

SCORPION STING

A Space Story

BOOK ONE
and
BOOK TWO
and
BOOK THREE
and
BOOK FOUR

by
Christopher E. Cancilla

**I have a simple philosophy when it comes to storytelling;
...a story is nothing more than a random or intentional
collection of thoughts.**

So, I hope you enjoy this novel.

**My most current collection of random thoughts,
all inter-related and
hopefully entertaining.**

“Scorpion’s Sting,” Parts 1 and 2 and 3 and 4, are the original story of **Christopher E. Cancilla** and is his sole, original, authentic, and imaginative work.

The universe of Star Trek, all terms, ideas, and thoughts related to Star Trek or the Starship, classes, or races of people, and that specific universe is not.

Star Trek was created by Gene Roddenberry, but this universe is fun to explore.

I claim no rights to that universe. Only the occasional visit.

Send me a comment at:

[**SnipDawg.Publishing@gmail.com**](mailto:SnipDawg.Publishing@gmail.com)

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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 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 the Japanese culture is one of the oldest and most prosperous on all of Earth. She was hiking along the Nakasendo Trail from Kyoto to Tokyo. As her group stopped for the night, she found her new friend in some underbrush near death.

Shilo Ariel was raised on a planet where all life is sacred, and as such, she scooped up the abandoned newborn kitten and called for emergency transport to medical after explaining to the trail guide what she was doing, and she would return shortly. 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. She informed medical she would return the next day to visit the kitten, so she did; within a few days, the kitten was out of harm’s way.

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. Requesting a report every shift change, she transported back where she started. Their guide asked how Koneko was doing. It was then she discovered Koneko was colloquial Japanese for Kitty. Her friend now has a name. Koneko Ariel. The look on the medical administrator’s face when she informed her of the kitten’s name was priceless.

Over the next few weeks, she visited the kitten more often than she thought was necessary, but she could not tear herself away.

Making a request to her commanding officer to bring a pet aboard the ship, he instantly approved her new roommate. One stipulation, he was allowed to visit from time to time. It seems the Captain has a thing for cats, and this Kitty has something for the Captain. They were fast friends.

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

Picking up her communicator pin, issued just before she met Koneko, she contacted her commanding officer. Since this was a classified and covert mission, the crew members were not to wear a uniform unless required, and her communicator pin was shaped in an hourglass, 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 hourglass 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 heart 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 chose 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 attire 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 weather net provided an exceptional morning for this walk.

When she entered, she saw her commanding officer in line ordering breakfast. He must have just arrived since she got into 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 Miss Kitty, I mean Koneko, a scratch behind the ears for me when you get home.” Captain Gregory T. Binotti, commanding officer of the USS Scorpion. Really enjoys pets, and cats are his favorite. When he was a young Ensign, his roommate had a pet cat, Rocco. The breed was a Maine Coon, one of the largest breeds in feline history. The cat gravitated to him if he was in the room, and the roommate was not happy about it. A few months later, he moved out, and Greg had the space to himself from then on. But he missed Rocco.

The ship is currently under retrofit and upgrades at the Morena Shipyard, a few lightyears from Earth, for a classified mission, which the Captain and First Officer have been working on for more than a year. The briefings, the training, memorization, and a lot of physical activity increase stamina and the chance they will come home alive from the mission.

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

One of the line workers smiled as he said her cat's name. She was Japanese by birth and suggested to Shilo that the best way to understand a culture is to experience the culture.

"Moriko, Koneko ga kon'nichiwa." Shilo said in the little Japanese she learned. However, it took her a while to memorize this phrase.

Moriko replied, "Shilo, arigatō. Koneko watashi no ai o ataeru."

"Shimasu Moriko."

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 standard 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. Although they have something similar to the potato at home, there is nothing in her homeworld like mushrooms or onions that the inhabitants eat, and she found that she rather likes the earthy flavor it adds to foods.

Earthy is a phrase...word she picked up in the last couple of years as a new resident of this planet.

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

Shilo said, "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 her Captain's 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, Lieutenant Commanders Martinez and Steel, and Lieutenant Commander O'Roury; 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 Steele will fill in Helm and Nav, and Commander O'Roury 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 judgment. 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 you, we would fall apart as the ship and crew. Now, we can’t have that, can we?”

Shilo was taken by surprise at the comments. She did not really care for 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 and how her world acted and reacted. However, 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 her list; putting up a finger, she 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 of 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, Major 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 unsuccessfully tried to hide it.

Rowan and Larrimore went to the line and grabbed some food and a cup of coffee. Then, they returned to the table and sat and ate. They had the exact same breakfast. There is a bowl of oatmeal with brown sugar and cinnamon, a plate of bacon in 8 strips each, and 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 started 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.” Major Regis said.

“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 since we will be unavailable for a few days.” Regis 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 nonchalantly 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, 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 section thir....this is SSD headquarters. Here, I am in command. This is not the main SSD HQ area, but an insignificant and minor area we retain specifically for espionage and allow guests to visit occasionally. Here, you and Shilo will be trained in areas and items the 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 permanent damage unless the inquisitor desires to cause pain and injury.

“Agreed.” Greg and Shilo said in 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.” So

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 place 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 random order. Since the mind scanner was active, the subject was uncertain if a few seconds had passed or days.

Greg and Shilo were brought to a small conference room and realized roughly the same time where they were. 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."

"Same for him. 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 security clearance has been raised to level 21, and your personnel record will reflect that clearance 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 subcode. Therefore, 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 homeworld. It was a silver pin with red horizontal lines in the form of the plant. Quite beautiful, she thought to herself.

Greg's pin was in the shape of a circle, primarily red and unmistakable, to represent 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, to get here, you must have this pin. Since you have both just touched the pins, they are now encoded into your DNA. So only you can activate communications. No chance of someone sneaking in." Larrimore laughed a slight chuckle. The first sign of anything less severe 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 of the communications pins. 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." Then, 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. So 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 for an iced tea, orange pekoe, with no sweetener. Then, 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 Greg's room as he picked up the glasses and joined her at the table. He placed the drink 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. So 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. So 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 finalize 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 personnel on this mission. Besides, I am a laid-back commanding officer. So 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. Then, 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 turn out to be an interesting assignment.

As they left the room and the door slid closed, the room lights dimmed at the 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 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 live is perfect for me. Large quarters are not me; cozy and comfortable quarters are all I need. Besides, my quarters on the ship are nearly a duplicate of the place I am living now. I had the shipyard send me the blueprints for my quarters and talked the building owner into letting me recreate them. I’ve been in them for nearly 3 years now, and I think they are the best in the universe.” He paused a moment and looked at Shilo, “This way, I will know what I can bring and what I need to leave here in storage. Since the layout is the same, I need to beam the room to the ship. Everything will fit perfectly.” 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.”

“Cookies?” She asked.

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, or since. He believed the people, the crew, came first, then the mission. If you give the crew the respect they deserve, the latitude and creativity they need, the mission will always succeed. He told me, the way a commanding officer leads their crew is a signpost of how great they are. Lead well, and the crew will follow them to the depths of hell.”

She was starting to like this man. She never expected that was going to happen. Reading his file as she did, she assumed he was a loose cannon, an inferior 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 quickly turned and 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, well, not like you. I expected 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. I expected someone," She stopped and looked him dead in the eyes. "I expected someone who would be caught sleeping on duty, playing in the holodeck during a crisis, someone who pushed off their responsibilities to others. In other words, Greg, I expected someone who would get us all killed at the first opportunity."

She stared at him intently. Finally, he started to smile at her, "Good!" He replied.

"Good?" She asked.

He looked at her as they walked, "Yes. Fleet command cookie cutters cut out 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 cannot 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 lovely 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. “Ah! Those special people you mentioned.”

“Exactly! When I see them, I’ll know them. Then we’ll have a new crew member.” They walked a little more and 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. But were they actually becoming friends? It had taken a year, but there is a friendship beginning. “By the way, if you find anyone you think would be an asset to this mission, feel free.”

When they arrived at the training center, Greg stopped a hundred meters from the main entrance and looked up. “This is my favorite building for two reasons.” Looking at Shilo, he said it just loud enough for her 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 magnificent structure.”

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

“What’s the second reason?” Shilo asked.

“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 Commander on the way, and each and every one of them looked anxious or nervous as they passed by them on the relatively thin portion of the walkway Greg and Shilo had stooped. They stood precisely where the bushes were laid out to create a narrowing. The groundskeeper called it 10 meters of hell. The cadets passed by at less than arm’s length if a commanding officer stood on that spot.

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. They stopped and turned towards him, he motioned to the two in question, and the rest made a break for it. The two he wanted to talk to walked back to him and Shilo, stopping in front of them.

“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 one of two things: 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. Instead, he tried to get to lunch. On the other hand, the woman 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, I was born at 23:59, and he 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 becomes 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.”

Shilo smiled. She just heard this a short time ago from Greg’s best CO. She had an idea he knew these two, but it had been a while since they did not recognize him.

Greg looked at Yvonne and smiled. He knew, had always known, exactly who these two are, but he smiled as if remembering something with great fondness, “How is Jose?”

She was blindsided; her eyes narrowed a bit, barely noticeable, but this guy knew dad. “He and mother are well. She is on some starbase somewhere in command of it, and Dad is her sidekick or something. The strangest relationship I ever saw, but it works for them.”

“Actually, your mother is the commanding officer of Starbase Cochrane, not all that far from the Romulan Neutral Zone, and your father has taken on the role of an advisor for the entire sector. But, of course, being retired as he is, has its advantages.” He looked at them both, “When was the last time you saw them?”

“Cochrane is quite a distance. Hard to get there and back in a weekend since the areas to get there have warp limits and all. Mom and Dad did manage to visit us once, though; it was not a family reunion but more of a state visit.”

Ricardo interjected. “The school paraded them around dog and pony style. You could tell the parents hated it. They wanted to spend time with us as much as we wanted to spend time with them. So we never really had personal time with them during those few days.”

“So, the last questions 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 the 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 choice. “I think they assigned us there because Dad is an Admiral, and it is ... safe.”

“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 and to truly teach requires experience and practice. At the moment, we are at the top of all our classes. So 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, 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. So 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 to join Starfleet. Even as young as we were, you impressed us that 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 Commander Ariel or me 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, 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 lives 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 makeshift office in the training center; they went about reviewing crewmembers. Then, finally, 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 Admiral 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’s 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. They got the assignment because someone had a bone to pick with me.” Then, he

changed tone, “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 three years ago and told him he was the best man for the job. Unconventional ships need an unconventional captain. “Stop by if you’re in the area. Maybe I can get rid of the cat. Need to run, my turn to cook dinner.”

“Understood. So, take-out then? I will drop in if or rather when 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. Most of the crew should be arriving soon, and we can begin crew training.”

“Excellent!”

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

“Captain, the ship is being worked on at the Morina Shipyard, correct? How are they maintaining security? This has bothered me for a while, and I figured you may have some insight.”

Greg smiled, “About a lightyear from Morina is the classified dock, Morena. Direct line from Earth, just a few more minutes at warp. This facility is hidden, classified, and not on any star chart. It is off any and all routes to and from anywhere. In other words, the perfect classified location. The accidental slipping would not be an issue since the two locations sound nearly identical.”

“Why was I not informed about this classified location?”

“Captain and above,” Greg said.

“Oh, but you just told me?” She said.

“Yes, my discretion, you have a need to know.”

“Thank you, sir!”

“My pleasure, Commander.” Greg changed the subject slightly, “So, I guess the twins and any new stragglers 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 morning in the training center, quite a few people were 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, so he ended up with the career path and the ships he served.

Gregory T. Binotti attended college at the state university in central Ohio. He had a dual major, Engineering and Employee Relations, expecting to be the employee relations manager at some colony. But things did not work out the way he wanted. After a year or so of searching for his niche, he happened to meet up with a Starfleet Academy Recruiter at a sporting event.

Since he had already received a degree from a university, he needed to only take the basic classes and specifics to graduate and did so in just over two years. He was scheduled for three years but worked and studied long hours to complete the program as early as possible.

While at the school, 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 some of his instructors, not considering his grades, he was known as a lazy cadet. For someone who did not work at being the best, the best came naturally.

The academy classes and practical exams came easy; therefore, he did not need to push himself to make top marks, but he always seemed to score the highest. He was older than most cadets, which gave 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.

Some of the instructors watch specific cadets, mainly to see where their life path leads them. He was no different. Rising through the ranks quickly and acquiring the command of the Ajax through misfortune, but he had commanded.

Over the next few years, his life consisted of tedious 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 used weapons as a last resort, with creativity and communications in the forefront. In addition, he was known to be an excellent commanding officer. For this, those who followed his career felt good for him. His crew was loyal and followed him willingly, knowing he had their lives in the forefront of his mind.

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

"Are you kidding!" She stated pretty 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. Finally, he just took an extended leave of absence to attend some Klingon ritual. In 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. He was assigned to complete the ritual. 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 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. I take it he is one of the special cases? 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. "By the way, please do not let on that he is a special case." Shilo chuckled slightly. Maybe this screwup Captain is OK, she thought.

The now-familiar chirp was heard as if on queue, and Greg tapped the Fleet communicator on his chest. "Binotti."

"Sir, this is the reception area. Are you expecting a Commander Steele? 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 Steele 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 Steele 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, he learns a new technology when he gets downtime or bored. Not just a cursory understanding, but a complete understanding. He knows warp mechanics, transporter systems, dilithium reactions, and the list goes on. He spent a few days at the engineering academy and took a bunch of tests. He would have graduated in the top 2% of his class at the Academy, but.....” Her voice trailed off as she paused a moment, “However, he also has a dark side. AH! He has been busted several times at various duty stations, including the Academy, for operating 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.”

How far along at the Academy was he when he went from cadet to crewman?” Greg asked.

“He had less than one semester left, and he would have been an Ensign. What a waste; he would have made an excellent officer according to his test scores. I would guess engineering is his forte.”

“Good. Finalize the transfer to the Scorpion as an Engineer First Class and give me the orders. I will hand them to him personally. Perhaps, he will be an officer, Shilo. We, as in you, me, and Rich, can see to it.”

“As you wish.” She was not all that happy with what just happened, but she did understand his logic. She sees the value in this man and that he has fallen into jobs, positions, and billets that make it difficult, at best, to advance. She realized they had spent a lot of time together up to this moment, and she now felt she could finish his sentences.

She thought to herself, ‘As the humans say, se la vie....’

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

He transported Commander Steele to his location and had his issued communicator in his hand.

“Commander, the Captain asked for me to get you to your assigned quarters and to instruct you in using the new communicator.”

“New communicator, where is it?”

Johnston opened his hand, and the communicator sat in his palm.

“That little thing?” Rich said.

“Yes, sir. It has three times the range and double the power of the previous model. Tap it 4 times, and it emits a distress beacon. If you...”

Rich thought to himself, ‘Is this guy going to teach me the manual?’

15 minutes later, “And commander, that concludes the instruction on the new communicator, do you have any questions?” “Just one,” Rich narrowed his eyes, “How do I call someone?”

