spectator, I mean Ariel, are you ready?”

Shilo said laughing, “Ready here Top.”

Larry Lanning said, “All set.”

“Major, you are cleared to depart the cradle.”

“Departing.” The craft disconnected normally from the Scorpion but then it appeared as though it lost all control. Twisting and jerking and flying straight up in relation to the Scorpion until it came to a rather abrupt stop six kilometers above, and slightly in front of the ship, and flying in reverse.

A few minutes later, “In position flying in reverse. We can see all of the cutters.” Shilo said.

“Roger that, Commander, we see you. Tell the Major he looks like he is having fun.”



“He heard you Top and told me to tell you he is grinning from ear to ear like a Cheshire cat, whatever that is.”

“Understood Commander,” His voice and demeanor changed. “Attention all cutters, do not disengage from the cradle, activate your cloak.”

As they did the ship looked like it was in a traffic accident, dents all over the hull. “Ariel to Top. Have the cutters modify their cloak shield geometry by.....say.... 14 degrees with an azimuth of negative 9.”

The cutters all heard her of course, but the Top-ranking Marine on the ship repeated her request. A few moments later the dents turned into dimples.

“Is there a way to continue the mod while we watch, it appears each cutter will need to be manually tuned due to their location on the hull. That also means one cutter will need to break away and the Major and I will need to do this procedure while someone else observes our shield modification.”

For the next hour they readjusted the cutters, and finally all of them appeared to be a darker spot on the ship and not a cloaked and classified cutter. They docked and one of the others flew off and helped them adjust their geometry.

The craft docked again and activated the new geometry which made it vanish on the hull. Good thing too, they were nearly in visual range of Starbase Cochrane.

“Binotti to Steel. On your sensors, what did you see?”

“Well sir, as they adjusted the geometry for nominal, they vanished off sensors, as in the glitch it appeared to be, stopped. At the end, we had no sensor issues and at the moment they are tuned to the most sensitive we can make them. Ten times more sensitive than when we are in a battle, so I think we are good to go!”

“Captain.” Top said, “Would you and your Commanders like to join us in the standard debriefing after an exercise?”

“Yes we would. Contact Shilo and Rich yourself and invite them at my request. I will head there now.”

“I hope you enjoyed the demonstration sir.”

“I did, yes. I only wish there was a visual of Shilo’s face when they initially disengaged from the ship.”

“Uh...Sir. That can be arranged. But, at the same time, you have no idea where it came from.”

“Understood John, send it to my quarters.”

“I just wish I could see the looks on those young Marines faces when they walk in and see you already in the room.”

“Now that’s something I can make happen John.”

## CHAPTER 1-9

Greg left the room and let the Top finish up. As he entered the Marines briefing room, a cargo bay converted to a conference room, “Computer, is there visual recording in this room?”

“Yes, visual recording is possible.”

“As each person enters this room record a visual containing their face. Maintain the recording for the first 90-seconds after they enter. Send a copy of the compiled recording to myself, and to First Sergeant John Braddock.”

“Ready to record.”

“Also, there is to be no notification of any kind that this recording is taking place.”

“Complete. Standing by for someone to enter.”

The captain sat in a darkened corner of the room waiting for the Marines to enter. He loved playing with people. He was not mean about it, but he did like to have some fun. So far, most of the Marines had no idea how to take him, and most of his crew wondered what he would do next. Only Rich and Shilo had an idea, the three of them had a daily meeting about what will transpire the next day and what happened so far today. He demanded his senior staff be fully informed, and that they inform their staff when appropriate. He did not like being kept in the dark about anything and was nearly 100% certain his staff, his crew, and his Marines did not appreciate it either.

The first Marines walked in, a group of five including Sarge. He saw the captain in the shadows and asked the group, “So what do you think of the captain?”

Without hesitation, “Well, not sure how to take the man. He’s not a Marine but he acts like one. He’s not exactly acting like a captain either.”

“He’s swims in his own river. But at this point on the timeline I can’t say anything negative.” Another said.

Sarge asked, “Is that a good thing?”

“Yes it is. This is the oddest and craziest mission in the history of Starfleet, only fitting we got the oddest and craziest captain to lead the mission.”

Sarge stopped and turned towards the captain, “Sir, I took a consensus. You’re an odd duck but we’ll follow you to hell and back.” The Marines who talked about the Captain turned and saw him sitting there listening, and Sarge reached over and closed a mouth or two.

The room let out a cheer. Greg stood up and walked to the group of five. Marines, stand at ease. Sarge, you’re kinda the odd duck also. I guess it’s only fitting when we get there you and I do a little scouting.” He lowered his voice making it sound like he was trying to whisper. “These guys any good?”

“Well sir, kinda green but they got potential. If I had to rate em, I’d give them an A for effort.”

“I need four guys in 6-hour rotations in a cutter to be the invisible eyes for the ship. Since we cannot use active sensors on the mission, human eyes are the best bet. Think they can handle it?”

“No sir, they would get bored and start playing around most likely. I would stick the major, the top and our two LT’s in those things for those shifts and free up these muscle heads for the real work.”

The other Marines were looking at Sarge like he was nuts talking to the captain like that, “Sarge, what are you doing for dinner?”

“I was planning to eat the galley slop. You got another idea?”

“You like steak, or ribs?”

Sarge thought for a minute, “Ribs.”

“Best answer; be at my cabin at 1800 and dress like you’re relaxing. If I see a uniform, you will be very unhappy.”

“Yes sir, I understand.” He shook hands with the captain, “See you this evening. Hope you got a LOT of ribs!”

Greg laughed, “I brought 40 pounds. I may have the chef cook them all! Who knows, maybe after we get our fill, you can make a few Marines happy.” The room cheered again.

Greg enjoyed the debriefing and he and Shilo participated more than they thought they would.

“Captain, can I have a word with you?” Major Lanning asked.

“Just one?” Greg replied without thinking.

Larry shook his head slightly, “Sir, I am rather enjoying the time on the bridge, and your crew is very well trained. They refuse to let me screw up too bad. In the scenarios I die quite a bit, but they offer suggestions. I finally started taking their advice, and we started winning. Why do you need me on the bridge?”

“Larry, this is a joint service ship. I want to prove that Marines are more than just the Federation’s muscle. You are doing a great job learning and soon you will have a new role. Just get your shit together, put it in one place, and don’t lose it.”

Larry was dumbfounded. That was not an answer. He had something in the works and Major Lanning was a large part of it. “Yes sir, I will keep learning and see what’s next.”

“Good, tonight report to weapons control. Select four Marines to accompany you. On the bridge, everyone can run any console. So far, all you learned was sitting on your ass. Now that you understand command a little better, time to spread your wings. One of those four need to be Top also. I will treat him like an ensign, he’s going to hate it.”

Lanning smiled, “Yes sir, he will hate it.”