Johnston tapped his communicator, “TE2 Johnston to TE1 Rogers.”

“Rogers here, Mike, go ahead.” A female voice could be heard through the little device, and it was crystal clear.

“Audrey, instructing a Commander in the new comms. Thanks for the reply. Johnston out.”

He handed his new comm to Rich, Rich tapped it.

“Commander Steele to TE1 Rogers.”

“TE1 Rogers here, sir.”

Rich grinned, “So Audrey, got any interesting stories about Mike here you can reiterate?”

She started laughing. “Yes, sir. I will contact you later, and we can discuss Mike over a coffee.”

“Sounds like a plan, Steele out.”

“It appears you taught me quite well, crewman. Now, where are my quarters, and can you see that my belongings are transported there at your convenience?”

“Sir....uh....”

“We were playing with you. But she sounds like a very nice person.”

“Yes, sir, but she is my cousin on my fathers’ side. So, Commander, I know for a fact she is currently unattached. May I recommend the coffee shop out the east gate? I know for a fact that is her favorite place.”

“Playing matchmaker?”

“In a way, sir. I see by your sash you are a bonafide Klingon warrior, and the Klingon culture holds a special interest to her.”

Rich smiled, “Point me to my quarters.”

“Computer, please lead Commander Steele to his quarters.”

“Acknowledged. Commander Steele, please follow the blue light. You are 9 minutes away from your quarters.”

Rich nodded at Johnston, he liked the guy, but Johnston left way too many openings to be pestered. “That was the East Gate, right?” Rich said as he left the transporter room.

Johnston just smiled. His cousin will be happy.

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

“Steele 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 Second Class 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, Steele out.”

Richard Steele paused a moment to get into his Klingon mindset. “Steele 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.”

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

“Controls reset, sir. Energizing. The destination is level 19.”

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

As the last words came out of his mouth, the transporter cycled, and TE2 Johnston turned a pale shade of white. Somehow, he learned what he said to the Captain.

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

Binotti reiterated the dialog from earlier, and Steele 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. So who’s the babe?” Steele motioned towards Shilo Ariel.

“Mr. Steele.” 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. But, dang Greg, if she had phasers in her eyes, I’d be toast right now. So let’s start over.” He straightened up and extended his hand. “Good afternoon Commander, I am Lt. Commander Richard Steele. 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 colorful metaphors, if possible, 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 these two 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 mainly watched.

“So, Rich. Let’s walk to the café. Who are you thinking about for ops?”

“I was thinking about that; myself, Lt. Cmdr Leake, and Lt T’Pell. 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, time-off duty is coveted, and this gives you time for relaxation and sleep. So 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 shift....”

“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.” Maybe she didn’t like this guy as much as she thought she did!

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

“Greg, let’s hit the Taco House. Commander, you up for the perfect taco?” He paused and looked at her, “You eat meat, right?”

“I do, Commander, and I enjoy it. But, Captain, actually, if it’s alright with you, I will head back to my quarters and have lunch with my baby.”

“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.

“Her baby?” Rich asked.

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

“What’s that, crew transfer?”

“Yes, it is. TE2 Johnston to Engineer 1<sup>st</sup> Class Johnston and reassigned to the Scorpion under your guidance. 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?” Greg winked at him.

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

“How on Earth did you manage to get it done in a few seconds? It normally takes weeks or months?”

“I have clout. This is an important mission; I have a blank check.” He looked over the documents, “Perfect. Let’s get to lunch.” Then, tapping his communicator, “Binotti to TE2 Johnston, two to transport to your location.” He looked at Rich, “and her baby is Koneko, the coolest feline in the Federation!” Rich smiled at that; he liked cats too.

“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, stood in front of Binotti and Steele, and came to attention, “Transporter Engineer Second Class Michael Johnston reports 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. I like that, don’t change. 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 reread it 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 Steele. 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.”

“I had a conversation with a previous supervisor, the only one to NOT reprimand you in the past couple of years. She told me you are a dream to work with and the most intelligent person she ever met. She also mentioned you make an excellent bourbon. That is, she mentioned it after I asked about it. She also said you did it for morale, not profit.”

Rich spoke, “Bourbon. Nice. But I hear you can make pretty much anything? Is that true?” Michael was flabbergasted and simply nodded to them.

“We’ll talk more on the ship, but that is confidential.” He paused a moment, “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, the CMO, will be in on this. 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. Steele. He will process you into the ship and get you on your way to engineering.”

“Yes, sir!”

“The last thing; go get the correct uniform on Engineer First Class Michael Johnston; I believe your new color is yellow or mustard or something. Now, 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. Steele commented in the open air and sun, “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.

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Shilo arrived at her room but did not eat. Instead, she tapped her unique 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.

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 whatever 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.

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Greg and Rich walked in relative silence, bringing up things from the past, mainly reminiscing. Finally, they reached their destination, The Taco House.



Rich realized they walked out the east gate, and he noticed the coffee house across the street, The Coffee Transport. He needs to make a date with Johnston's cousin if for no other reason than to see if the kid is on the level.

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 new 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. Although he has not been around for a couple weeks, I miss talking to him."

Greg held up his finger, tapped his communicator, "Binotti to Engineer First Class 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 just got reassigned, a new job, and a promotion. Not quite sure, but 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.” Remembering the conversation he had with his cousin.

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, “Hey Maria, you got anything with a kick to it?”

She winked at him and walked off.

The Mariachi band started playing a few minutes later, and Maria led the procession to their table. The patrons all started clapping in unison; it seems that this specific song had a reason.

In Maria’s hands was a bright red bowl. The regulars knew this was the liquid fire salsa. Greg dipped just the tip of his chip in the liquid and tasted it; he nearly choked. He turned the prettiest shade red and coughed for a few minutes.

On the other hand, Rich 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.”

The man nodded 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 set it on the table. I looked like a Starfleet issue biohazard container, but not really. A replica for effect, more or less.

“What’s that?” Greg said.

“My new condiment. I’ll get the replicator to scan it, and I can have it anytime when we are not in range of the real thing. I may even tell Johnston it’s in there.” He thought for a moment, “Let’s see. Maria’s Salsa...no. Steele Salsa 1, no. Maybe.....Got it. Taco House Fire Salsa.”

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

Steele 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.” Rich said to her as constructive criticism, not a scolding.

“Yes, sir.” She relaxed a bit. “Thank you for the advice.”

Greg and Rich stood on the transporter platform. Rich said, “Ho long have you been running a console?”

“Today is my first-day solo, sir.”

“How do you like it?” Rich paused a heartbeat and added, “My quarters, please. Energize when ready.”

“Well, sir, can I be honest?”

“Sure thing,” Greg said.

“I really enjoy scrambling people’s molecules and sending them all over the place. Always makes me feel good when they reassemble correctly.” She looked at them smiling, “Energizing!”

A moment later, they were in his quarters. “I LIKE HER!” Rich said. “Can I order a newly minted Transporter operator for this mission?”

“Talk to Shilo. Just tell her she is a special case if she gives you any gruff.”

“Excellent!” Rich said. 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; Greg picked up a chip and crunched it in his mouth and nodded approval. Rich picked up a chip and dragged it through the Salsa. Then, putting it in his mouth, he said, “PERFECT!!”

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

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

The computer chirped.

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

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

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

“There are a couple crewmembers who you are to make into a special project. Johnston is one of them. Find out what he wants to be when he grows up and help him impress the hell out of me. I will

consider it a failure if he does not deserve at least a Warrant Officer rank in six months. Work with Juan on this. I can see it in him, as will you as soon as you start working with him. Help him find direction and help him grow.”

“I thought it was going to be something hard.” Steele smiled. “It will be my pleasure, sir. Who’s the other?”

“Well, the other comes as an opposing set,” Greg said.

“You wanna put that on a leash and walk it by slow, please?”

“The ship will be graced with a set of twins who will be joining us as soon as they graduate; I estimate a few months but definitely before mission start.”

“These twins got names?” Rich asked.

“They do, Yvonne and Ricardo.”

“You mean as in Admiral and Colonel Ramon?”

“Yup!”

“OK, where will they be assigned?”

“Mainly to Ops, but let’s call it special projects. For their specialties at the Academy, we’re talking tech, covert, weapons, and things that go boom in the night.”

“Excellent. I can push them along nicely. I like boom!”

“Anyone else?”

“Not yet.....” He winked at his friend.

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Shilo Ariel materialized in her quarters again. This time she had a light lunch with her cat. They talked of their day so far. It is 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 the transporter room, transfer to level 19 when ready.” She vanished.

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

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

## CHAPTER 1-4

“Well, Commander, speak up. I don’t have all day.” So come 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. Be advised; I trust my instincts.” Shilo Ariel said to the two of them. She had been an operative for several months now and needed to know where she stood.

Major 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 so 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. Steele. We expect a 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. She really wanted to

get into the SSD computer and look around, but computer tampering and piracy are crimes. So is the possession of stolen and classified material.

“Glenn, why did she do that? We planned to give a 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. Steele 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. He turned us down flat. Something about our jobs not on his radar, too boring or routine, something like that, anyway, let’s prepare that special briefing, so we will not let the lady down.”

~~~~~

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

The entire crew assembled and selected their shift rotation, and everyone was happy with their assignments.

Learning the new systems was the hardest, and learning the new technology was the most difficult for the new engineering crew, except for Engineer First Class Johnston. He hung on every word from his boss and found the opportunity to make a few corrections no one noticed. Then, finally, he found his place, a starship engineer!

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### **Captains Personal Log**

Finally, we are en route to the Scorpion. We have waited more than a year for this day, for some of us closer to three years. However, thanks to delays in manufacturing a few essential items, we managed to have several more months than expected.

The entire crew is either onboard the Nightwing with us or en route to the ship in Morena Shipyard. Although we are taking a casual flight on the



Nightwing, Cherryl was kind enough to give us all a lift. I just hope the twins make it to the ship before we start our mission. Our travel time is a few days due to restrictions.

Right on schedule, the anxiety is setting in. Not about the mission but about the command. Always happens to me, change a duty station and get butterflies. 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. Morena is located a light year away from a shipbuilding facility, but its location is classified. This shipyard is known for very few, and the Scorpion refit is in good hands. HA! Refitted, more like rebuilt, redesigned, restarted from scratch. From the ground up, if I do say. I feel like a kid on his first date. I just finished the daily 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 considerable part of the crew is considered the fleet's dregs. Lots of reprimands, sub-par conduct, the kind of crew needed for this mission, this ship. Her words, not mine. Service reports, passed over promotions, decreases in rank, and a few had brig time. Well then, so be it; I know my past, and I've also been assigned to this mission thanks to it. So I guess that makes me a dreg too. Maybe from now on, I may 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 includes planting a secure sub-space transmitter in the central computer of the Romulan capital city secure records area. Did I mention this is a protected area we

need to get into? The SSD crew members we have assigned to our ship have that task. I am to understand they have been taught, Rihanna. Well, at least I now know 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 the planet, so they will not be discovered on this mission.

This mission is scheduled to last for about 13 to 18 months ship time. This includes a round trip to and from 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 since the refit started has bent my anxiety slightly. I have the feeling I won't sleep again until we are underway.

Commander's Ariel and Steele are sleeping like logs. I know, no movement from Shilo's cubicle, and the entire ship can hear Rich sawing on those logs. Me, well, I think maybe I'll take a walk.

~~~~~

"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. The remainder of the crew left a few days ago on a troop transport ship, not a luxury, but they got there in 22 hours. These couple of dozen stayed behind to ‘clean-up.’

Looking around the room at the sleeping faces, he was heart-warmed at the resilience of this crew. Due to the number of passengers and available staterooms, this cargo area has been converted into a dormitory-style sleeping arrangement. Although there are partitions to simulate privacy if the resident elected to use them and most did not, they are not soundproof. 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. These are also makeshift cabins, not luxury but functional. The wall between their two rooms can slide out of the way to hold larger groups for briefings or gatherings.

But at the moment, the Captain decided to walk around the ship and think. Thinking 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 numerous times for playing practical jokes on the captain and most of the crew of the various vessels he had been assigned. According to his record, he is an excellent comm officer; never has he done anything that could jeopardize the ship's safety. However, while he is assigned to the Scorpion, he will be the 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 entirely original at his jokes. In addition, he was reprimanded for placing subliminal messages into the ship's announcement system.

This caused the captain to wear a Hawaiian shirt, red shorts, flip-flops, and a straw hat during his off-duty time. He had no idea

why half the people in the lounge were dressed similarly. The reason filtered to the captain by way of the ship's 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 as loyal as he is blue, honest, and friendly, not to mention fun to have around. After he admitted to the deed, the captain removed him from command placed him as the second officer. He stated 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 having him assigned to the Scorpion. Admiral Maddox asked him why; Greg's answer amazed her, "Why not!" he said. Pretty sure 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 of the ship. The schematics of this ship are very unique, and it meant he needed to know new technologies 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.

Various crew members in the science section have devoted their talents to the Scalosian problem discovered by Captain Kirk, who encountered the planet Scalos around stardate 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 extraordinary. This is an incredible secret weapon the crew will use on the planet during their mission.

The inhabitants of Scalos are all gone, members of history now. However, they are remembered in the classified logs from Captain Kirk, who returned to learn all had perished. He used the water to search the city, finding the remains of each Scalosian and

gave them proper internment. Then, Captain Kirk and subsequent captains went back to acquire water from the planet. This is the best-guarded secret, no weapon, in the Federation.

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 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. Enough of the water will enter their system, and they will vanish. The Romulans will merely see the person bite on the pill and vanish. In their mind, the Federation suicide pill will be a disintegration pill? Nothing subtle there.

Carrying the water pill is required by even those 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..... before leaving the Nightwing. The results were hilarious. Greg and Shilo decided to fix several systems, which were both needed and very well accomplished. But it turned a few heads on the Nightwing repair team. He had to bring Cherryl in on the reason for the fast repairs and her first officer, but it was worth it. He left them a dozen or so of the pills for their entertainment or if they needed to make emergency repairs.

Greg mentioned to her one evening in her quarters as they were sipping on some rather expensive bourbon, 'Cherryl, if you kept a pill handy and if boarded you bite down on it, you would vanish and have the ability to circumvent the boarding party. For example, grab a phaser set to max and walk through the halls shooting the bad guys but leaving the commander alone but disarmed. You then take the antidote and return in the exact same position as when you left. But the tables have been turned.'

He and Cherryl have known each other for years, decades, really, and she understands what this means for the protection of the ship.

The antidote was always in the center of the table, but a single special water cup was placed in front of each person. The equivalent of an eyedropper full, the amount in the capsule, is all that is needed. Each crew member 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. Steele 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 bit upset but not all that bad; the Captain needed revenge. Again, the antidote was administered in the same order, but the Captain did not go third this time. He waited till the end.

He stood Mr. Steele up and placed him on the table, no easy task since he is not a small boy. He put 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 talk privately. Finally, 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 with a hero’s welcome. The Admiral knew what she was doing, binding the crew.

“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, “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. For the past few days, all we have heard 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.

“Commander,” Greg said to Cheryl’s First Officer. “One of my engineers is exploring with routing a single phaser array through the warp conduit or relay or something. He thinks it will increase phaser energy by more than 800%. Possibly only one or two shots but a last-ditch effort for sure. We are planning to mount a trinary array under the primary hull for this purpose. This way, the main weapons will not be affected.”

“Sounds intriguing.” She said.

Cherryl replied, “Possibly even blow out the warp system.”

“It is possible, but not probable,” Greg said. “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 a few seconds, just 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 evilest 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 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?” Knowing where each monitor was located, he looked up, put a big grin on that relatively dark blue face, and gave Greg two thumbs up. Finally, Greg said, “Binotti out.” And the link ended.

“Greg, you know three-forward is 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 that fun. Besides, I want you all there to toast us a successful mission.”

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

“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. Although 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 crew members 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 instead 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. 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. "Captain Binotti, Greg, 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." Soft laughter in the crowd. "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, the crew of the Nightwing, the 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 a 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 is identical to the

glasses held by the captains. She picked up the original bottle they opened, refilled her captains' drink, and then another 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 as U.S.S. Scorpion and NCC-4017. Joining the two images are, on one side, a handshake and, on 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!" Then, 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 anything. Just their taste buds translate it as a very nasty, bitter, and sour product.

Greg walked over to the replicator, worked with it for a minute, and returned to Cheryl's 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 an inquisitive 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. I read it would be like us drinking a mixture of sour milk and spoiled orange juice. 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 non-alcohol 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 more exemplary example of food products could not be found anywhere.

Shilo saw the 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 gorgeous 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 softly 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 Steele 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 pretty impressed with her looks. That was obvious.

“Commander, I thought you may feel this way, and we imported something. We have a lot leftover from our other guests and

can give you some for your journey.” She lifted the cloche, and Rich saw a wiggling and a 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 walked to the table.

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

Rich simply motioned to the chair opposite to his and lifted the cloche. The Klingon smiled and laughed. Then, together, they grabbed the live worms and stuffed them into their faces, speaking Klingon and laughing. This was the Klingon ambassador to the Federation. The Nightwing was offering him a ride to a nearby starbase where he would receive an honor from the chancellor the following day. He had been on Earth meeting with the other ambassadors.

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!” Then, he tapped his communicator, “Computer, when in range, transfer the replicator pattern for this blood wine to the Scorpion.”

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

The singing from that table made others look at them, which is most likely what they wanted; nonetheless, they enjoyed themselves. Then, finally, the ensign who gave Rich the Gagh approached the

table. "Commander, ambassador, I have a huge 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. But, unfortunately, 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 homeworld, knowing the two of you would be here. I told him I had an essential 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. Then, together, they 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 only do this." He removed the Klingon symbol from his sash, the character 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 blade.

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 assassin's 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, and 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 very 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 gift to the ensign.”

Without thinking, “17 minus the gift for the Ensign.” 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 the 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 servers 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. Excellent blood wine. Not replicated. She left the bottle at their table.

Kord looked at the bottle, “A 23? Wonder vintage.” He glanced at the neck of the bottle, “This is from the Chancellor.”

Rich looked at a familiar stamp on the neck of the bottle. “He must consider us worthy.” Kord nodded and drank the blood wine.

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.**” He looked at Greg and Cheryl, “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 drinks were the Rec officer, Cheryl’s cousin, and the galley 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 smashed 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.” He gave her a heartfelt hug.

“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 to Morena.” 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. The ambassador may beam onto the station where transport will take him to his next ship.”

“Thank you, understood, Nightwing out.”

Greg walked over to the comm lieutenant, “Open a channel to the Scorpion, please.”

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

“Captain, this is Lieutenant JG Khaleel.”

“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 judgment.” Then, activating her communicator, “Marlan to the transporter room. Prepare to earn your pay.”

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

Greg tapped his communicator, “Binotti to the 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 a look of impending doom on his face. She has seen it before. But 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 Steele, 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, getting you the hell out of here! Energizing!" And they were gone.

"Transport complete."

"Captain Marlan, would you please be the next to transport over?" Victoria Calloway, the Nightwing's Chief Transporter operator, requested.

"I'm not going over there alone. You 2 are coming with me."

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

"Transport when ready, Vicki."

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

Victoria Calloway and Michael Johnston have been working together constantly for the past few weeks. She is tall, has deep blue eyes, and has very red hair; she and Johnson had not minded everyone else noticing the two.

The remainder of the crew was transported over to the Scorpion. Johnson, of course, was the last to transport. He was the final piece of the puzzle. But, 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 heartfelt 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.

Michael, as the beam began to envelop him, said, “I love you.”

Vicki simply said, “Don’t Die.” and he vanished. Her face changed. She missed him already. On the other hand, she loved this guy she had only known for a bit over a month.



## CHAPTER 2-1

“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. He smiled at his Captain and nodded, a quiet thank you.

With that said, Captain Marlan appeared 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 crew waves began to arrive, then the Captain knew everyone was on the Scorpion because Johnston appeared, “Mr. Johnston, I do believe your expertise is needed in engineering ASAP.”

Johnson smiled. Cheryl commented his grin looked like a tribble rolling in quadrottricale.

“Captain Marlan, do you think you and yours could join me and mine 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, biometric mismatch, proceed with voiceprint match. Identify.”

Greg looked at Cheryl, who had a grin on her face 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 to 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 Steele, Second Officer, Chief of Operations.” Replied Rich in his coldest, the most Klingon voice he could muster.

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

Greg looked at Cheryl, “Captain Cheryl Marlan, Commander Daan, and Commander Regina 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. Although perhaps it works a bit too well, Greg,” said Rich.

“Identity verified with the main computer, USS Nightwing, NCC-4025 station keeping off USS Scorpion aft port. Authorized limited access, unescorted, is this sufficient?”

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

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

With that out of the way, the turbolift began to move, finally. “Proceeding 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 pretty warm and stuffy in that lift. In unison, the other 2 members of the Nightwing crew all nodded their agreement.

“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 a man was 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, excellent bridge ever conceived.

“Love the new carpeting,” Cheryl said. Greg snickered.

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. According to their tour guide, the view screen was the largest fleet 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.

The ops and nav stations are three meters away from the screen. 2 meters behind them is the captain's chair. On either side of the captain's chair, elevated slightly, is the area for the first and second officer. In an emergency, their consoles can be reconfigured instantly to mimic any bridge station's controls.

Behind the first officer and against the back wall, the engineering console 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 could 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 panels, making them genuinely adaptable. Different configurations could be created for each crew member assigned, and their favorite options used in place of the standard displays.

The last station contained a tiny 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 communicator monitoring system maintains a constant vigil on the crew's health when they are wearing their communicator. Thus, 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!” Cherryl 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 Steele, 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. So, 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 attractive look on her face. She wanted to say something but was not sure she should.

“Spit it out Shilo, what is it you needed to say one on one? If you start holding back now, we will have issues on the mission.”

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 hard to get back once you lose it.”

Greg smiled slightly, “Shilo, I felt it too. There is a phrase on Earth I think we both experienced in the last hour, ‘The Shit Just Got Real.’ We will both do great; we will both survive.” He looked at her more intently, “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 actually expected it a while ago and wondered when you would get around to it. I will respect your ideas and 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 always to guard the ship, its crew, the mission, and the captain; in that order. 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 week's sleep. This new ship is killing me. The learning curve on the new dilithium matrix alone made my head spin. But, once we’re underway, I can slip into something comfortable, like a coma. 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 Engineer 1. 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 picture 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 of 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 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 best but need both education and experience. Give it to them. Get it all done in 5 hours, and I owe you three 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 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 acronym, 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 smiled but 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 Steele 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 overcharged. 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 the captain will never wander, at least he never will once he knows where not to go. Only me, you, Rich, Piper, and him will 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? By the way, there has been a change in our orders.”

“Change?”



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

“OK, need a quick 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 quick 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 Steele 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. A plasma conduit runs incorrectly near the buffer and causes 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." He looked at the padd. "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 searched 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. Afterward, 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 a 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 correctly. 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 the 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. Then, when the 6 have breakfast, send them too. Tell them to report to Engineering, Commander Martinez. Marlan out.”

Cheryl looked at Greg, “Next?”

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

“Room Sealed.” Said the computer.

Major 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. Therefore, I believe the Nightwing crew should be excused from this briefing, as should all of those 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. First, we will travel to an obscure little planet in Romulan space and plant a spy transmitter in the main computer and government hall. Then, snoop a bit, come home alive.”

## CHAPTER 2-2

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 too far before. Rowan was still looking at her commanding officer, shocked that 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 a couple of 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 Steele, 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 successful classified mission.

Imagine how impressed they would be if, thanks to your leadership, we all lived. Of course, 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 Steele 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 her hand, “Yes, ensign.” Greg said.

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

“All of it. All data passing through the relay will be copied to our storage and brought home when we are there. It will store in the removable module, and when we get home, Fleet will grab it, and we are done. During that time, actually, from the moment we leave the space dock until we return, we will pretty much be in radio silence. Starfleet will send us our correspondence, but we will not acknowledge them after a time.”

“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, so 4-month travel time at a standard warp, and to avoid detection at the time, we’ll drop to low warp.”

The ensign raised her 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.

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

Greg turned to him and gave him a look. Steele 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.” So he sat next to Shilo.

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

A scanning 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 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.

“Computer, 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 grew.

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

She and Glenn were standing in the back of the room, in a dark corner, nearly invisible. Then, 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, and we are designating R1. A small insignificant planet a few lightyears away from their capital and 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 took a breath, “One letter difference in the names, Romulus, a U and Romulas, an A. In the event anyone gets wind of our mission, they will assume, since no one knows of R1, we simply spelled the name of the planet wrong and will be waiting for us there, and not at R1.”

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 unfortunately, they were spotted as they departed at high warp. 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 Steele, 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, making 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 his trial by pain sticks and when he received the sash and became a member of the House of Durrna.”

Glenn asked, “Captain, can we watch the pain stick portion? I’ll bring the popcorn.”

“Great idea. Rich, arrange it.”

“Yea, I’ll get right on that.”

“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. So 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,” Steele 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 piece of data that flows through the relay while we are in orbit and anything and everything we can find. And lastly, four, our SSD operatives have a mission they will not even tell me about.” He nodded to Glen, who nodded back. “The only thing left after all that, 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.” He stood, “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. For that, 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 Steele 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

charged phaser relay and internal emitter set to full. That should delete it to atoms.”

“Good thought. Do that also.” Lt. Potthast said. 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, sorry, engineers, to finish installing some things. My medical staff should be here tomorrow.”

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

“Not really Cheryl, what I need I can replicate. As for a blood supply in the event of something bad, I plan to siphon the crew and store it for later use.” She turned towards Greg, “Wonderful, thank you. That was all I had, Captain.”

She thought again and, in mid-sitting down, stood up again. “One more thing. If that was not clear, I would like to create a backstock of blood for the many species 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 call 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. So go ahead, 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 lunacy 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, all expenses paid, 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 bellhop.” The room roared.

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Repairs were made during the next 37 hours, completed upgrades, and the ship came 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 Steele found his counterpart on the Nightwing, who was also the Chief of Ops. Commander Victoria Rex had also spent considerable time living among Klingons and on the Klingon homeworld. She loved every minute of it, and she and Rich would practice their Klingon when they could.

Once they arrived at the station, they transferred the ambassador, but he did not depart right away. Instead, he and Rich would share blood wine and sing in the small pub on the station.

They did this several nights in a row. Commander Steele took a shuttle from the Scorpion to the station. According to the station security log, when Kord's ship finally arrived, Rich knew several in the crew from the ritual and, as a group, caused a ruckus in several locations of the station.

Victoria heard the singing on the station 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 never mentioned it to her, 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. Then, for 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, "Captains.....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 spoke again, “All bridge stations are at 100%, and the special marine attack craft is ready to deploy at your command.”

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

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

In unison, “Nothing.”

Victoria added, “Other than some excess baggage.”

“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 after that.”

“You got it.” She tapped her communicator, “Marlan to Nightwing, beam Commander Rex and me 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 Commander Steele and me 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 what your next order or request will be. 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 Gregggy, 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 could not guarantee an airtight seal. Kinda important. The second thing is the completion of the holodeck. A couple minor tweaks 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 Engineer 1 a few months ago. Give him time to get used to it.”

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

“Well, if you can find a CPO in the next month, I can get them transferred.”

“There is one, but she is in the brig at the moment.”

“The brig, huh. For what?”

“Beating the crap out of her boss.”

“How long is hse in the brig for?”

“Another month.”

Greg shook his head, “Send Shilo her name and current location.”

“Great.”

“Why did she resort to physical retaliation?”

“Let’s call it inappropriate touching. She was not busted for the retaliation. She was charged only with striking a superior officer.” He smiled, though, “Her boss was busted from Commander to the crewman. So, she outranks him now.”

“Poetic justice.”

“regarding Johnston, we’ll talk about it 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.” Greg said.

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

“Who? Johnston?”

“Yep. He may not have completed Starfleet academy, but he has had enough schooling and education to be commissioned. He will never be a Captain, but he is not the Captain type. More of a Commander as I see it. As for the application, if we transmit it before we depart, Fleet can do whatever they need to 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 Engineer 1st Class 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 it to think a bit independently. I am installing a program that will allow you to contact anyone from the main and battle bridge by calling 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. So 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 codeword is said on either bridge and only the main or aux bridge, the reset occurs without comment. The codeword is APOLLO NINETY 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 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 ones authorized to use this command; Myself, Commanders Ariel, Martinez, Skull, and Larrimore, also Lieutenant Commanders J’Kael, Steele, Regis, Potthast, Counselor Haynes, and Major Lanning.”

“Process initiated. Level thirty-six code input. Please notify the individuals personally of this responsibility. What is the deactivation code for level 36 security.”

Greg thought for a minute. “Deactivation code is to be set as GOO-GOO-GAA-GAA.”

“Completed. Deactivation code set to goo goo gaa gaa. 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. Update this file as you determine it is needed. 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 school. Starfleet implemented it after fixing a few of the bugs it had; the process places a force field around each bridge station and the operator if the ship is boarded. Thus, if nothing else, the bridge crew will have a few additional minutes to thwart the bad guys and make it more challenging 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 the damndest 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 terrific.

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 order that no crewman will come to attention in a Jeffries tube or opened a powered panel. You know what that means, right?”

The crewmen looked a little worried. “Yes, Gregg, 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 is 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 the training, we tied. The 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 a 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 investigation team, deal?”

In unison, “DEAL Sir!”

“So, tell me about your best competition.”

“So, tell me about your boss?” Greg said, grinning.

“I see you two are friends, sir. So, next time, ask him if a transporter power cell can zap you.” Sarch said.

“He didn’t?”

“Yes, he did, sir. Last night.”

“He did that once when we met. Just about knocked him across the room and unconscious.”