Gregory T. Binotti walked to the front of the room, the debriefing was over, and stood in front of a room full of Marines, and two of his Commanders, his first and second officers. He waited to start a briefing. After a few minutes, Top walked in and walked right up to the Captain. Major Lanning just shook his head, Shilo and Rich smiled, and the captain grabbed the outstretched hand of the top.

“TOP! Got everything squared away?”

“You know it, sir. You know, you are a hell of a lot nicer than Major Lanning said you were.” Larry planted his hand on his forehead.

“You are not nearly as grumpy as the Major says you are also John. If there is ever anything you need, or anyone who needs a timeout in the brig, you just let me know. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you, sir, I just may take you up on that offer.” Top looked around the room and locked eyes with a few of the Marines. Then, on purpose, Top and the Major locked eyes and the Major stood and squared off. They looked like they were about to fight then they hit their left open hand with their right fist. The third time it hit, the Major’s fist remained a fist, but Top had his index and middle finger extended and open.”

“HA! Won again!” Major Lanning yelled.

“Excuse me, sir. Does that offer extend to people of the major persuasion?” The room busted out in laughter.

After it calmed down a bit, Top took over and conducted the debriefing. Afterwards, Greg walked to the front of the room and asked who the best fighters were; a few of them stood.

“More than I thought. I need for you all to report to the gym in the morning at 0830. Commander Steel has a special assignment for you when we arrive at our destination. Yes, you have a while to learn your mission, but you will need it. For those of you that are standing, this is an all-volunteer assignment, backing out after you talk to Commander Steel is OK. Nothing will be recorded anywhere and if Major Lanning mentions it, I do have the power to give him a timeout.” He paused, “Rich, you OK with this group?”

“Actually no, I counted 11. I only need 8 more to make it 9.”

“So, three groups of three?”

“Yes sir, you’re good at math, aren’t you?”

Greg turned to John Braddock, “Uh Top, this guy just may make that list we were talking about.”

“I’ll mark him as tentative, sir.” Top said, pretending to mark an imaginary piece of paper.

From out of nowhere, Commander Steel produced a Klingon Mekleh. “Top, take me off the list and this is yours.”

“Including the sheath?”

“Deal. We’ll talk later.”

Top scratched his imaginary paper, and this time it was Major Lanning and the Captain to just shake their head.

“OK.” The Captain said, “We have a bit of business to tend to first. Marines, I’m sure most of you understand that not all of you may be returning home. But, that’s the nature of Starfleet. If it comes to that, I will be joining you in the great beyond.” He paused a moment, looking at the faces. The young and well, maybe not so innocent faces. “I’ve been hearing you all call each other by nick names or code names so, I have a special mission. The major and I have already spoken. The team will consist of Doc, Grumpy, Bashful, Sarge and myself.”

Greg looked at Larry who spoke up, “Captain, I guess that makes your call sign Cinderella!” The room erupted in laughter.

“I’ll take it, if for no other reason than the true oddness of it.”

The room quieted again, and he continued, “I need seven volunteers to go with the Major, this is a dangerous and secret mission,” all hands in the room went up, “to get captured and interrogated by the Romulan Command on the planet.” All hands went down.

“The Major is taking a covert team into a secure area. You will not be in Starfleet uniform and I recommend you not shave or cut your hair from this point on. Weapons can be whatever you want to carry, from whatever planet you can think of, providing we can get them before we depart. The team is not to kill anyone, heavy stun is OK. You are to get yourself captured and interrogated, and there may be some pain involved. However, we have something that will assist you in attaining your goal and get back to the ship in one piece.” He looked at Sarge. “Sarge, may I borrow you for a minute?”

“Sure thing sir, but please give me back when you are done.”

“No promises....” Greg smiled, “So Sarge, who in this room is the baddest of the bad, if there was one Marine you did not want to be on their bad side, who is that?”

“Sarge thought for a moment, but the room began chanting A-N-I-M-A-L”

“Animal, please join Sarge and I.”

“He did. Greg’s head was in this man’s chest, and he looked as though if he chewed his nails, he would have just removed them from the walls of a house!”

“Stand here.” He pointed to a spot on the floor. Animal stood there. “Your job, your only job, is to not let Sarge get to the box on the stage.” He pointed to the first row. “You Marines, stand in a circle and defend the platform.” They all stood and made a solid circle around the platform.

He turned to Sarge, “Your mission is to get to Major Lanning and in his top left pocket is an old fashion key to open the box on that stand, that is on the platform, that is encircled by Marines, and guarded by Animal.”

Sarge looked at him, “OK”

“See that chair over there Sarge, that is where you will start from, in a sitting position.” He started walking there and Sarge followed. He handed Sarge a small capsule and Sarge took it from him, no one noticed. In a very low voice, “When I nod to you, bite down on this capsule and I will explain it all to you after we are alone.”

“OK sir, confused, but WilCo.” Old Earth military for I will comply.

“OK. What’s in the box you may ask. In the box is a phaser, set to medium-ish stun to make it fun. The setting is locked so no one will accidentally get hurt too bad. If Sarge gets the key from the Major, and the phaser from the box, he has my permission to stun everyone in this room who is standing in his way. The power cell is at a full charge.”



“Now sir, you just made it worth my while to win this little match.” Sarge said.

“Good, Marines, DEFEND!! Sarge, ready in 3,” He nodded and they both bit down on the capsule they had in their cheek, “2,1, GO!”

Neither of them moved but the rest of the room slowed to a stop. Greg walked over to Sarge, “How you doing?”

“A little dizzy but OK sir. What the hell is all this?”

“OK. Sit a moment, it passes. In a nutshell this is the water from a Planet visited by the original Enterprise a bunch of years ago. It speeds up your molecules to a point you are invisible, or more exact, you are moving so fast that everyone else is essentially frozen in time. One rule, cell damage, when accelerated, if you are injured, you die in a couple minutes. So, no boo boo.”

“Yes sir, noted. Don’t get a boo boo.”

“The capsule I handed you is red, this one is blue. It’s the antidote. After you do what you need to do, go sit in the chair and take the blue. It will give you something to laugh at but remember not to send a phaser blast at your chair. Even they are slowed to an absolute crawl.”

“Understood sir. Can I begin?”

“Yes.”

He went about getting the key from the Major and in the process dropped his pants. Opening the box, he verified it was on stun and proceeded to shoot each and every Marine standing around the platform, in the chest as he walked completely around the platform. So when time resumes they will all fall on top of each other on the platform. Then he took a shot at Animal, and for good measure a couple more from various points in the room. The phaser blasts will appear to come from every corner of the room and the audience.

In the meantime, Greg walked back to Rowan and Larrimore who were standing in the back, in the shadows. He walked them to the front to stand them on either side of Sarge’s chair like guards.

He walked over to where the chair was sitting and stood and waited for Sarge to finish. When he sat down, he took the antidote. Sarge froze. Greg took his antidote and the room sped up and chaos ensued.