“Exactly, sir.”

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. Finally, 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. Unfortunately, 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. “You look nothing like crewman Johnston. Can I help you?” He said to her.

“Well, Captain, I believe you can. But, unfortunately, two crew members failed to report to me for their baseline physical.”

“I certainly can. Who are these two.”

“The first is Commander Steele. 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. So 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 Steele.”

“Yes, sir, shoot.”

“Meet me in the galley at 0430 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 0450 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 Johnston entered.

“OK, see you in the morning.” Commander Piper left the room. As she left, “Now he follows protocol. Reported on day 1 for his physical. Unlike someone else I know.

“Sir, ...” He was about to report as ordered, and Greg cut him off.

“Relax, Michael, we need an off-the-books conversation. I hear you make 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 bought a couple special wooden barrels a few months ago and had them scorched at a distillery, beamed them aboard 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 and bring the first batch to the lab, Commander Piper specifically. 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 Steele 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 Steele 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-consciousness. “Commander Martinez seems to think you are officer material. Apparently, you have all the 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 Steele, 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 leaving the system and running silent. Their response will be sent back to us by wideband, 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. So 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, possibly a Lieutenant Commander, 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.” Before he walked out the door, “Oh, by the way. I met Sarch and Johns, and I gotta tell you, they are both sharp as pins. Between us, I plan to give them the next derelict we happen upon so quietly teach them what they don’t know.”

“Yes, sir. Good night.”

CHAPTER 2-3

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 0420.” 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, kicking his legs down. His feet hit the floor, and he used the momentum to raise his body to a sitting position.

Some crew members slept in a nightshirt, 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 standard 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 weeks 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 tiny 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. Nevertheless, he found the survival gear and managed to get a small amount of energy from the storage cells, enough to 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.

Being a military man for nearly his entire life, the Commander permitted this, and the section of the ship where he lived for half a year evaporated.

He needed to do this for two reasons. First, he really did hate that ship, and he needed to ensure no one scrutinized it too close. Second, the ship was a section of a Scout vessel, and it did explode in the manner he told the Commander, but it was not sabotaged. It was intentional. The area 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 strategies. His cover was a computer scientist, which allowed him to be employed at the main complex.

His last data message requested he is evacuated when the mission concludes. Although 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 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 underway, 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, speed at your discretion.”

She knew him well.

Greg nudged the power of the impulse engines up faster and faster. Juan laughed. He was doing something all helmsmen thought

about but rarely had the chance to do. Kick the power-up quickly 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, “Next time, you get to do it!”

He paused, “Set course 237 mark 92. Commander Martinez will call out the velocity he needs. Until that time, Commanders Ariel and Steele 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.

A lieutenant said, “Sir, you can sit in the big chair.”

Lanning looked at it, “No, not yet.” and walked over to the side. He stood there.

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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 crucial decision. Engineer First Class Michael 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 in the past few months and knows just as much as he does. Additionally, he was asked to leave Starfleet Academy on a technicality a few weeks before being commissioned and would be a Lieutenant right now if he graduated. 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 already performing the duties of a lieutenant, just that he may not realize it. Therefore, 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 impressions take over, and logic is tossed out an airlock.”

“Captain, if this were a year ago, I would have called you an emotional human. However, 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, smiling.

“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 kumbaya?”

Rich gave him a poke on the upper arm as the turbolift reached its destination. The three exited the lift and entered the Engineering control room.

“Commander, assemble your department.”

Juan said a little loudly, “Gather round.” They did.

Greg took over. “People, the two things 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.

“Engineer First Class Michael Johnston, please join me.” Johnston froze, and Juan gave him a push. He nearly ran into the captain.

“Who here has learned something from 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 from 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 spoken to Juan about all this, and Juan let Kiski know she would be singled out and 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 Kiski, I have an additional assignment for you. There is a new Lieutenant Junior Grade in your department. Between you and Commander Martinez, this person receives the best training and education to be a lieutenant. Therefore, it is your job to prepare this person for promotion to lieutenant when you and Juan

feel ready. I give it a year, maybe less. Definitely, before we return from this mission.”

Kiski said, “Maybe next week if he 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 your room and into your new room. Commander Steele 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 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 long until we are in communications range again, or not in radio silence. Remember, this is a classified mission but portrays it as a routine exploration mission outside of our normal space area. 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 the ship’s operations are at 100%. So, literally, there is nothing for anyone to do except for 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. 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 giving 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. So it was he and I, a security ensign and two security puppies. We learned that Ensign Anderson was an expert in an ancient style of karate, Shoto-Kan. So 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. Then, Juan took over the story.

“So, Gregg 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 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 eventually won a match. He had more endurance than I did, or do, for that matter."

"And I'm smarter too!" Said 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. The 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 deathmatch. He instructed us in disabling and also running, 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 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 of the fact that I was the only male in the class, but we all sat on the last day. I was told males cannot fight in this way. They do not have grace and stamina. However, 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 are 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 4th-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, in 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 she could wipe the floor with me at any time. 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 felt like he pulled something and headed to sickbay first. He passed crew in the halls, and they said hello to him. He liked that, the friendly captain.

Entering sickbay, 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 sickbay.”

“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 with 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 whatever this is completed and are free, drop by.”

“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 he's 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 Wu.

Greg stood and headed to the door; Danna-Lu went back into the lab; he ran into Johnston as he walked out of sickbay.

“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. Therefore, my suggestion, make some of the relay connections intermittent, and a rap on the side resets them.”

“I like that, sir, thanks.”

Greg left sickbay 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 anymore. “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. 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 receiving 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 critical pieces of information. A few things from the helm, a few things from the 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 sickbay. “Good, glad you’re here,” Piper said. “Take off your shoes,” Piper said to him. He shrugged, 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 that is not recommended in this case. 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 backstories 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 impending 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 4th 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. The first shift, 1800 to midnight, will be the Major as first officer and Shilo in command. The second shift will be Shilo as the first officer and you in command. The third shift is you in command and me as the 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. Steele. 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 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, bouncing him off the wall. His communicator chirped, “Lanning here.”

“Major Lanning, you are needed on the bridge immediately. The captain and Mr. Steele 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. “Damn, communications must be completely down.”

The doors opened as the Captain and Commander Steele was 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. Two Tholian ships are attacking. They are not answering hails. The area is blanketed with subspace noise. Warp is down, impulse is at 50%, helm and nav are still active.”

“Well, let’s play!” He thought a moment. Overcharge 4 torpedoes and prep for launch. Target all phasers on the left ship and fire, max power level.”

The left ship was damaged and slowly regained its orientation. Larry knew he hurt it but not bad. As the right ship approached, “Target forward and aft torpedoes to the right ship, target the exact or as close as possible to the exact same spot. Make it a sequential hit, 1.5 seconds between each strike.” He paused a moment as the Tholian ship approached. “FIRE”

The four torpedoes erupted from their tubes and struck the ship one after another.

“Sir! The first hit lowered their shields by 20%, second 15% more, third 25 % more.” As the fourth hit, the ship exploded.

OK, that will not work again. Reload all tubes and fire to hit the aft of the ship. The torpedoes should MISS the attacker the double back and hit them right in the engines.”

“NICE!” Someone behind him said.

“The second ship appears to have a power fluctuation, but they are beginning an attack run.”

“Fire the four to fly past them and turn around.”

The four missed the ship, “I am hoping they will get the impression our targeting scanner is down, and we are shooting blindly.”

The ship increased speed and headed directly for them. Meanwhile, the torpedoes flew past them and turned around. A moment later, the Tholian ship did some evasive maneuvers, so they knew they saw what was happening.

“Phasers, now!”

The ship exploded.

“Anything else on sensors?”

“No, sir.”

“Leave us at yellow alert for 30-minutes, then clear it. All decks report status when the comm is back up.” He turned and saw three crewmen standing in the back of the bridge. “You three, go to engineering, medical, and security and get a status and come right back and report.”

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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 half 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. The computer hid their presence from the Major.

Lanning was busy with the battle and managed to dispatch a ship. Then the second.

“Sir, the warp is back online.”

“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. Finally, 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 at that moment.

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. "We can debrief later. Besides, I want to watch it again."

"Computer, end simulation." The room cleared out, and they departed.

They arrived in the transporter room 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." Then, 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 Lieutenant Commander Richard Steele – 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 was not sure if Rich had any 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 that 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. So 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 supposed to be 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. Finally, 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. So 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 crewman 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 the 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 is 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 nonetheless. 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. So 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 or references."

"Yes, sir." He turned and went to a console and transported the shellfish to the galley freezer.

"Shilo, get us moving again, please."

Greg and the gang left, and all went in different directions. Shilo headed to the bridge, Rich headed to the gym, and Greg went to engineering.

## CHAPTER 2-4

A few minutes before his shift, Greg walked onto the bridge, “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 seconds to be here as well.” He paused a heartbeat, “Binotti out.”

“Rich, get to the briefing. I will be there in three and a half minutes. I want to see you first thing in the morning in my quarters.”

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. Then, as the turbolift doors closed and the car slipped away, a blood-curdling scream could be heard. Rich was in Klingon mode. Greg smiled and nodded.

“Computer, which entrance will Robinson be using?”

“Port forward.”



Greg walked over to that lift and waited. The doors opened a few seconds later, 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 Steele 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 stood and went to the front of the room and activated the screen. Greg took her seat next to Larrimore.

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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, sir.”

“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, did I interrupt your little chat? I am so sorry for all of you; I know how your Captain likes to ramble on and on and.... Anyway, what are you doing in this neck of the woods? I thought they had you in some dungeon somewhere prodding and poking 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 for a drink to old times?”

“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. Then, the five of us can all have a steak on him.” Juan laughed and shook his head.

“5 of us?”

“Yes, got 2 crewmen who will be joining us, me, you, and Juan.”

“Martinez? Really, he’s buying dinner. I am so there!”

“You two know each other?”

“We do, almost had him talked into the Starlifter, then he got your orders. You stole him from me.”

“Then it’s only right that he buy you dinner.”

Juan spoke up, “It would be my honor to feed my second choice.”

The room chuckled, as did the Captains. Now, to get back on track.

Greg asked, “So, what can I do for you?”

“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.” Everyone knew the implication.

“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 no 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. Finally, he got him off the ship and made it appear generic in nature.

“So, why do you want 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, but may I say that 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 1730.”

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 to 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, afterward, collect ALL currency and annotate their pay records accordingly. We will not be stopping anywhere for a year and a half. Fleet has given us a blank voucher. Use it. Talk to Commander Ariel or Steele 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 at warp. So 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. Finally, Larry walked into Cutter Ops and tapped a console.

“Lanning to First Sargent Braddock.”

“Go ahead, sir.”

“Top, please exit your cutter, leave it on standby. I will be flying it. Then, 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 shouted, “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 the hell 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.”

Of course, the cutters all heard her, 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 its location on the hull. Unfortunately, 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. So 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. It's a good thing too, they were nearly in visual range of Starbase Cochrane.

“Binotti to Steele. 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. So, in 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. Rank makes some of these young pups itchy!”

“Now that's something I can make happen, John.”

“Why, thank you, sir, your nothing like Major Lanning makes you out to be.” He smiled at the Captain.

CHAPTER 2-5

Greg left cutter ops and let the Top finish closing out the exercise. As he entered the Marine briefing room, a cargo bay next to cutter ops turned into 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 that day and the next and what happened so far. He demanded his senior staff be fully informed and that they tell their staff when appropriate. He did not like being kept in the dark about anything and was nearly 100% certain his staff, crew, and Marines did not appreciate it either.

The first Marines walked in, a group of five including Sarge, who saw the captain in the shadows and asked the group, “So what do you think of the captain?” Sarge liked messing with officers.

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 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, mostly filled, let out a cheer. It seems only Sarge saw the captain in the shadows. Greg stood up and walked to the group of five. Marines stand at ease. Sarge, you’re kinda the odd duck also. So 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. So 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 a better 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 depressed.”

“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. “Pick a good marine officer to join us. Not the Major, though. He hates ribs.”

“Got just the right dinner guest in mind.”

“Excellent, make sure Rhonda dresses comfortably. Besides, Commander Ariel and the Major are already invited.”

“Sir, how did you know I was gonna pick her?”

Greg just winked at him and went to his seat. He 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 did 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 after dinner in my cabin, at 1800, by the way, you can 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 he 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." First, top looked around the room and locked eyes with a few of the Marines. Then, Top and the Major locked eyes on purpose, and the Major stood and squared off. They looked like they were about to fight, then 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. Afterward, 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 you all to report to the gym in the morning at 0830. Commander Steele has some unique training and a special assignment for a handful of 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 Steele 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. So 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 Steele 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 heard 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 3 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; you need to appear as mercenaries, 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 unless absolutely necessary. Heavy stun is recommended. 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 AN-I-MAL.”

“Animal, please join Sarge and me.”

“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. The animal stood there. “Your job, your only job, is to not let Sarge get to the box on the stage.” Then, he paused a moment, “You have permission to take whatever action you need to accomplish this mission, short of eating him, that is.” Animal smiled at that.

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, sitting 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 tiny capsule, and Sarge took it from him. No one noticed. Then, 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 are 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 many 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 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 a couple more from various points in the room for good measure. The phaser blasts will appear to come from every corner of the room and the audience.

He went to the back of the room and put the phaser in the face of a few Marines and shot a couple blasts at blank walls. When time resumes, it will look really odd when the phaser blast seems to come from their eyes.

In the meantime, Greg walked back to Rowan and Larrimore, 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 casually, 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.” Greg paused, “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 captain's 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. They all need 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.” So 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. Naturally, 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 takes 3 red and 3 blue capsules. Red is the speed up, and blue is the antidote. Once you take the blue pill, you cannot take a red one for 12 hours. It will have no effect since the antidote hangs in your system that long. 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. The first few times, it gives you mass dizziness. OH, by the way, there is a downside. If you get cut while accelerated, you will die from any cell damage. On the other hand, if you are interrogated and bleeding when you take it, there is a 90% chance you will be fine, depending on the level of damage. So, take the cold pill as soon as possible, 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.” Greg looked at the Marines. “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 words.” 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 few times, it causes dizziness. But, 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. Then, 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 backward.

“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 to fill in your packet."

"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 do equal four, you know."

"Thank you, sir. As far as officers go, you alright!" He saluted the Captain and left.

"One last thing, here is a box containing 6 of each pill for all of the Marines. Keep track of these and pass them out as needed." Greg looked at Sarge, stared at him really.

"Am I growing a third eye, sir?" Sarge asked.

"No, but I had a strange thought."

"That's so out of character for you, Cap."

Greg smiled, "What do you think would happen if a Marine in a cutter bit down on a cold pill? Would the ship stop? Could it fly accelerated?"

Sarge looked at him, "You're right, sir, that is a strange thought." Sarge grinned at him. "I'll let you know!" He smiled and walked off.

Alone in the room, he looked around. Then, 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. Her role is maintaining the room, all conference rooms and cleaning them up when they end. He turned to look out the window, a glorious sight.

"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. Of course, I understand the cautions and told my people to be careful, but nothing could be better or more fun for repairs and maintenance. 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..... Maybe he can read an old science fiction novel. Better yet, since the holodeck is up, perhaps he can live the story. So he went running the new hollow program he received, finally. It took long enough to create. Log cabin, mountain top. This sounds like fun.

CHAPTER 2-6

During the next couple of days, a few of the Nightwing crew assisted the Scorpion crew. 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. Then, he looked at Juan a moment later as he reappeared, "All done, sir."

"Damn. That saved us days of work." Finally, 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.

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 Steele fit in and do a fantastic job. As for our SSD operatives, I came to learn they are really a part of Section 31. No one will admit they exist or deny it; however, they quickly change the subject. Needless to say, they are a mystery, wrapped in an enigma, stuffed into a dark corner of a magician's warehouse. They stick to themselves and not all that much socialization, but they will be at parties and get-togethers, 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 it into a hobby, and I drafted Commander Steele 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.

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, Sarge....”

“Can it, 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 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 completely. Then, 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 delicious bottle of scotch.” He picked up a glass, handed it to the captain, took one for himself, and sat back on the couch.

Rich raised his glass, “To the mission!” He emptied the glass in one gulp, as did Greg and Sarge. Then, 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 gauge the temperature of the Starfleet crew and Sarge, your role is to gauge 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.” He looked at Sarge, “You are to take a cutter and head to a set of coordinates at the other end of this solar system. It should take less than an hour at max speed. At that ship, 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 last night celebration. Then, 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 homeworld. I tried it once. It reminds me of a cross between vanilla, bitters, and sour 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. Also, a few bottles for the new light bird. Tequila!"

"Does the General know what's in the case?"

"Yes and no. He knows it's not really classified materials but has no idea what it really is. So 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 at the academy and was in my chain of command when he was a butter bar. Been friends and kept in touch ever since. Stationed a few times together. So he will fit into this group perfectly."

Sarge raised his glass, "To the General, be fun to see him drunk." The others two raised their glasses as well and said, "To getting drunk!" They killed their glasses.

Rich poured another round. "OK, let's get down to business."

"Rich, Sarge here is on a suicide mission, but I want to see him get home. I need you to evaluate his fighting capabilities. You have maybe six to eight months. If he does not make it home, I'll dock your pay."

Sarge said, "Well, that's good to know...."

"Don't worry, Greg, I plan to teach him Klingon fighting techniques. On the mission, I have a special blade he can wear when he is captured. It was given to me by the Chancellor, has his seal on it, and the blood of a great many warriors. Before he leaves, I plan to put my blood on it so when they scan the blade and extract the DNA, he can tell them he took it off some human Starfleet commander. The DNA will trace back to me. They will assume he used my own blade to make me extinct."

"Nice Commander. Credibility as in, the enemy of my enemy is my friend." Sarge said.

“Sarge, off the record, what do you think you need, and where can we get it?” Greg asked.

Several items were only available at a Marine barracks, and when he picks up the General, he can get what he needs, but it allowed him to make a shopping list.

“Sir, one thing I do need is a ship that we can blow up or crash into the planet, outskirts of the town. Make it look good, and all, but it needs to scan as no exact species, flag, or origin.”

“That is taken care of, I think. If I am not mistaken, our SSD gang will bring that to us.”

“You asked them for something?”

“No, made a suggestion, an idea. They never do anything part-way, so I guess they will provide a ship to fill this need. So much easier than finding junk and getting it to run again.”

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. He chose this table because the view was all stars and 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 Starfleet so 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.”

A crewman approached with a couple plates of breakfast. He set the plates in front of their seats. “Thanks, Donald.” They moved the few steps from the window to the table and sat.

“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.

“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 judgment. 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.”

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. Japanese lady, really nice too. She said to give Koneko a rub for her. 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 her CO’s 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.”

“Yes, it does, sir. There are a few people on this crew I love to cook for, present company included. But, the biggest reward I get from serving people a meal is watching the smiles.”

They started eating.

“Yup, just like that.” Donald walked off, back to his stoves.

“So Shilo, what do the people in your world eat for breakfast? I have never read anything about food in your homeworld.”

“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 evil 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 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. I like the guy and would like him to return to the ship after his mission is complete. So 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. I am guessing that when the ship crash lands, bursts into flames, and explodes, someone will give him a ride into town. 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 the 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 controic, how do humans say it, haphazardly 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. I believe this is similar to what our good doctor started down the yellow brick road. Sarge can say he acquired it and not created it, so there will be no construction questions. As for the beacon, a pressure transponder is 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.

“Grab a drink and join the brain trust.” When they both returned with a cup of coffee, 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 more 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 mostly bladed instruments, I can talk to Commander Steele privately and 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.”

Juan added, “If we find the metals, we can forge them using a phaser set on low. Then, hammer them down to a base blade, sharpen and hone.”

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 is 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. I know where I can get my hands on one, but they will not be too happy it will not be coming back.” 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 will arrive the day before we leave for the mission. So 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 embedded 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. So the computer processing will not be affected 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 it happen; whatever 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 various 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 quite right. So 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, Chef. You are doing a great job.” He and Donald shook hands, and Greg left the galley.

“Serve this at our dinner when we reach Cochrane. Then, maybe 20 minutes after we finish dinner, the table is cleared, and coffee is served.”

“Great idea,” Donald said.

Greg left the kitchen and headed for the holodeck. He was off duty at the moment, and Larry was in his chair. Time to check out the cabin in the snow.

## CHAPTER 2-7

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. Finally, he stood in the back of the bridge. A few of the crew saw him, and he put his finger to his lips in an 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 viewscreen 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 extra 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 the last dinner.” He stood, “Secure all stations. Open a channel to Morena.”

“Channel open, sir.”

“Morena, this is Captain Binotti. We are preparing for the 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 team 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.

“Status?” Marks asked, and each of the stations reported. All is well on the USS Scorpion.

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By the time Sarge returned, Greg was in clean clothes after a shower and had a cup of espresso.

“Captain, I’m back with the cargo.”

“Perfect, bring the cargo to my quarters.”

“Roger that.”

Sarge spoke again, “Computer, location of Major Lanning?”

“Major has entered turbolift 6 heading to the recreation area.”

“Perfect. Computer, ensure the turbolift I Am entering and heading to the Captain’s quarters, and Major Lanning’s turbolift are never near each other.”

“Affirmative. Rerouting Turbolift 6. Extending route by 31 seconds.”

General Fowler smiled, “You’re pretty smart for a Marine, Marine.”

“Yes, sir, please don’t tell anyone.”

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 thing is 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?”

“In the cutter, I feel like I know you. You look familiar?” The general said to Sarge.

“Yes, sir, I hope so. We met about eight years ago. But, unfortunately, 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 likes people or something. He’ll get over it 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 Captain’s 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. Then, 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, Top, can you please escort the honoree to the front."

Sarge and Top stood. They sat next to each other, and Sarge quickly let him in on the events when he sat down. Then, they both snapped to attention and saluted, "It would be both my pleasure and an honor, sir." The General returned the salute.

Sarge walked nearly all the way around the room, stood next to Major Lanning on his left, and snapped to attention. Top did the same and stood on his right. "Major Lanning, it would be my pleasure, and one of my greatest honors, out of all my time in the Marines to escort you to the General."

Larry stood, no idea why he was on his way to see his boss. They walked at an average pace, slower than usual 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, your detail is dismissed." He saluted him back. Top and Sarge returned to their seat using proper and perfect facing movements like they 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 the endorsement of the Commander, Starfleet, and the Federation President.”

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 sirs; Larry, I can finally refer to you as Colonel! You are now the 5<sup>th</sup> highest-ranking officer on the ship and have completed the bridge CO course held by the best instructors. Commander Ariel and Lieutenant Commander Steele.”

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 was 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.

“TOP! Where are you?” The General said.

“Yo, sir!” TOP stood.

“I believe the former Major needs a new call sign?” Call signs are given by others. You cannot choose a call sign.

“Well, sir, I was thinking about that. What do you suggest?”

“Well, I was thinking TWEEDY.”

“Tweedy bird, General, I like that. Consider it done!”

Lanning was shaking his head. He lost his old call sign, BOSS, and he is now tweedy.

The General asked, “Uh, Lieutenant Colonel Lanning, what is your call sign?”

In Marine fashion, Larry stood at attention and yelled, “Sir, my call sign is... TWEEDY BIRD!” The room applauded when it quieted down a bit, “Sir, may I request you ask Captain Binotti what his call sign is?”

“Captain, you have a call sign?”

Greg jumped up and stood at perfect attention and simulated what Larry had just done, “Yes sir, I do. Given to me by Sarge, TOP, and Tweedy.”

“And Captain, what is your call sign?”

“Sir, the call sign given to me by the Marines is..... CINDERELLA!”

“Interesting, I need that story later.”

Larry, still standing, and Greg said in unison, “YES, SIR!”

“Sit, you two. I have a couple more promotions to deliver, if I may. Commander Larrimore?”

She walked to the front a bit curious, “Your office, which I have no clear idea who that is, asked me to promote you to the rank of Captain.” But, of course, since the SSD wears no rank, he had nothing for her but words. “Captain Larrimore, I guess your promotion is a secret?” The room laughed a bit.

“Now, the last promotion. 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 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 with several of the Captain/Colonel ranks. 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 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!” Greg said; the general just 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 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.”

“Chief, the Captain and the Commanders tell Starfleet you are deserving of a promotion, but enlisted wise, there is not a whole lot more you can do.” The General looked at the crew. “If you work for this man, please stand.” The kitchen crew all stood. “Show of hands please, if he were an Ensign, would you still respect him.” Slowly, the hands went up, all of them. “Well then, Captain Binotti tells me

you are worried that if you were an officer, you would not be able to stand at a stove. Well, the promotion to Ensign makes you the second-ranking officer in the galley, so nothing changed. It also means you run the kitchen, so nothing changed. Congratulations, Ensign.”

The room roared for Donald. He deserved it.

Donald raised a hand. “Sir, one thing did change. PAY!”

Laughter all around the room.

The meal, the fellowship, and the speeches afterward went very well and had a lot of humor and heartfelt moments. After a time, it broke up, and friends went with friends to have smaller parties.

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They were all in the Captain's 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 package, “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.”

“DAMN!! The last time I had this was the night the Chancellor made me a member of his house. This is literally the best blood wine in the history of blood wine! Thanks, Cap!” Rich was smiling.

“Oh my lord, Greg, call medical. His face is contorted!” Everyone laughed at the comment.

Greg reached in the box again, “Major, I mean Colonel, I understand you like tequila.” He handed him a couple of 5-liter bottles of very, very good tequila. Larry accepted the huge bottles with both hands. “I called Johnston’s sister and asked her to send me a couple of her best and biggest bottles of tequila. When she replied, asking for payment, I knew it had to be good! Just save me a shot or two, is all I ask. I like tequila. But for that cost, I need to find out just how great it really is.”

“You got it, Cap!” Larry replied.

“Perfect and smooth scotch.” He pulled two out, handed them to Sarge and two bottles, and handed them to Top, “Can’t leave out my new friends. Your personal stash. The rest is for me and these meetings every few nights in these quarters. ”

He removed another bottle and handed it to Rich, who 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. Finally, after a couple hours of conversation, words of wisdom from the General, and a little classified information passed on from Starfleet, it was time for some rest. They were departing in the morning.

“Shilo, we have a question. What does that taste like to you?” Rich asked.

“To me, it is a sweet-tasting liquid, almost cloyingly sweet if it were a pastry or something. Of course, our tastebuds work differently than yours. I am told by friends of my fathers that it has the taste of rotting meat.”

“Well, I was going to ask to taste it, but not now,” Greg said.

“I may, but not now. One day I will have a toothpick with me and ask you if I can dip it in the elixir.”

“Then, one day, I will let you, Rich.” She used his first name. There are firsts for everything.

Greg and the rest of the gang walked the General to the transporter room, and he beamed back to his ship, now in a parking orbit nearby. They were getting an upgrade on their ship, the first and only Marine Starship. Larry had no idea, but he was being groomed to be the second.

After the transport was complete, “Colonel, I believe I am hitting the sack.” He congratulated Larry the last time and bid everyone a good sleep. Then, 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.” Top's voice was evident through the communicator.

The interesting thing about the new communications system. If you instruct the computer to designate an individual as a specific name, it does. So there was Top, Sarge, Animal, Bulldog, Butterfly, 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.”

The bridge crew could hear everything. He knew it. They knew it. But he needed to state the obvious. Besides, it will give them something to talk about.

“Captains Log. Instead of the actual stardate in my logs, I will be using mission dates. Today is stardate minus one. 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 Lieutenant 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 to be an effective commanding officer in simulations, but I hope it never comes to that.... As for the remaining command officers, they are exemplary. The promotion of Engineer 1st Michael 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. I may get hives or something. My greatest thorn on this mission is Commander Steele. I intend to use that thorn

to poke anyone who gets in my way. I am fairly certain he won't mind. The rest of the crew are professionals, and our two fresh Ensigns Ramon from the academy 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 I had known them since before they were born, and 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 in retrofitting 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 Chancellor at Starfleet Academy, Commanding officer of the USS Nightwing, General Fowler, Morena Operations and Commanding Officer of Starbase Cochrane and of course Admiral Maddox."

"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?" They all shook their heads.

"Very cool!" He looked at the ceiling, "Computer, begin the 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 had 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 Steele 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 an 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 by 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, 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!

# SCORPION STING

A Space Story

**PART THREE**

and

**PART FOUR**

by

Christopher E. Cancilla



## CHAPTER 3-0

“Binotti to Steele and Ariel, promotions completed.”

“Understood” came back in a pair of voices, and the comm disconnected.

Greg waited for the freshly minted new lieutenant 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.” Greg stood, and she sat in the chair.

“Aye, sir. I shall strive for that result, but no promises.” The rest of the bridge looked shocked.

As she spoke, Greg stopped dead in his tracks as he walked to the lift. He turned to her and smiled. “A joke, wonderful. There may be hope for you on this trip.”

“Thank you, sir. Rest well.” 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 by me.” Beep

“The remaining names on that list, notify them of their promotion, and once they are all notified, transmit the promotion log to SPO. Send a copy of this log to Commander’s Ariel and Steele.”

“Notifications in progress. Names and data will be transmitted to the Starfleet Personnel Office in the next 5 minutes, logged with the central archive, and copied to the First and Second 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!

## CHAPTER 3-1

Greg came to a stop. Greg Binotti, Captain of the USS Scorpion, was walking to the restroom in his cabin. He woke up before his alarm went off, and once he realized he needed to be on the bridge in 2 hours, his attention turned to prepare for departure.

Smiling, he did what he had to do, showered, dressed, and headed to the galley. Then, leaving his quarters, he turned left, headed for the turbolift, and instructed the lift to take him to the galley.

The doors opened, and he walked through the corridors and strangely did not see anyone. That seemed odd to him. Was he still asleep and dreaming?