Everyone fell over. Major Lanning stood there with his pants at his ankles, and the Section 31 duo was flabbergasted they were now in the front of the room.

The insanity lasted less than a minute, and they all looked at Sarge, who was sitting there quietly in his chair like he never moved. He had his legs crossed in a casual manner and the phaser was sitting on his knee.

“Take your seats please and I will explain.” Greg said. After a couple minutes everyone managed to stand and walked back to their seats. “MAN! He’s fast!” Greg said. A hand went up in the back.

“Private.....”

“Private Gomez sir. May I ask how he did that?”

“Would you believe magic, Private?”

“No sir. But however he did it, I want some!”

Hoots and howls took over for a moment, Greg raised a hand and it subsided. “So, you want to learn how he did it, huh.”

“Private Gomez, Sarge, please join me.”

They stood on either side of the captain and the captain handed Sarge two capsules. Sarge got the idea and behind the captains back he told the private to bite down on this when the Captain extended his index finger. Greg heard the conversation also and was ready. All three of them had a capsule in their cheek and a minute later Greg held up an index finger. All three bit on the capsule and the Private nearly fell over.

Greg let the private stabilize and explained what happened and to never get cut when in this state. It is important for all of them to get acclimated to the transition, so the dizziness will not affect them in a real-world situation.

“Now, let’s head to the back of the room.” They went to where Larrimore and Rowan were standing, frozen, again. They were leaning against the wall. Greg picked up Larrimore and put her where he was standing. Sarge grabbed Lanning and put him where he was standing, and Gomez picked Sgt Morgan and put her where he was standing.

He placed their hands in the exact same positions and they all went to the back of the room and waited.

“This is the antidote. Take this and it all goes away in a moment.” He handed one to Sarge, one to Gomez and he put one in his mouth. They all bit on it and the room sped up.

Everyone was astonished. Larrimore and Rowan were not happy, again. When were they happy.....

Greg explained the entire process to all Marines. They all wanted a part of it.

“Let me explain to you what just happened,” He held up a capsule. “These have a special ingredient, the name of which is classified higher than most of you will be able to know. Suffice it to say, we will call them,” He looked at Sarge who thought up a name.

“Captain, how about a cold pill?” Sarge said.

“Cold pill?”

“Sure, has two effects. One, you take revenge on someone after taking them, or two they find a way to take revenge on you for what happens to them when you take them.”

Rich spoke up, “Sir, there is a Klingon saying, Revenge is a dish best served cold. I get it, a cold pill.”

“OK then, cold pills.” He held up a red and a blue box. “Everyone in this room line up and take 3 red and 3 blue capsules. Red is the speed up and blue is the antidote. At your convenience, please get used to the effect and be sitting when you take them the first time and wait a minute before you get up. Here’s the downside, if you get cut, as in any cell damage, you will die. So, take the cold pill, do what you need to do, get to safety and take the antidote. Am I clear on this?”

A resounding YES SIR.

“Good. Have fun, nothing bad please. Playing is ok.”

“All of you will be practicing with this secret weapon for the next few days. You will receive three of each, and I cannot stress it strongly enough, if accelerated, do not receive any cellular damage. Also, nothing inappropriate if you get my drift.”

Sarge raised his hand, “Sir, the word inappropriate may be too big of a word for some of these young’uns. May I suggest changing it to don’t do anything against regs or stupid?”

“You may, if you feel it’s necessary to dumb it down, but I’ll leave that to your discretion.”

“Another hundred credit word.” He paused and took a breath, “Ok sir. I’ll try to get it through their heads.”

“As I started to say when the grammar Marine cut in...” Laughing filled the room and several marines patted and slapped Sarge on the back and shoulder. “...Each of you will receive three blue and three red capsules. The red capsules are red to indicate danger. In your clothing there will be a pocket that is reachable if you are bound. There will also be a couple other pockets in your clothing to hold the red capsules. The blue capsules will be in a compartment in your shoe for added security. In the heel actually. As I said, you will each receive three capsules to accelerate. Practice, play, get used to the experience. The first time it causes dizziness. You get used to the feeling quickly.”

Greg looked around the room. “Top, any words of wisdom?”

“Just one thought sir,” He turned to the room, “Don’t be stupid!”

“You spoke volumes.” Major Lanning said. Sarge and Top nodded.

“Come up and get your Cold Pills.”

They filed up and received a small packet containing three of each of the capsules. They were being handed out by a couple of the Marines Greg drafted into service. He looked around the room and

heard laughter, he noticed something in one section of the room, the opposite area from the commotion.

It appears someone removed Major Lanning's pants and put his shirt on backwards.

"OK, who did this? I want a pill check!"

"Relax Major." Since all the pills were handed out and Greg was standing in the front of the room. "Dismissed, have fun but heed Tops words." He paused a moment. "Sarge, can I see you a moment?"

The room emptied and Sarge joined the captain. Greg handed him a red and a blue capsule. "You may need these."

"How did you know?" Sarge said.

"Just before the Major was redressed, I was looking directly at you and you were sitting facing left. In a picosecond, you were sitting in the chair facing right. Then the Major had an explosion. Two and two does equal four you know."

"Thank you, sir. As far as officers go, you alright!" He saluted the Captain and left.

Alone in the room he looked around. Thinking to himself, he tapped his communicator. "Binotti to logistics."

"Yes sir. Ensign She'la here, how can I be of assistance?" He remembered her, about 2 meters tall, and a fine example of her species. She was in the briefing a few moments ago, sitting near the windows. He turned to look at the window, a glorious site.

"Ensign, the conference room is empty, can you please send a few able bodies to put the chairs up, and clean up the room?"

There was a moment of silence on the line. "Done sir. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

Greg turned to look into the room, it was completely spotless. Everything was put away and the tables on the far end were set up in the event of a buffet it looked like. "Nice work, Ensign. How do you like the new toys?"

“This is great sir. I understand the cautions and told my people to be careful, but for repairs and maintenance, nothing could be better, or more fun. By the way Sir, thank you for being near the windows, you were completely out of the way.”

“Great work, convey that to your troops. Binotti out.”

“Shilo.” Greg said tapping his communicator again.

“Yes Captain.”

“Can we meet for breakfast? 0530 in Rec Room 4?”

“Yes sir. See you at 0530. Ariel out.”

Greg had a realization, an awakening, a revelation! He had nowhere to be, nothing to do, and no one to talk to until 0530. OK, what can he do for the evening.....

## CHAPTER 1-10

During the next couple days, a few of the crew of the Nightwing assisted the crew of the Scorpion. These few crewmen volunteered to be deposited on Cochrane and Cheryl would pick them up in a few days, a little R&R for volunteering to stay with the Scorpion and offer assistance to the engineering crew.

They were needed to get the ship ready, since they had the cold pills available for their use, they literally did more than a week's work in 30 hours. At one-point Juan realized he had a 2-day calibration that needed to take place and was about to send up a flare.