Entering the galley as he did any other morning, Greg froze. He looked around the room and noticed it was a packed house. Every crew member occupied a chair. He did not hide the fact he was pretty apparently slightly shocked.

Greg watched as Larry stood and came to attention. Then, of course, Colonel Lanning called the room to attention. "CAPTAIN ON DECK!" The room stood as one.

"As you were." He said as he walked towards the command staff. The room was relatively quiet as Greg made his way to the main table.

He walked up to Rich, "What's all this?"

Rich did not say a word. Instead, he put his hand up, palms facing his commanding officer, and shook his head, trying to play the innocent victim. Then, Rich looked at the person across from him and pointed an index finger.

"Sir, we decided you needed company for breakfast this morning," Shilo said. "So, you get a special FIRST DAY breakfast."

Greg looked at the array of Commanders at this table. Steel, Montalvo, Lanning – more or less, Martinez, Ariel. Then, as he sat in his chair at the center of the table, Donald approached.

“Captain, I have your breakfast. A special breakfast it is, sir.” He set the plate, covered by a cloche, in front of his captain and lifted the cloche. Greg saw his standard breakfast, which happens to be his favorite. Eggs scrambled with cheese, crispy hash brown potatoes, four strips of bacon, a small bowl of grits. Donald had walked away and returned with a perfectly toasted and buttered English muffin. “Sir, I realize this is more or less your normal breakfast, but there **is** an extra egg, and the English muffin makes it special.”

“You keep this up, Donald, and I’ll promote you again!”

“No, sir. If I was promoted, I would not be at a stove, and I like cooking. Besides, the idea of being an officer gives me the willies, no offense to those of the officer persuasion.” He winked at his commanding officer. “Enjoy your meal, sir. I need to feed the rest of the animals now.”

He turned away, and Greg said, “Did he just call me an animal?”

“I believe he called us all animals, Cap,” Larry said.

“Feeding time at the zoo!” Martinez added.

Rich quickly passed a message around to the crewman closest to him, and it went through the crew in a matter of seconds. A minute later, Donald and his team walked back in. As soon as the crew of the Scorpion saw him, they all started making animal noises. Finally, Donald stopped, raised his hands, and looked at the command table. “Commander Steele, this has your signature. Well played, sir!”

And the noises started up again for another minute.

Everyone had a great breakfast, and the room buzzed with conversations in every corner.

After breakfast, Greg stepped up onto his table, and the room went silent.

“Crew. Today is Day 1, Stardate 000001. Actually, I am showing it in my log as stardate 1, and this is how the computer will record all logs until we return home. Interestingly, we are about to embark on a very classified and somewhat hazardous mission. But I have every confidence we will all return.”

He looked around, "Ensign Johnston,"

"Sir," Johnston replied.

"I plan to have lunch with you and your sister when we get back." Turning a bit, "Yvonne and Ricardo,"

"Sir!" They said in unison.

"I think your parents would be upset if you did not get home to them, and I like your parents!" The room laughed a little. Everyone in the room knew who their parents were.

"Thank you, sir!" Ricardo replied.

"Lieutenant T'Pell, Vulcan command has plans for you, and I would hate to disappoint Vulcan Command."

"Affirmative, sir, that would not be a brilliant career move." She replied.

Rich and Larry about fell out of their seats laughing, and Shilo was trying to hold her laughter in check.

The Captain offered T'Pell a small 2-finger salute, acknowledging the fact she completely understands human humor. Then, he turned to the commanders.

"Rich, would you like to pass on the game plan for the next 7 days?" Greg hopped off the table, and Rich took his place.

"Yes, Cap, I would. OK, folks, I talked the Captain here into... uh, I mean, he has seen in his infinite wisdom that a weekly briefing for the entire crew is a good idea." Everyone laughed. "So, every 7-days, we will gather as a crew for a meal, and I will pass on the info for the next week."

Donald shook his head. "What?" Rich asked him.

"You are putting a lot of work on the cook crew, sir!"

"Yep. You got a problem with that?"

"Well, sir...."

Rich grinned and said, "Now, before you speak, please keep in mind that you may get promoted if he doesn't like what you say."



Donald stood straight up and said in a big booming voice, “No sir, feeding the crew enriches our lives!” The cook crew in the room repeated what he said.

The room roared. When it quieted some, Rich continued, “Perfect answer. Donald, pull the rest of your gang out here for the briefing.” He waited as the galley crew took a seat where they could. Some had food, and others had coffee or some other drink. All of them had dessert for the tables they sat with.

“Uh, Donald, it appears that your crew brought desserts. But, unfortunately, you showed up to our table empty-handed.” Rich said.

“No, sir, it is on its way.” And a crewman with a grav cart appeared. The crewman stopped at the captain and began passing out handmade chocolate chip cannoli. They were smaller in size, so everyone got two.

“Crewman Reynolds, please join us,” Rich said.

“Thank you, sir, but I need to pass out a few more items.” He walked off, and Donald sat in Rich’s seat next to his Captain. HUGE grin on his face.

“You seem quite happy with yourself?” Shilo asked.

“Yes, Commander, I am. I have not made cannoli in a while; it was a lot of fun. Reminded me why I love to cook so much, not the cooking part but watching others eat and enjoy what I serve. By the way, Commander, I checked the culinary database and the pastries in front of you, although they look like cannoli, are actually my idea of something called Tersani.”

“You made Tersani?” Shilo asked.

“I’ll answer that after you taste it. Never heard of it before. No idea what it tastes like, and I have no intention of tasting it. The problem is that some of the native ingredients are not available or easily substituted.”

Shilo took a bite. “Holy crap!” She exclaimed as she smiled an ear-to-ear smile. Letting Donald know he did alright.

“I want a taste?” Greg said.

“No, sir, you don’t. Trust me.” Donald said. “I mentioned the ingredients. Well, let’s just say humans do not really consider some of the ingredients as normal food. But for them,” He motioned to Shilo, “Their taste and physiology are just different enough that the concoction we can’t eat is gourmet cuisine to them.”

He paused a moment and looked at Greg eye to eye, “The universe is weird, sir. Just plain weird.” Greg nodded to him in agreement.

Shilo said, Greg, these are the best I have had since I left home. But Donald is right. If you ate a bite, you and Dr. Piper would become really close friends.”

Greg winked, and Rich continued.

Rich turned to the crew. “OK, it seems that we need to do a little shopping. So, we are stopping off for a few days or so at Starbase Cochrane for resupply and advice. Ramon’s, you need to invite your parents on board for a tour and dinner. I’m sure Donald here can put together something fantastic in the next few days.”

“Prime rib comes to mind, sir. But, wait, your parents are human, right?”

“Yes, they are,” Yvonne said, laughing as she and her brother patted themselves down as verification they were human.

Rich added, “So, it’s set. 3 days we will host a dinner for Mr. General and Mrs. Colonel Ramon.”

“My Dad is a big fan of meat,” Ricardo said.

“Great. Now, the rest of you, please check out your duty areas. If there is anything you think you will need in the next couple of years, yes, I said years, or backups for something important, shoot a note to your department head.”

Juan spoke up, “I thought of something. I would really like to have a backup warp core. Several reasons, but needless to say, just in case!”

“Commander Martinez, as your second officer, I would like to inform you that an extra warp core will be arriving at Starbase

Cochrane in 31 hours. I had a talk with the refit team, and they are diverting one for us.” He winked at Juan, “Can you think of a place we can store one?”

“Nice.... And I think we can refit cargo bay 4, the closest to engineering, easily.” Juan said, and Rich continued.

“Now. Once all our shopping lists are filled out, those of the rank of lieutenant commander will be given a part of the list, and the commanders will work on the rest. I believe in spreading the wealth.”

Greg stood up, “Let me add a few things to Rich’s statement. Commander’s, you need to divide and conquer. Gather your lists over the next 36 hours. 12 hours later, we will be at Starbase Cochrane. Once we depart, we will not see Federation space for a couple years. Donald,” Donald stood. “If you can think of any REAL food you can gather and store for the trip, do so. You may need to get a good supply of E-Rats also. Just in case.”

“Yes, sir, understood. Do I have your permission to turn room alpha 16 into a giant stasis chamber?”

Juan and Rich were standing next to each other. They turned and looked at each other, nodded. “I like that idea.” They said at the same time.

“Tell you what, let me work on that in the next 48 hours. Then, you get your shopping list together like it’s going to happen because it will.” Juan said.

“Thank you, sir. Captain, if Commander Martinez can do this, I can acquire a lot of supplies.” He sat down.

Greg spoke again, “Rich, watch over this and everything else. Work with everyone to keep things on schedule. Sarge!”

“Yes, sir!” Sarge said from the back of the room.

“You and Top work on a list, if there is anything you need...” He grinned at Sarge. “I know tomorrow the Starship Helpful will be in the dock here for maintenance.”

“Starship Helpful?” Juan said, thinking he said it to himself.

“Yes, Juan, one of three Starships assigned to the Marines, and fully manned by only Marines. There may be a few items on that ship, not on a Federation ship.” He looked back at Sarge and Top. “Sarge, Top, if you need it, you have a blank check. Talk to Shilo if you need something from Starfleet to use as trade.” He looked at Larry, “Colonel, acquire what or who you need.”

Larry grinned, “Yes, sir!”

“Now, on with the briefing. Commander Steele, you have the floor.”

“Thanks, Cap. But at the moment,” He tapped the table with his foot, “It’s a table, not a floor.” Rich continued, “Now, in the next 7 days, we are not expecting any hostilities. We are not expecting any close calls. We are expecting a shopping trip and shore leave for the crew. Department heads rotate as needed, your prudence. Today is day one. We will stop replying to hails on day 92 but need to listen for messages directed to us, and yes, they will be in code. Command developed a new code for this mission alone, and if it is in this code, it is most definitely for us. We expect we will need to be radio silent around day 100, and on day 139, we will lower our speed to warp 3 and casually fly towards the Romulan border. By day 141, we will be under cloak and traveling at lower warp if the target has warp displacement scanners on their border, which we think they do. But they expect a ship to fly at high warp to get through as fast as possible. Where are we heading... A small, obscure planet roughly 100 light-years from the center of the empire.”

A hand went up in the front of the room.

“Yes, Johnston,” Rich said.

“Sir, if we send out a passive probe in front of us, traveling .4 warp faster than the ship, maintaining an encoded and directional data connection, one way, we can detect any and all scanners and transmissions we may encounter. Then, if it is detected, all it will look like is a probe.”

Rich looked at him. “Meet me in cargo bay 9 when this gathering breaks up. I think that is a great idea.” He turned to Juan, “Be careful. He may have your job one day.”

Juan joked back, “If he takes it now, I can retire!” Rich grinned.

The briefing continued another 15-minutes, or more precisely 6 minutes of briefing, and the remainder was the crew becoming a crew. Banter is a good thing on a ship. It means you are comfortable with the person next to you.

Rich stepped off the table, and Greg took his place.

“Crew of the Scorpion,” Greg said.

Shilo continued as if it was rehearsed, “Attention!”

The entire crew stood at attention in less than a second.

Shilo said, “Honor Guard, Advance.” Greg stepped off the table and into the ranks with the command staff.

There were several races on the ship, several different species. Each of them walked to the back of the room and picked up their flag, representing each planet.

Lieutenant Colonel Lanning carried the Federation flag, and Sarge had the flag of Earth. The procession continued to the front of the room where a Marine, in full dress uniform, was stationed in front of each flag holder.

Larry stood a few meters from his flag holder and turned to face the crew. As each person arrived, the Marine at that flag holder saluted the flag of the planet and accepted it. Finally, the flag bearer saluted and returned to their seat; the Marine held their flag.

Once all the flags were in the hands of the Marines, Colonel Lanning placed his flag into the holder. It was several centimeters taller than the others. He turned to the crew and spoke.

First Lieutenant Bratelshumer called it, “Detail, prepare to place.” The Marines placed the end of the pole in the holder at an angle. “Detail, place your flag.” All flags dropped into place at the same time. It sounded like a single thump.

“Detail dismissed.” The Marines walked from either side of Larry and in perfect step, and two by two returned to their seats. Once they all returned to their seats, Larry turned to Shilo and saluted.

She returned the salute. He snapped his facing movements and returned to his seat also.

“Crew of the USS Scorpion.” Shilo was standing on the table now. “We are not one race, species, gender, mindset, or attitude. We are not strangers, nor are we aliens. We are a crew. We are brothers and sisters. We are a family and nothing.... NOTHING... is more powerful than a family. YOU are my brothers; YOU are my sisters; I am yours. Nothing can or will ever change that fact.”

She hopped off the table and turned to Donald, and nodded. Next, Donald played the anthem of each world, and as the anthem played, the members from that world saluted, then finally the Federation anthem. When the music ended, Donald spoke, “Crew, at ease.”

The crew relaxed, and Greg walked out in front of the staff he was standing with; he had to lighten the mood because it became oppressive.

“Crew, the only thing I can say here is...Commander Steele is my brother?” The room roared. They were not expecting that, and Rich stood off to one side, bobbing his head up and down. Greg looked over at him and shook his head. Then, as it quieted a bit, Greg said, “OK.”

Shilo walked out in front of the captain. “Crew, attention. You are dismissed to your duty area. Prepare to depart in 93 minutes.”

The room applauded.

## CHAPTER 3-2

Greg sat comfortably and casually in his command chair. He sounded like he was conversing with both an old friend and the controller at the refit station about historical events they both experienced and enjoyed talking about at great length.

They attended Starfleet Academy at the same time, but very few of their classes were together. However, they did take three semesters of history together and pushed each other to the top of the course. For all three semesters, the instructor decided to give them both the same grades the first semester. It made them both quite driven, and as such, they excelled in the class and left the rest of their classmates in the dust.

“Roscoe, you know as well as I do that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was and is by far the most interesting century of the planet Earth,” Greg said to his friend.

“My dear friend Greg, my dear delusional friend Greg. The 22<sup>nd</sup> century was more interesting since it contained a war, a big one if I remember correctly; meeting the Vulcans, and I think, correct me if I am wrong here, but have you ever heard of Zephram Cochrane?”

“Yes, I heard of him, Fluffy. He made what I’m about to do possible, actually. But the 20<sup>th</sup> century had not a single war, but it had 5 separate wars. WW1, WW2, Korea, Viet Nam, and the Gulf, not to mention the war on terrorism if that were a real war. Plus, humanity went from horse travel to cars, then to planes, then to the Moon. Can you imagine someone living 100 years and born in the late 1800s? Just think of how their lives were altered, changed. But was it for the better?”

“That, Speedy, is the topic of our next conversation. I have this ship scheduled to leave shortly, and if they don’t leave on time, the Captain will get cranky.”

“You are most likely correct, but I think the crew will be more upset about it than the Captain.”

“Right! OK, contact you from control in 15 minutes for your departure clearances. If I know you, you’re going to pull a Binotti.”

“You know me so well.”

“I’ll clear things out for a few lightyears. Lemur out.”

Shilo walked in near the end of the conversation, “Captain, may I make a query?”

“By all means, Commander, how may I enlighten you?”

She looked him in the eye, “Fluffy? Speedy?” That was all she said, and quiet laughter could be heard around the bridge.

“Ah...Fluffy. The Lemur is the Captain's last name and an adorable and furry small chimp-like animal on Earth. As for Speedy, well, I really hated running. I can do it fine and pass any test I needed to, but I really hated it, still do. I timed and paced myself to pass all physical tests with just a few seconds to spare, meaning I came in last in every physical test throughout my Academy time. I was given the name Speedy because of it, and very few of my classmates let me forget it even to this day. A few instructors like to remind me about it once in a while also. In the last physical exam, one of the other cadets bet me I could not beat him in the run. It was to my benefit to win, so I did.”

“By a lot, too, if I remember my ancient history.” One of the crew added.

“Just a lap, or so,” Greg added. “If I need to run, I can run. I just do not like running. HEY! Wait a minute, *Ancient* history?”

Shilo smiled, “Perfect, thank you, Captain. That clears up the confusion.” She turned and stopped, “Captain, who lost that bet?”

Greg just smiled a moment, “Why Fluffy, of course.”

“Good.” She started walking away. “Very good. Can’t have the captain of the Scorpion, my captain, losing to Fluffy!”

Rich entered the bridge. “OK, I Am Here! We ready to hit the road?” Shilo looked at him sideways, and Rich said to her, “I’ll explain that one later.” She nodded.



Greg looked around the bridge. Everyone was at their place; everyone except Juan, that is. Greg touched a control on his chair. “Commander Martinez, your chair appears to be empty. Please join our little party.”

A moment later, “Captain, I think I will stay here and mind the children. However, my chair will be filled in a moment.” Then, he paused, “3.... 2.... 1,” and the turbolift doors opened, and Johnston walked onto the bridge. “My chair cover should be there now, Greg.”

“He’s here. Nicer to talk to also. He respects authority.”

“No, not really. Just afraid of command rank.”

“Smart kid,” Rich said just loud enough for all to hear. Johnston just smiled. He liked this crew. He enjoyed their company and worked hard because he did not want to let them down.

So much different than his last posting where you were expected to be a certain way, say a specific thing, or maybe like a particular food. His old coworkers did not like Mexican food. They said it was terrible for you. He said to them, “Millions of Mexicans tend to disagree.” Not knowing that his sister worked at the restaurant.

These guys, this crew, the captain and command staff, no pretense, no prejudice. Just good old fashion work hard, play hard. Honesty and loyalty are straightforward here and not a commodity. They are possessed by everyone and given away freely as a gift.

“Ensign Johnston, are you ready in engineering to get this show on the road?”

“In a moment, sir, Commander Martinez needs to check one thing.”

Rich spoke, “And that one thing is....” He tapered the sentence off.

“The magnetic containment is a little squirrely in this new configuration.”

Rich, Shilo, and Greg glanced at each other.

“Do I need to be concerned, Ensign,” Shilo asked.

“Uh...no ma’am. We will be making slight corrections for the next few weeks as the components break in; it was expected.”

“If it was expected, why did you mention it?”

“Well, sir, you asked.” He replied.

Rich laughed, “Gocha there, Greg.”

“Sir, engineering is a green light,” Johnston stated.

“That was the last one. I guess we’re ready.” Rich said from the operations console.

“Lieutenant Tom’La. I know it’s been a while, but do you remember how to fly one of these ships?”

“I think so, sir.” She paused and turned in her chair to look directly at her Captain. “Sir, may I assume that the Binotti is a rather intense start to a rather boring mission?”

Greg grinned like the proverbial cat, “Lieutenant, take us out at... whatever speed you decide to start this mission.”

“Aye Aye, sir. Full impulse it is.” She said. Shilo grimaced slightly. It’s really against protocol, but the Starbase and the crew seem to be expecting it.

“USS Scorpion to Control. We are departing in a typical Binotti fashion.” Greg said.

“Understood, Scorpion. Standby..... Ok, traffic at 221 Mark 35 has been cleared for two light-years. Once clear of the immediate area, you are free to go to warp. Godspeed, Speedy. Captain Lemur out.”

Greg pressed a button. “I’ll bring you back a T-shirt Fluffy. Speedy out.” He looked forward. “Tom’La, at your discretion. Have fun!”

She rubbed her hands slightly, cracking her knuckles, and smiled an evil smile. Shilo and Rich saw her face, and a growing concern crept into their minds. “Releasing moorings, ¼ reverse.” The ship backed out of its niche, spun a bit, and pointed slightly

above the horizontal plane. “3/4 impulse, now.” The ship jumped away in an instant. Then, less than a second later, “Full impulse.” She said with the biggest grin on her face.

60 seconds later. “Now that was fun!” She said. “Always wanted to do that. Thank you, Captain. We are cleared for warp at your command.”

“Well, I serve the crew.” He said, smiling. “Best speed to Cochrane.”

“Aye, sir.” She looked at her console, “We will be at Cochrane in a few days. Leisurely pace for the moment, sir, Warp 4 as requested by Commander Martinez.”

Greg touched his console. “Warp 4?”

“Not my idea, ask my seat cover.” Greg left the comm open and turned towards Johnston, who was prepped and ready to answer.

“Well, sir, little tweaks here, little tweaks there. I think we should be set to 100%+ in 24 hours. All Warp factors will be available.”

From the comm system, “What he said Greggry.”

“OK, please keep the First Officer posted on an hourly basis.”

Greg stood and walked over to Shilo. “Commander, will you please join me in my cabin in an hour. Bring Rich with you also.”

“Yes, sir. One hour.” By the time she finished speaking, he was at the turbolift. The doors closed, but as they closed, “Shilo, you have the bridge.”

An hour later, Shilo and Rich rang the bell.

“COME!”

The door opened, and they entered. He ushered them to seats and pulled out a small box from a cabinet.

“This is what you need to know about in the event something happens to me. Sarge is going to hit the planet, literally, and get captured.”

“We know about that already,” Rich said.

“What you don’t know is that this,” He opened the box and removed a small clear pad. “This is why we are sent on a covert, blank check, mission. This is the only mission that cannot fail. Everything and everyone else is expendable.” He was very serious about this. They both knew it.

“Looks like a baby jellyfish,” Rich said.

“Jellyfish?” Shilo asked.

“I like that. Been trying to think of a good name for this op, and JellyFish it is.” He paused a moment and sat in his chair. The three of them formed a triad the way they sat.

Rich explained, “A jellyfish is just that, but it secretes a form of venom that hurts humans. I am not a marine biologist, so the computer may do better to enlighten you.” She nodded to him.

Greg continued; he explained the device the best he could, but suffice it to say, it took control of any system attached to it, and the system had no clue. So it was something he suspected came from Section 31. But no one would admit there even was a Section 31, so.....

“What’s the range?” Shilo asked.

“It’s a new subspace band, way the hell up there, and they tell me they have not discovered the range limitation yet. The band is undetectable and has low power, so it will not be discovered. Hell, I knew where the thing was, and with standard Federation and Romulan tricorders, I could not find it. The only way to see it, once it is applied, is to use a special light. It glows orange.”

Greg picked up a small lamp and turned it on. Sure enough, the jellyfish glowed orange.

“Captain, I see no difference between the light and the non-light.”

Greg looked at Rich, then said to Shilo, “What color is the blob right now?”

“Well, it is not clear, nor is it opaque. On the contrary, it is ever so slightly orange.”

“Hmmm....” Greg made the sound.

He directed the light on the blob.

“Ouch, it is glowing like a nova. Hurts my eyes.”

“Well, it appears the visual receptors of the commander here are uniquely qualified for this mission.”

Shilo asked, “Interesting. Is there any technical information I can review?”

“Nothing public, and nothing is on any computer outside of the security center unless....” Then, he grinned, “...our black ops team has something printed.”

“Understood.” She smiled at him, knowing she needs to speak to Regis and Larimore. They discussed the mission for half an hour longer.

“Computer. In the event of my death, Commanders Steele and Ariel are to have full access to my personal logs, lockers, safe, and the ship.”

“Noted.” Replied the computer.

“Greg, you make this mission sound dangerous,” Rich said.

“Maybe a little. If by some chance we are in the polar orbit of the planet and the cloak fails, we will have very few moments to get it operational again, move, and pray before we are no more. If that happens, well, this is all a moot point.”

They nodded to him.

The bell chimed. “Enter,” Greg said.

Larry and Juan entered.

Larry looked around for a brief moment, “Did we miss something?”

“No, have a seat. Rich, fill them in on what we know.”

Rich smiled, “The most classified piece of this mission is operation JellyFish.” He pointed to the blob on the table. “It becomes invisible and takes complete and covert control of the

system it is attached to and communicates on a previously unused subspace band using low power to avoid detection.”

“Not bad, Rich, you were listening. Larry, your guy, will have one of these, and when taken to the security center, he will place it on the main computer interface. We will be able to keep tabs, download documents, and take control as needed. Juan, I also need one of these in the ship’s computer if we are boarded and the ship is taken over. We need a way home. The communication to it needs to be through a TnT. Commands need to be instantly received and processed.”

Juan rubbed his chin, “Let me think on that a minute or three. I can think of a few places it can go, but it also needs to be in the right place. Can I bring a couple people in on this?”

“I prefer as few as possible. Do what you must; just don’t put it on the bulletin board.” He paused and looked at Rich. “I need for you to teach the Marines and a few select Starfleet security types the skill of Klingon fighting, or any other type of techniques you can think of, you have about a year. Most of this trip will be at warp 2, and at warp 2, they are a long way away.”

“Uh, Cap, I did the math. About 19 years at Warp 2. So, I’m assuming between here and there, we will be traveling at a higher speed.”

“Correct.” Greg turned to Larry, but Rich took over the conversation. “Colonel,” Rich asked, “Any Marines interested in learning to fight like a Klingon?”

“Commander, I speak for my Marines when I say, we ALL look forward to it.”

“Good.” Greg continued, “Shilo, Rich, I need you to do me a favor.” She cocked her head at him. “I need for you two to always have the water near you, at all times. In the event something goes south, you need to speed up and take care of the situation. Use your judgment. The same goes for the rest of you, have the water at hand and use it if necessary. But Rich, defend the ship; Shilo, defend the crew.”

“Yes, sir.” She replied.

“One last thing. When this mission is in operation on the planet, I may become an enemy of the Federation. Captured by a Romulan spy on the Scorpion. She and I have already spoken, and she is aware of her role. She was planted a few decades ago, and she informed me she was activated a few hours before we departed Earth. This is also classified, as is her identity until it is disclosed. The crew’s reaction must look real.”

“Understood,” they all said as the briefing continued.

An hour later, they returned to their quarters. They needed to get in motion. Greg sat quietly in his quarters.

“Computer. Play some quiet jazz.” Music filled the room. Greg closed his eyes to meditate; he was in a completely white room.....

## CHAPTER 3-3

Greg was sitting in his chair on the bridge, deep in thought. He needed to consider if everyone was currently required for this mission or if additional crew was required to be assigned. They had a single stop before they vanish without a trace, and the known universe, sans Starfleet Command, believes them all to be dead.

“Computer notify everyone of Commander rank and above to meet in the mess hall in 15 minutes. If they are off duty at the moment, they can wear whatever they want.” He paused a very brief moment, “Computer, amend that to be all ranks of Lieutenant Commander and above.” The computer chirped.

He looked around the bridge, and other than him, there was no one on duty at the moment higher than the rank of Lieutenant. “Computer, how many onboard hold the rank of Lieutenant in Starfleet or the equivalent rank in the Marines?”

The computer responded, “11.”

“Please transmit the same message to them, Lieutenant or equal rank, in 30-minutes.”

He heard a chirp to his left and an ‘acknowledged’ and knew the orders have been given.

Standing and making an extended circle around to all stations and receiving a nod from everyone, he walked towards the turbolift. “Lieutenant, you have the bridge.”

“Aye, sir.”

Lieutenant Ma walked to the center seat and took her place. Another crew member went to her station, science, and resumed her duties. “Status?” she asked.

Each station reported in sequence.

“Traveling at warp four, the destination is Cochrane Station, ETA is 13 hours.”



“No ships or items of interest in range. One exception is a courier shuttle catching up to us at warp 5. Unfortunately, their destination is also Cochrane.”

“No stray signals detected.”

“Engines are all in the green.”

“Weapons are all at the ready, on standby.”

“Ship’s internal sensors, life support, and systems are all green.”

Roughly 20 minutes after the Captain departed, she spoke again. “Any changes in the shuttle or surrounding space?”

“No, Lieutenant, status quo.”

“Excellent, Thank yo.....” She was interrupted by the Ensign at communications.

“Lieutenant, the shuttle is hailing us, priority traffic.”

“On screen.” The image appeared on the screen of the inside of the small shuttle. “This is the USS Scorpion. How may we assist you?”

“Allow me to dock in your bay. I have documents for your command staff.” He paused. “Sending codes.”

A moment later, “Authenticated.”

“Permission granted. We will drop to sublight....”

“No Scorpion, slow to warp one and open your shuttle bay. I will make a warp landing.”

“You’ll what?”

“Trust me. I do this all the time.”

She thought for a minute, “Approved. Slow to warp one. Open the shuttle bay doors.”

“Engineering to bridge. You are opening the bay doors, and we are still at warp.”

“We know. Prepare to receive a shuttle.”

“AT WARP!”

“Yes.”

“Holy crap....” The connection terminated as they looked up how to do this on the computer. They had a lot of time—a whole 88 seconds.

“Steele to bridge, is there something you want to tell me.”

Lt Ma smiled and reiterated what transpired.

“OK, you have a good handle on it. When the courier arrives, bring em to the mess hall.”

“Yes, sir.” The connection terminated, and she looked around. “OK then, I have it under control. A shuttle traveling at warp will enter our warp field and land in the shuttle bay. Happens every day!” There were a few chuckles but more out of anxiety than humor.

The shuttle approached and stopped a few meters short of the Scorpion’s warp shell. Then slowly approached and merged the two fields. There was a slight bump as they touched, and it shook the ship a little. Once it was inside, its warp bubble collapsed and was carried by the Scorpion. It entered the shuttle bay as if they were at a dead stop.

The single occupant left the shuttle, and a security officer approached, “I am to escort you to the Captain.”

“Perfect.”

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“I called you all here to discuss personnel one last time.”

He looked around and continued, “Are there any crewmembers who you do not want, and are there any Federation people you do?”

No one spoke. As Greg opened his mouth, the ship rocked and shook a moment. Rich tapped his communicator.

“Steele to bridge, is there something you want to tell me.”

Lt Ma reiterated what transpired for the past few minutes.

“OK,” Rich said. “You have a good handle on it. When the courier arrives, bring em to the mess hall.”

“Yes, sir.” The connection terminated.

Lieutenant Ma opened a channel, “Ma to security. Please hold outside the galley, and we will join you as you deliver the courier to the Captain.”