Johnston looked at his Commander, "Hold on a second sir. Be right back." He held up a finger in a wait a minute gesture and bit down on a cold pill, as did two other engineers who knew what he was going to do. A moment later he looked at Juan as he reappeared, "All done sir."

"Damn. That saved us days of work." The other two engineers appeared.

"We even cleaned everything up!" One said.

"And we polished the bulkheads!" The second said.

"Good work, now on to the next issue." A few engineers walked in, "You must be Nightwing?"

"Yes sir, what do you need us to do? We are finished in Medical."

"What are your specialties?"

"A little of everything sir." The Lieutenant said.

"Great. If you find you need a lot of time to make a repair, take a cold pill." Juan told them, and they looked at him with the oddest of looks. He volunteered no additional information.

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## CAPTAIN'S LOG

Repairs, upgrades, installations, and maintenance are moving along faster than expected. Nearly at light speed. We're ahead of schedule, and this mission will be departing earlier than expected. Starfleet is happy about that, as am I. The sooner I get out into open space the better I'll feel. As for the crew, they are adjusting well to the mission and each other. My command staff is perfect, Commanders Ariel, Martinez and Steel are fitting in and doing an amazing job. Our SSD operatives, I came to learn they are really a part of Section 31. No one will admit they exist, nor will they deny it; however, they do change the subject rather quickly. Needless to say, they are a mystery. They stick to themselves and not all that much socialization, but they will be at parties and get together, just sitting in a dark corner, watching and whispering. I thought about planting bugs in all the dark corners in the hopes of hearing what they were talking about, just have not got around to it yet. Besides, I really don't care all that much. They're not in my chain of command, just passengers until we get to our destination. In the meantime, I like messing with their minds, turning into a hobby and I drafted Commander Steel and Major Lanning into this group also, they think it is fun. Speaking of the Major, he is becoming an able captain. He has been receiving the typical training for a bridge officer and is doing quite well. At this pace, he will be certified before we depart in two weeks, and then Starfleet Marines will have to make him a lieutenant colonel. Glad to see my plan came together. He needs to be promoted because I prefer to call him Colonel than Major.

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Greg ended his log and went to his replicator, "Scotch, 4 fingers, neet." And the glass appeared.

BEEEEEEP, from the door chime.

"Come."

As he entered, "Sir, Sargen..."



“Sit down Sarge. Relax. Unless you’re being dressed down in here, consider that a permanent order.”

“Yes sir. I like you Cap. You’re a nut job.” He paused and Greg looked at him and crossed his eyes. “Yes sir, not sure if you’re a pecan or an almond though.”

“More of a cashew, I would guess. Classy, but with taste.”

He looked at Sarge and pointed to the drink. Sarge nodded. Greg walked over to the replicator and put his empty glass in the unit. It spun up and disappeared, recycling complete. Turning ninety degrees he opened a cabinet and removed three glasses and a bottle. He sat in his big chair and Sarge was sitting on the sofa. A moment later the chime went off again and before he could say anything the door opened, and Rich walked in and plopped on the other chair.

Without saying a word Rich picked up the bottle and filled all three glasses about halfway. He recorked the bottle and set it on the small table, then, “Three?” He realized Sarge was sitting on the couch.

“Howdy Commander.” Sarge smiled. This was such a routine he did the actions with muscle memory.

“Sarge, did the Captain here add you to our evening get together?”

“Not sure sir, all I know is that is a really good bottle of scotch.” He picked up a glass and handed it to the captain and took one for himself and sat back in the couch.

Rich raised his glass, “To the mission!” He emptied the glass in one gulp, as did Greg and Sarge. Without thinking, Sarge refilled the glasses and put the bottle down, and sat in his chair.

“So, Cap, what’s this all about?” Sarge asked.

Greg sipped on his glass, “I picked this bottle up in Ireland a few years ago, a case actually. I have this bottle and three other bottles left. I already put a glass in the replicator and copied it, but it lacks something I cannot figure out. Great for the evening, but for the flavor, you need the real thing.” He looked at Rich, “Rich, your role in this little scotch club is to gage the temperature of the Starfleet

crew and Sarge, your role is to gage the temperature of the Marines. I need to know they are OK. Nothing covert, but if they need something, I need to know about it; if I can get it, they get it. Next week sometime, Major Lanning will be promoted to LT. Col at my request. Starfleet is a bit miffed with me on that one because the promotion went through with no flak from Marine Command.”

He sipped his scotch. “You can’t say anything yet because I have a mission for you. You are to take a cutter and head to a set of coordinates at the other end of this solar system, should take less than an hour at max speed. You need to pick up a passenger and a crate.”

Sarge sipped on his drink, “You gonna tell me who I’m carrying back to the ship?”

Greg grinned, “I thought about it being a surprise, but I am fairly certain you don’t get flustered.” He paused and sipped again. “Who’s the highest-ranking Marine in this area?”

Sarge grinned, “The three-star, General Fowler.” Sarge laughed, “Why all the covert stuff. The General has his own ship, he could just show up and beam over.”

“Well, there will be a soiree in the main dining room because it will be a last night celebration. The next morning we’ll be heading to our mission. The General is here to promote the Major to Light bird, and I think his new call sign should be tweedy.”

Sarge smiled a full smile, “I like that!” He paused a moment, “Maybe the General and I can have a talk on the way home and the General can make the suggestion.”

“Just be certain to follow all procedures to depart, keep the cloak active, and if there are any questions, they need to talk to either me or Rich. They are not to contact Larry at all.” Greg took a sip.

“Once he is promoted, he will join this little group. Oh, by the way, in that crate you are bringing back with the classified label, Captains Eyes Only, is 20 bottles of this stuff. A few bottles of something from Shilo’s home world. I tried it once. It reminds me of a cross between vanilla, bitters, and spoiled orange juice. But she loves the stuff. No idea if it is an alcohol-based drink, since 99% of that planet does not drink. But I want her to have something from

home.” He smiled, “I needed to make sure we had enough of this,” tapping his glass, “to last the duration of the mission.”

“Does the General know what is in the case?”

“Yes and no. He knows it’s not really classified materials, but has no idea what it really is, that night we’ll invite him to review the classified materials in my quarters and inform him then.” Sarge looked at him, “Never fear, the General and I have been friends since I was a cadet. He taught me at the academy when he was a butter bar. Been friends and kept in touch ever since. Stationed a few times together. He will fit in to this group perfectly.”

Sarge raised his glass, “To the General, be fun to see him drunk.” The others two raise their glasses as well and said, “To getting drunk!” They killed their glasses.

Rich poured another round. “OK, let’s get down to business.”

They discussed things for the next half hour.

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Greg walked into the Rec Deck at 0515 and grabbed a cup of coffee. He sat at a table near the window and stared out. He chose this location because the view was all stars. He loved looking at the stars.

A few minutes later, after he finished that cup of coffee, Shilo arrived and got a glass of juice. She walked over and stood next to him and just stared out the window.

“Captain, may I make an observation?”

“Any time Shilo.”

“You love the stars. You are married to command and to Starfleet in such a way that the word love makes it seem small. I will tell you something I never thought I would tell you.” She paused a moment and Greg looked at her. “I accepted this post knowing you would screw up in such a way that I would need to take command. However, I have discovered it is your style of leadership. A style I would never have considered. For that, I thank you. You opened my mind to new ideas, new possibilities. I am beginning to understand

you and appreciate you and the mission in a way I would never have considered before. I thank you.”

“Nice. Thanks.” Greg said and pointed to a seat. She sat then he sat. “I had my doubts about you as well but over the past year or so, I have come to trust and believe in your abilities and your judgement. You have taught me a lot, you organized nightmare you. Because of you I must say I know my plan and I can stick to it a lot easier these days.”

A crewman approached with a couple plates of breakfast. He set the plates in front of the officers. “Thanks Donald.”

“My pleasure sir. If you get the chance, stop by just before lunch. Got a surprise for you.”

“See you at what, 11?”

“That should work.” He turned and walked away.

Shilo looked at her breakfast. “This is my favorite breakfast from Starfleet. How did you recreate it?”

“Got on subspace and called the café, spoke to the head cook and she remembered you. I asked what you liked to eat and had her send the recipes. Chef can recreate this whenever you need a smile.”

She looked at his plate, “Me, well, I like a lot of things and mix cuisines at my convenience. Three eggs scrambled with cheese, grits, bacon, hash brown potatoes, fresh fruit. This makes me smile.”

They started eating. “So Shilo, what do the people on your world eat for breakfast? I have never read anything about food on your home world.”

“Well, nearly all breakfasts at home are what you would refer to as a smoothie. Powders, nutrients, fruits, milk type products, proteins. Blended and drank quickly.”

“Why quickly?”

She smiled a smile he had never seen before. It was pure humor. “Let’s call it a unique flavor. A few humans had tried it, but the human gag reflex will not allow them to drink the entire glass as

we do. Personally, I like the flavor. I have been told the aroma is like strawberries. But the taste is, let's say, difficult to acquire."

"I will need to try it one day."

She looked at him, stared at him really, he said "I like new things, even things I should not try."

"I'll see what I can do."

They finished their breakfast and spoke of their youth, early career and friends they discovered they had in common. Saying they were friends may be a stretch, but the term mutual respect is closer to dead on, and they do respect each other.

As they were sitting there Sarge walked in, as did Dr. Piper and Commander Martinez. They each went to the buffet that neither of them noticed had been set up while they were talking and grabbed a plate and a drink. Major Lanning walked in and did the same. The table the Captain and the Commander sat alone at a short time ago has filled up. The captain and Commander sat across from each other with Piper next to the Captain and Sarge next to the Commander, Juan and Larry sat at each end of the table.

"OK Cap, what's up?" Sarge said. Shilo looked at him, then to the Captain at the nickname.

Greg looked at her, "Long story. Tell you later." He winked at Sarge. Everyone noticed, and he continued. "A man in my past, a former CO actually, once told me you do not need to be the smartest, nor do you need to be the best. But if you surround yourself with the smartest and the best, something may rub off." He glanced at each face. "I did just that..."

Taking a deep breath, he continued, "We have a problem to resolve. Sarge here is going on a suicide mission when we get to our destination." Sarge laughed out loud. "We need to figure out a way to NOT make it a suicide mission. Personally, I like the guy and would like for him to return to the ship after his part is completed. Let's see if we can come up with a way for that to happen."

"First off, the mission he will be on is quite simple. We will deposit him on the planet a good distance from the settlement and he

will walk into the town and make his presence known. He is not a covert operative but needs to appear as a former Federation citizen who bums around from planet to planet making a meager living. He needs to have equipment, and other items that reinforce this persona.” He paused, “So, what does he need, how can it be developed and used, and what are we not thinking of for this mission?”

Shilo spoke first, “He needs to communicate with the ship eventually and he needs a tricorder in some form. Perhaps a hidden beacon and a controic, how do humans say it, hap hazardly constructed...”

Sarge added, “Commander, I think the word you are looking for is cobbled together.”

“Yes, that’s the term, thank you. This needs to be cobbled together from many races and locations. It can have hidden features, but it needs to appear no specific nationality.” She tapped her TNT, “Ensigns Ramon, please report to the Rec Deck.”

“Aye Commander.” Two voices could be heard.

Juan took over, “I can create a cobbled tricorder since we have a fairly extensive parts bin from all the major powers. Klingon, Romulan, Ferengi, Federation. Sarge can say he acquired it and not created it so there will not be any construction questions. As for the beacon, a pressure transponder placed in the meaty section between the thumb and index finger. To disguise the power signature, the thumb knuckle can be modified to be partially non-organic.”

The Ensigns approached the table, “Have you had breakfast yet?” Shilo asked them.

“Yes Commander.” Yvonne said.

Shilo reiterated the discussion to bring them up to speed.

Piper spoke up, “I see where you’re going with that Juan. Captain, I can place an Andorian bone splint and the story could be his hand was crushed in an incident, he was repaired by an Andorian doctor because he saved the life of someone on that ship and they felt they owed him.” Piper thought for a moment, “Also, the repairs they made need to look as though they used Andorian skin cells. Maybe

other species also; we can always make you appear to be Vulcan or Romulan than Human.”

Sarge raised his hand and everyone looked at him. “I like that idea Doc, we can talk later about this but there are a few things I want. A few weapons, bladed instruments mostly, I can talk to Commander Steel and we can create what we need. The metal needs to be forged, not replicated and not a Federation metal and the blades need to be created, not replicated. I suggest we find an asteroid on the trip and make them on the fly.”

Sarge continued, “I am fairly good with leatherwork, I can make a sheath for the blades. A simple scan will uncover what they really are; also, in the heel of my boots 6 vials of the water in the left, and 6 vials of the antidote in the right.” He paused and rubbed his chin. “Also, I need a phaser but not a federation phaser. An Andorian phaser in a holster. Also, a Varon T disruptor as a backup weapon in a hidden holster. No one in their right mind will believe a Federation citizen in good standing is carrying a Varon T. Don’t worry sir, I have no intention of actually using it on anyone. It’s just a symbol of my allegiance, and my character. Believe me, they will understand when I am taken in and the Varon T will be my ticket to where I need to be.” Everyone looked at him. A Varon T is very illegal in the Federation. “The communicator needs to be hidden and deactivated unless I need to use it, as in zero power signature when off. Lastly, there needs to be a single capsule of the water in a place I can get to even if I am tied up. Perhaps sewed into my collar. I can bite down on it and the water can do its thing.”

“Great ideas. Let’s see what we can do. We depart in a little over a week. Major, can you get an Andorian phaser delivered to us here in a week?” Lanning replied.

“Yes sir, I can. I hear there’s a ship due to leave Earth a few days from now and due to arrive the day before we leave for the mission. I’ll send a shuttle to pick it up and bring it back.”

Sarge looked at the Captain, Greg said, “Larry, let Sarge take a cutter and pick it up. It will be a good opportunity to verify the cloak works as we hope in a condition other than optimum.”

“You up for a short flight Sarge?” Larry asked.

“Yes sir, sounds like fun actually.” Sarge replied and winked at the Captain, no one noticed.

Yvonne added to the conversation. “Sir, there is some new tech Rikky and I were trained on in school. One of which is a cellular communicator. It can’t transmit speech, nor can it receive, but it is imbedded into a cell in a conspicuous location and when needed the wearer squeezes it three times. It emits a very low power signal on a very specific and unmonitored frequency.”

They all looked at her and Ricardo took over, “Sir, the computer can be set to automatically receive the signal and activate the transporter beam on that signal. The computer processing will not be effected by the temporal pause as humans are.”

“You know this for a fact?” Lanning asked.

“Yes sir, we have tested it.” Yvonne said.

“I knew I brought you two here for a reason. Good work. Work with this team and make happen what ever they need.”

They sat at that table for a few hours and hammered out all the details. When they left the room, it was nearly time for lunch, but none of them were hungry. They had been nibbling all morning.

Greg walked into the Galley and found Donald. “Am I early?”

“No sir, right on time. I created a new recipe and on this ship sir, you are the man to test a chocolate dessert on, so, here you go.” He paused and grabbed a plate that had a small chocolate cake in the center. As the captain accepted the confection, Donald continued. “Sir, this is a molten cake. The center is a thickened chocolate, fudge like actually, and the cake is a cross between a variety of varryine levels of cacao.

Greg put the plate on a nearby work surface and using the fork cut into the center. Liquid chocolate oozed out. Then he noticed the layers of the cake, light in the center and darker as they make their way to the outside. He tasted it.

“This is amazing, but I think it is too large. The depth and richness of this, after dinner, will be a bit heavy.”

“I tried to make it smaller, but it never came out right. This is the smallest it can be and still be like it is, perfect.

“OK then. I like it.” He finished it off since it has been a while since breakfast. “I need a cup...” Donald handed him a cup of coffee. “You thought of that too?”

“Yes sir, been cooking for you a while, I know your tastes.”

“Carry on Chief. You are doing a great job.” He and Donald shook hands and Greg left the galley.

CHAPTER 1-11

Walking onto the bridge an hour before he was scheduled to be there can create a bit of mayhem. In a fun way. At least for Gregory T. Binotti.

As he entered no one noticed because they were in the middle of a test scenario. He stood in the back of the bridge, a few of the crew noticed him and he put his finger to his lips in a SSHhhhhhh motion. They understood and went about their business.

Major Lanning was in the chair, so the Major was in command at the moment. In this scenario, the ship was being attacked by a fleet of enemy ships. All firing at the Scorpion and hitting their mark with each volley.

A few minutes later the computer announced the ship had blown up and the scenario was over; all functions returned to normal and the view screen changed to an external view, of the space station they have been at for more than a month.

Tomorrow they depart for the mission. Tonight, is the last dinner. “Major Lanning, you blew up my ship!”

“Yes Captain, I did it again.”

“Reset the scenario to 5 minutes before the end. Major, may I sit in your seat. I would like to attempt to win.”

Larry stood and moved out of the way. “I gotta see this.” He said.

Greg sat in his seat. “Begin.”

It began, and he heard sirens, klaxons, alarms and people yelling. “Here is what is going to happen. Ops, grab our spare warp core and turn it on. Send it out in front of the ship 10,000 kilometers and detonate it. Increase forward shields to max or more if possible. Helm, 2 seconds after the detonation, punch it. Comm, send a surrender message now. When they stop firing, the moment they stop firing, warp core boom, engines at full, get the hell out of here.”

A round of “Aye’s” and everything was set.

A second later the ships stopped firing. The warp core was transported into space and detonated and a second later the ship lurched forward. It appears Binotti had escaped.

“Set course to Federation space, fastest this ship will go.”

A minute later, the computer announced the scenario ended, they had won. Greg sat back in his chair. “I always wondered if that would work.” He said to himself, but everyone heard him. He turned to Major Lanning.

“Major, there are times when you will use the proverbial manual word for word, then there are times you will use it to level an unbalanced table. This was one of those times. Think outside the box. Be creative. Do the unexpected. But remember, you will only be able to do it once. Next time, they will be looking for it or at least have the scenario in their minds and will not let you get away with it; unless they are Packlets of course, then you can do it as many times as you want, and they will never get wise to it.” Everyone on the bridge laughed, he had the Packlets nailed.

“Sarge to the bridge.” Greg said and the computer passed on his message.

“Major, I think it is time for Sarge to take his little trip, and for us to get ready for last dinner.” He stood, “Secure all stations. Open a channel to Morena.”

“Channel open sir.”

“Morena, this is Captain Binotti. We are preparing for last dinner.”

“Understood Captain, sending bridge crew to mind the store.”

“Thank you for your effort. You did a fantastic job. I really like the new carpets.”

“Our pleasure Captain.” A pause. “Morena out.”

A moment later four officers appeared in the center of the bridge. “Captain, I am Commander Marks. My crew and I are prepared to stand the night watch.”

Sarge entered the bridge. “Sir, you needin me?”

“Yep, time to take your little trip.”

“Aye sir.”

Greg looked at Marks, “A little sightseeing tour. Fully authorized.”

“Aye Captain.” Marks replied.

Greg looked at Sarge, “Hit space Marine.”

Sarge turned and left. Greg looked around a moment. “Commander Marks, you have the con. Your mission, is to sit here and count the stars.”

Marks laughed a little, “Aye sir.”

Greg and Larry walked towards the turbolift, the rest of the bridge crew had already left. As they entered the lift, Marks and his crew could be heard counting... as the doors closed, they laughed.

Morena had come to know Captain Binotti, and nearly the entire crew of the Scorpion were regular people. This was their way of letting them know they appreciate the time spent.

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By the time Sarge returned Greg was in clean clothes, took a shower, and had a cup of espresso.

“Captain, I’m back with the cargo.”

“Perfect, bring the cargo to my quarters.”

“Roger that.”

A minute or three later, the bell sounded.

“Enter”

“Greg, this guy tells me you are the oddest and most unique commanding officer he ever saw in his 30 plus years in the Marines.”

“General Fowler, really a pleasure to see you.” He grinned and stuck out his hand, the general grabbed him in a bear hug. “Only proper sir, he’s the oddest Marine I ever met, present company excepted.” He looked at Sarge and the General, “You ready to make a Major into a light bird?”

“I am. Has he got a clue?”

“As far as we know, no.”

“This things heavy.” Sarge said, pointing to the cargo container that was floating on a grav cart.

“Marines!” The Captain and the General said at the same time.

“Bring it in.” Greg said and they placed the container on the table in the center of the couch and chairs.

Sarge looked at them, “You boys ready to Majorly blow someone’s mind?”

“You look familiar?” The general said to Sarge.

“Yes sir, I hope so. We met about eight years ago. You were on Vulcan and needed to get to Andor yesterday...”

“...and you were the Marine who picked me up on Vulcan because the transporters were offline for some maintenance. Brought me to the ship and we broke records getting there. I spent half an hour in that infernal metal tube with you and I think we talked about everything.” He thumbed at Greg, “What’s his story?”

Greg said, “You know I’m standing right here.”

Ignoring him, “He’s nice. He’ll get over someday. But till then, he’ll be nice. Likes doing things for people and making friends. Oddest CO I ever had. Like he ain’t out for just himself or something. Did I mention he was nice!”

The General turned to Greg, “As you were, Captain. Sounds like that’s when you’re at your best.”

“Let’s go promote a Marine.” The General said and they left the room. “So, what’s in the box?”

Sarge and Greg smiled. “Show you later sir,” Sarge said.

“You will? You know that’s the Captains quarters.”

“Yes sir, but he shares.” Greg started laughing.

“OK, now I’m curious.”

Greg replied, "Good!"

They strolled to a turbolift and made their way to the dinner.

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The three of them entered through a side galley door and the General remained in the kitchen. The staff looked like they were under surveillance. Greg walked to the stage and Sarge took his seat.

The room quieted, "How many of you think I am odd?" All hands went up. "Can you believe it, that's what Sarge told our special guest on his trip here. This guy stowed away in the cutter when he picked up a special package of classified materials." He paused and Rich looked like he was waiting for the punchline, so he gave it to him. Rich, do me a favor and escort our special guest into the dinner."

Greg pointed to the kitchen door and Rich opened it, no one in the room saw who the guest was, but Rich instinctively stiffened into attention. The room saw it and got really curious.

As the general entered, TOP yelled, ROOM, TEN HUT!" everyone stood at attention. The General took a few steps and said, "As you were."

He made his way to Greg and the two of them chatted a moment. Then the General said, "Sarge, can you please escort the honoree to the front."

"It would be both my pleasure and an honor sir."

Sarge stood and walked nearly all the way around the room, stood next to Major Lanning and snapped to attention. "Major Lanning, it would be my pleasure to escort you to the General."

Larry stood, no idea why he was on his way to see his boss. They walked at a normal pace, slower than normal actually since Sarge set the pace and Larry stayed perfectly in step.

Sarge snapped to attention in front of the General and rendered a perfect salute. "Sir, it is my pleasure to deliver Major Lawrence Lanning to you."

“Thank you, Sergeant, you are dismissed.” He saluted him back and Sarge returned to his seat using all the proper and perfect facing movements like he just left boot.

The General looked at Greg, “Captain, please read the approved document.”

“Yes sir” Greg smiled at Larry.

Greg turned to the room, “ATTENTION TO ORDERS!” Everyone in the room stood at attention.

Greg continued, “The President of the United Federation of Planets, acting upon the recommendation of the Marine Secretary has placed trust and confidence in the loyalty, integrity and personal qualities of Major Lawrence Lanning. In view of these special qualities and his demonstrated potential to serve in a higher grade, Major Lawrence Lanning is promoted to the permanent rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Starfleet Marine Corp as of this stardate. By order of the Marine Secretary and with endorsement of the Commander, Starfleet.”

Greg turned to the General who reached into a pocket and pulled out a silver cluster.

“Major Lanning, it has to be my greatest pleasure to promote you. When you return from your mission, I am told by a little Captain who shall remain nameless that we may be doing this again.” He removed the gold cluster and pinned the silver cluster in its place. The General took a step back and they saluted. “Captain, do you have any words?”

“A few sir; Larry, I can finally refer to you as Colonel! You are now the 5th highest ranking officer on the ship, and General, he has completed the bridge CO course held by the best instructors on this ship. Commander Ariel and Commander Steel.”

General Fowler looked at Shilo and Rich, “Commanders, is he any good?”

Rich volunteered an opinion, “General, I would fly with him anytime.”

“He is green as a ship commander sir, but he knows what he is doing.” Shilo said.

“Colonel Lanning, I want you to know that in recent Starfleet history there has only been one other Marine to command a starship. But in his case, he had no choice and was tossed into the fire pit. All bridge crew were killed, and he had to get the ship home. He did. By the seat of his pants and a prayer. I trust you will be a better ship’s captain than I was...”

They saluted again and Larry went back to his seat, and of course as he passed each marine, they stood at attention and saluted him. There were quite a few salutes, since Larry was sitting in the back of the room.

“Greg, I have a couple more promotions to deliver if I may. Commander Larrimore?”

She walked to the front a bit curious, “Your office, who I have no clear idea who that is, asked me to promote you to the rank of Captain. Therefore, Captain Binotti, for the duration of this mission, is given the rank of Commodore to avoid confusion. That is a rank we have not used in a quite a while but is appropriate here. This mission may not have multiple ships assigned to it, but it has three distinct branches of Starfleet. Congratulations to you both.”

“Do I get a pay raise?” Greg asked.

The general played along, “A little. But you need to sew some insignia on the new uniform.”

The room was quiet as they all waited to hear what Greg was about to say. “Computer, recognize Captain Binotti.”

“Recognized.”

“Until further notice, replicate all my uniforms with the rank of Commodore.”

The computer chirped.

“Done sir!” The general shook his head.

“I’m hungry, and I need a drink.”

“Got just the thing. DONALD, you’re on!”

The staff appeared and Donald was the only crew who was working the galley, the cooks and wait staff were from the station to give the crew, the entire crew, a time together.

The General stood, “Chief..”

“Donald sir, just call me Donald.”

“OK Donald, we seem to have an extra seat at our table. I would be honored if you joined us.”

Greg mentioned this to the General in the turbolift. If not, Donald would work himself to death.

He looked at the Captain and winked, “My pleasure sir.”

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They were all in the Captains quarters and about to open the cargo container, the CLASSIFIED cargo container. Rich, Shilo, Larry, Sarge, Top, Greg and the General.

“Sir, the classified delivery you made was less than a classified and more of a delivery.” Greg opened the container with his security code. He reached in and grabbed a six-bottle case and handed it to Shilo, who set it down and opened it. She extracted a bottle and looked excited.

“Captain, where did you get this? It’s only available at home.”

“I know. I spoke to your father and told him I wanted to give you something to make you happy every time you saw it. He suggested this but made me promise not to drink any. It seems most humans have a gag reflex issue when drinking this beverage. Not sure if it is alcohol based, but regardless, I am happy that you are happy.”

“Thank you, sir. I will have a conversation with my father to properly thank him later.” Everyone chuckled at that comment. “As for the drink, known as Coroik; yes, there is a small amount of alcohol but not enough to even give you a buzz, I believe that is the correct term.”

“It is Commander, thank you.” He reached in the box again and pulled out a smaller box, “This is a gift from the Chancellor. Rich, you made an impression on him. My understanding is these are the last two bottles of this vintage of blood wine in existence.”

Greg reached in the box again, “Major, I mean Colonel, I understand you like tequila.” He handed him a 5-liter bottle of very good tequila.” Larry accepted the very large bottle with both hands. “The rest is for me and these meetings every other night in these quarters. Very good and smooth scotch.” He pulled two out and handed them to Sarge and two bottles and handed them to Top, “Can’t leave out my new friends. Your personal stash.” He removed another bottle and handed it to Rich. He got the idea. “Computer, 7 brandy glasses.”

They appeared in the replicator. Rich filled six of them with about half full of scotch and handed Shilo an empty one. She got the idea and poured an equal amount from one of her bottles.

Shilo sipped and savored her drink, but the others downed theirs and refilled, then sipped. After a couple hours it was time for some rest, they were departing in the morning.

Greg and the rest of the gang walked the General to the transporter room and he beamed back to his ship, in a parking orbit nearby.

After the transport was complete, “Colonel, I believe I am hitting the sack.” He congratulated Larry a last time and bid everyone a fine sleep. Heading toward his quarters, and rounding a corner, “Binotti to Top, the Colonel is on his way.”

“Thank you, sir, he will have a nice reception.” Tops voice was evident through the communicator.

Interesting thing the new communications system. If you instruct the computer to designate an individual as a specific name, it does. There was Top, Sarge, Animal, Bulldog, and a few others he liked to use. Colonel Lanning liked to refer to the Captain as Cinderella.

Greg walked onto the bridge for just a moment and the duty officer nearly fell out of her chair, actually his chair.

“As you were Lieutenant. Just here to take a final look. Tomorrow we depart.”

“Yes sir. I’m hoping to get to the station one last time to pick up a few things. Not really had the chance till now.”

“Make you a deal Delores, while we are on mission if you take two of my watches, I take yours now so you can get a little shopping.”

“Really sir, you sure?” She was surprised, but not all that much. The entire crew knew this man would do anything for his crew.

“Go. The time is 0200, we depart at 0900 so 7 hours. I need at least 4 hours sleep and a little leeway, is 2 hours enough time for you?”

“Definitely sir. Thank you.” She left the bridge and Greg sat in his seat and played with the buttons. He never really did that before and always wondered what they all did.”

“Computer, record Captains Log.”

“Recording.”

“Captains Log. Instead of the actual stardate in my logs I will be using mission dates. Today is stardate .5 and in a few hours the mission will begin, and we will be on our way, stardate 1. I want to go on record that all members of the crew deserve the highest commendation. With the promotion of Major Lanning to Colonel I now have a full complement of Command Rank officers, and all of them are fully trained in bridge operations, even the Colonel. He has proven himself in simulations to be an effective commanding officer, but I do hope it never comes to that.... As for the remaining command officers they are exemplary. The promotion of TE1 Johnston to Lieutenant Junior Grade was what Commander Martinez needed in his department. He has a full crew of officers now in engineering who are all fully trained and can train anyone in just about anything. Commander Ariel has to be the best First Officer I have had the pleasure to serve with, but some of her traits are rubbing off. I am becoming organized and I take notes now. This is really scary. My greatest thorn on this mission is Commander Steel. I intend to use that thorn to poke anyone who gets in my way, I am fairly certain he

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won't mind... The rest of the crew are professionals and our two fresh Ensigns from the academy, they fit in well, are very well trained, have the newest knowledge and techniques and make our current crew look antique. I love them both because they will be my teeth on this mission, and they know it. Special commendation must be given to the crew of the Nightwing for their effort in assisting us to retrofit this ship in near record time, as well as the crew of Morena Shipyard who did an amazing job on this old boat. End Captains Log." The computer beeped.

Thinking a moment, "Computer, transmit a copy of this log to the academy, General Fowler, Morena Operations and Commanding Officer of Starbase Cochrane."

"Logs transmitted." The computer replied.

"Computer, how long will it take for you to explain and demonstrate all functionality of the command console?"

"One hour twenty-two minutes excepting for additional questions or reiteration."

The rest of the bridge chuckled. "Did any of you know the computer could do this?" The all shook their heads.

"Very cool!" He looked at the ceiling, "Computer, begin lesson."

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An hour later Greg knew everything about his console, things he had no idea it could do and a few tricks he could use later if the situation called for it.

Greg looked around, "Who is the lowest ranking person on the bridge?"

"I am sir." A young woman, Vulcan, approached his chair. "Ensign T'Pell. Communications."

"How long have you been in the field Ensign?"

Greg looked around the bridge and saw every single person was a Lieutenant except for her.

“I have been out of the academy for 18 months and assigned to this ship for the past 6 months sir.”

“My idea was to give the bridge to the lowest ranking person on the bridge but an Ensign, it just does not seem right, now does it.”

She looked at him and the rest of the bridge smiled. He has done this before, promoted someone seemingly on the spot.

“Computer, reassign the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade to crewmember T’Pell.” The computer beeped. “Computer, where is Lieutenant JG T’Pell?”

“Lieutenant Junior Grade T’Pell is on the bridge.”

“Well...” He looked at her. “I guess it’s official.”

She almost smiled but caught herself. “Take 5 minutes and get in the proper uniform, then return to the bridge and take the con Lieutenant.”

“Yes sir and thank you sir.” She left the bridge to change.

“Binotti to Steel and Ariel, promotion completed.”

“Understood” came back in a pair of voices and disconnected.

Greg waited for her to return and when she did, he stood and applauded. As did each and every person on the bridge.

“Lieutenant T’Pell, you have the bridge. Try not to break my new ship please.”

“Aye sir. I shall make the attempt, but no promises.” He stood and she sat in the chair. The rest of the bridge looked shocked.

Greg stopped as he walked to the lift, “A joke, wonderful. There may be hope for you on this trip.”

“Thank you sir.” Greg walked off the bridge and into the turbolift. “My quarters.” The lift sped away.

“Computer, open file Binotti-P-1.”

“File open.”

“Mark the promotion of T’Pell as notified my me.” Beep

“The remaining names on that list, notify them of the promotion and once they are all notified transmit the promotion log to SPO. Send a copy of this log to Commander Ariel”

“Notifications in progress. Names and data will be transmitted to Starfleet Personnel Office in the next 5 minutes and logged with the central archive and copied to the First Officer.”

The lift stopped and the doors opened. Greg entered his cabin and headed for his bed. He had a few hours of sleep available before he needed to be on the bridge. Tomorrow is stardate 1!