“Understood.”

She looked around the bridge. She was a Lieutenant, and there were three others on the bridge. Finally, the replacements appeared, and they stood and waited by the turbolift.

“Ensign Tor, you have the bridge. Please try not to crash into anything.”

He stood and walked to the chair, looking at it for a moment.

“Is there something wrong, Ensign?”

“No, Ma’am, this chair increases the level of anxiety and responsibility the moment you sit in it.”

“Yes, it does.” She replied.

Tor took the seat, “Yes, it does indeed.”

She looked around the bridge and said, “The rest of you, keep an eye on him, please.”

Yes, Ma’am sounded around the bridge. Ma entered the lift and the doors closed.

When they opened again, they saw the security detail approaching the door. So they joined the group and entered the room together.

“Lieutenants, please take a seat.” The Captain gestured around the area where there were open seats, and they all sat among the other officers. Lieutenant Ma stood next to the courier while the others sat. Then, when the room quieted, she spoke.

“Captain, this is the courier.” She took a seat, and the courier approached the captain.

He walked up to the Captain, stopped in front of him, snapped to attention, and made a left-facing movement to squarely face Commander Ariel. "Commander." He handed her a data disk, then did a perfect about-face to meet the captain and snapped to attention.

The Captain looked curiously at Shilo, who was interfacing the data module with her padd.

"Oh my..." she exclaimed.

"Shilo? Would you like to share with the class?" Greg said in a not too quiet voice.

She looked around the room and showed him the screen. He read some of the information.

"Oh my..." Greg said.

"Greg, can you share it with the class, please?" Rich asked.

"Yes." He looked at Shilo, who nodded to him. "First, this courier is to become a part of the crew assigned to Major Regis. His role will be passed on to us as the need arises. Secondly, we are to travel to three worlds before we head on our mission. That should delay us by 8 days, but overall, it will be better for us."

"The planets we will be visiting are member worlds, and we will spend a couple days at each, so a rotating shore leave policy will be in place." He tapped Juan on the shoulder, who winked at him, understanding he must take control of that part of the trip. "The reason we are heading to these three planets is that at each location, a member of Shilo's family or a person from Rich's past will meet us to pass on classified information. We have no idea who will be meeting us at each stop, which is the reason Shilo and Rich will need to take care of this part, just the two of them." He looked up a moment, "Larry, pick two who will be inconspicuous as both a tail and bodyguard to watch over them."

"Aye Aye skipper got the two who would be perfect for the role."

"My past..." Rich said. "What does that mean?"

“You’ll have to let us know. Thanks, Colonel.” He looked at the padd, “First stop is the Klingon homeworld, Qo’nos,”

Rich commented, “Finally, some good food!”

The Captain smiled at Rich and continued, “We will be there for 88 hours. First, a contingent of Klingons needs to be transported to New Sydney, where we will meet up with the ship they will be assigned to, along with the makings of a feast for the crew, compliments of Commander Steele, who will deliver it personally.” He winked at Rich. “Rich, know any good Klingon chefs in the capital city? Get with them as we travel there and get the meal lined up. Blank check.” He paused and looked at the pad, “As I said, our next stopover is New Sydney, in the Orion sector, where we will be for 48 hours. We are transporting two people, technicians, and a cargo hold full of equipment, it sounds like. Last stop, we will be traveling to Regula 1 Station for a 4-day layover. Shilo, it looks like this is your time to create a feast. I believe we will arrive the day before KraJat Na. What is that?”

Shilo smiled, “Similar to Christmas on Earth. Translated to standard, it is Feast with Family. An annual celebration dedicated to family and friends. Traditional foods that humans will enjoy, but some may be spicy.”

“Spicy Shilo chow! I can’t wait to try it all!” Rich chimed in.

“Yes, Commander, you will be invited,” Shilo told him.

Greg continued, “Once we leave there, we will head at warp 7 to the Orion nebula for a comprehensive survey inside the nebula. Any idea of the impact of activating the cloak in the nebula?”

Juan and Rich answered together, “Not a clue!”

Rich said, “Before we do the ship, I suggest the Colonel take a cutter and run a smaller-scale test.”

“Great idea,” Lanning replied.

“OK then, remember that 7-day briefing this morning. Forget it. You just got the new and improved version. Still, now that we are stopping at other locations, expand your shopping lists as necessary.”

The agent was seated next to Larrimore and Regis when Greg looked for him. He never saw them enter the room. “Your shuttle, do we need to drop it off anywhere?”

“Actually, no, sir. That shuttle was designed for just this trip. Once the engines cool down, we can remove the current warp core and store it later. More on that later. There is an extra core in the cargo area that is inferior to the current warp core, and once installed, it will appear as though your covert Marine cobbled it together. Once it crashes on the planet, the Romulans can do whatever they want to it since it contains very few Federation, as in Starfleet, specific parts.”

“Juan, have your team look into that, please,” Greg said. “Now, what exactly is your role?”

“Well, sir, I am the backup plan.” He bit down on something and seemed to reappear next to Greg. “In the event of a serious turn of events, I will go into the situation and correct it.”

“Water capsule?” Shilo said.

“Yes, Commander, I have a supply of them in a pocket and place one in my cheek out of the way. Then, if needed, I simply bite down on it, release the water, and correct the situation. I cannot cause a danger to anyone, hurt anyone, or leave my DNA at the scene. I have been trained for just this role.”

“Very good.” Greg turned back to the officers in the room. “Is there any person that (A) you feel should not be on this mission and (B) a person you feel would be an asset to this mission?”

One hand went up.

“Lieutenant Ma, you have something?”

“Yes, Captain. I feel there is a Lieutenant Commander who may prove useful in this mission.”

“Who is it?” Shilo asked.

“My husband, Tolar.”

“Where is Tolar at present,” Greg asked her.

“Tolar is stationed as the logistics officer on Regula 1.”

Shilo searched Starfleet records for Tolar. “Captain, Tolar is an engineer specializing in energy and dampening fields. I cannot see a need for his skills.”

“But the question should be, why is an energy expert, a commander no less, putting in time as a logistics officer. Something is not adding up there.” Rich said.

Ma spoke up, “Commander Ariel, search back 2 years and 4 months.”

Shilo did, “The record is empty.” She probed deeper. “That period is classified.”

“Computer, unseal Tolar’s record for the time in question.” Ma said.

The computer asked, “Security code required.”

“Computer, recognize Lieutenant T’Pring Ma. Security code IDIC-42.”

“Completed.”

“Uhhhhhhh Captain, I tend to agree with Lieutenant Ma. He may be a valuable asset.”

She handed the padd to Greg. He read the section and said, “Transfer him.”

“Lieutenant Ma, feel like sharing your quarters for a year?” Greg asked her.

“It will be an adjustment, but I shall suffer through it.”

“Good for you, if you need anything, get with Commander Steele. I suspect you may get larger quarters.” Looking back at the group, “Anything else, anyone.”

Juan spoke up, “Greg, I have one level 5 transporter tech right now, but we have 2 main transporter rooms. Johnston mentioned to me there is a young lady who is an absolute wiz with a transporter. We can always use another level 5 transporter tech so, that’s my suggestion.”

“OK, get with Johnston and get the information to Shilo; Shilo, get her assigned here before we head out. Where is she currently stationed?”

Juan said, “I’ll find out.”

“Good. Thanks, Juan. Now, anyone else or anyone we need to leave behind?”

No one spoke or moved, “Dismissed.”

Everyone left the room except the command staff and the covert trio.

Greg looked at the operatives dressed in black, “We need a conversation, 2100 hours in my quarters.”

He turned to the others in the room, “OK, tell me all the things you did not want to say with the others in the room.”

CHAPTER 3-4

Greg walked into the Galley, barely past 0300 on the ship. A few hours ago, the meeting in his quarters with the SSD got his anxiety level up, and there is only one way to drop it back to normal.

He walked into the kitchen, and a couple of crewmen were prepping for the day and jumped when he entered. "I'm not here. You didn't see me." They smiled.

Greg went to the cooler, grabbed some milk and some chocolate syrup, then the freezer, and got some ice cream. "You guys know where Donald hides the vanilla extract?"

"Yes, sir, I take it you are making a chocolate shake."

"Good guess, you must be a cook?"

"Yes, sir, I've been called that. Let me make it for you, sir."

Greg smiled, "Thank you, crewman....uh....Gallagher, I believe." He looked at the other, "Larchmont. Will Gallagher and Greta Larchmont. If I remember correctly, you two are engaged."

Greta replied, "Yes, sir. Just waiting for the right time to get married."

Will started to make the milkshake, but just before he turned the blender on, Rich walked into the kitchen.

"Hey, Will, put a few shots of this in there also." He handed Greta a bottle of bourbon, and she smiled and handed it to her fiancé.

"Yes, sir, 1 adult chocolate shake coming up," Will replied

"Can I offer the two of you a little free advice, don't wait. If you do, you will kick yourself later for not doing it sooner." He smiled at the two of them, "Tell you what, if you need any more free advice, let me know. I am told I am full of it!!" They laughed.

"He is that, yep, he is that." Rich grinned, "I'll have what he's having?"

Will doubled the ingredients in the blender and picked up the bottle, and poured. Maybe a bit too much, then looked at the Captain, “Hey, I need to deal with this guy!” Greg thumbed at Rich.

Will poured a couple more shots in the blender, pulled the bottle back, and looked at them. “WAIT!” Rich said, “You need to give me some courage. I need to talk to that guy.”

Will poured a little more in and closed the lid, and blended it. It was a dark chocolate color, and you can smell the vanilla and the bourbon.

“Rich, you do realize in those two glasses of chocolate shake is about a dozen shots of outstanding and expensive bourbon?”

“Why, thank you, Greg. Fortunately, I am not all that fond of the cheap stuff.”

“You two really are friends, aren’t you?” Greta asked.

Greg replied, “No, Greta, we’re brothers. So is Will, and you’re my sister. Never forget that.”

Rich picked up, “I have known this guy for a long time; since we were pups. But, I will tell you one thing; he tells it like it is. Plain and simple. No pretense, no bullshit...if you pardon my Romulan.”

Will handed him a shake, and then the Captain. Even had a straw. They each took a draw from the straw.

“Holy crap, that is good!” Rich and Greg said together.

“They use one brain too,” Greta said before she realized who she was talking to. She looked nervous now.

Greg and Rich laughed, nearly spitting chocolate shake all over the galley. “That’s right! We take turns. Thankfully, it’s my turn today!” Rich said; Greg shook his head.

“Captain, there’s just a few shots left in the bottle.”

“Tell you what. Hang on to it, and when you make that decision, drop by my quarters, and the three of us will finish it off.”

“Yes, sir, thanks.”

Greg and Rich walked out to the dining area and took a seat to savor the milkshake. “What was that all about?” Rich asked.

“They are toying with the idea of getting married. I hoped I pushed them a bit closer.”

“Well, let me know. I would love to set up the pre-marriage party.”

“I bet you would.” He paused a moment. “So, what do you think of the shake?”

“Needs more bourbon.” He smiled. “But then again, this is from the Johnston Distillery, isn’t it?”

“It is. But it is some OK stuff he is producing. When he leaves Starfleet, he has a future in the adult beverage industry.”

“True. He wants to expand his warehouse. He and I were thinking about trading it on the next couple of stops. He has a great deal in backstock he needs to get rid of and needs fresh ingredients.”

“I’ll leave it up to you. This is all off the books. No vouchers or credits can change hands.”

“We know. He has a special arrangement already picked out at the last stop, his beverage, this bourbon actually, for steaks. Enough for each member of the crew to have a tasty meal of a perfectly cooked prime rib. You’ll get the first sample at the dinner in a few days. That’s part of it. And before you ask, yes, the cooks are in cahoots with him. They all think they are putting one over on the old man.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way.” Greg took the last of the shake through the straw, making that sucking sound that kids make at the end of a drink, “One more thing. We need some good wine for the dinner party.”

“Taken care of.” Rich did the same.

“When are you planning the Prime Rib dinner?” Greg asked.

Rich swallowed the mouthful of milkshake he had, “We thought about that and figure we can hide the ship in a small nebula just outside of Romulan space. Hang out there for a day and let the

science types have some fun. Since we will be motionless, and no one will see us there, all hands can attend the dinner. So, about 4 or so months after we leave the last Starbase.” He took a drink, “Then, just before we exit, we kick in the cloak, and no one will be the wiser that we are headed into Romulan space.”

They stood and walked to the recycler and set their mugs on the pad. Then, a moment later, they disassembled into their individual molecules and vanished.

“One last thing. There will be a new crew member at the Starbase, Ian Preston. Currently a Lieutenant, he is being notified of the assignment and the promotion right about now.”

“What’s his specialty?” Rich asked. It’s a bit odd since he and Shilo saw all transfers. This guy was an unknown element.

“Intelligence, I figured at least one of the command officers needed some.” Rich smiled at him.

“His access?” Rich asked.

“Same as yours.” Greg grinned, “I think you may need to review his file; he is an interesting character.”

“Good night Greg.”

“Good night Rich.”

~~~~~

Greg walked out of the galley and into the Turbolift, “My quarters.” He told the lift. He was exhausted, beat. He needed to sleep and nothing more.

A minute later, the doors opened, and he entered the corridor, walked a few steps, and approached his quarters; the doors opened.

When he entered, he smelled perfume. Odd. He glanced around and saw clothing neatly laid on his desk chair. Then, without looking in the other room, he said, “Hello Ramona.”

“Hello, Greg.” She replied.

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Greg woke up when Ramona got out of bed, it was 0430 ship time, and he needed to get up early anyway.

“You know the crew knows about us?” He said to her.

“I know. They also know we have known each other for more than 2 decades.”

“True.” He paused. “What are we going to do about it?”

“I was thinking about that... I say nothing until this mission is over. If we survive, I mean if we succeed, you can captain whatever you want, and I can stay in Starfleet and get assigned to your ship, or I can retire and join you on the ship. Either way, we end up together.”

“You have it all worked out.” He smiled at her as she dressed.

“What are you smiling at?”

“Knowledge.”

“Knowledge? What knowledge?”

“The knowledge of you and I together, the knowledge you and I are meant to be together, and the knowledge you and I will be together forever!”

“Really. How do you know I don’t have some young Ensign on the side?”

“Would he know to touch you here?” He touched her in a specific spot. She started to melt a little. “or here. Or possibly here?”

She joined him back in bed. “What about getting your day started?” Greg asked comically.

“I thought I would start this morning with an exercise routine recommended by my Captain.”

“Oh, just tell me what I need to do?”

An hour later, they both showered and dressed and headed to the galley for breakfast. Greg walked in first, and a couple minutes later, Ramona entered.

Shilo and Rich smiled as she entered; Greg looked at them but grabbed some food and coffee. As he approached the table, the smile on both of their faces faded slightly, or rather the attempt to conceal the smile was made.

“Commanders,” He looked around, and no one was in earshot. “What’s up with the grins?”

Shilo shoveled a colossal spoon of something into her mouth, so it was up to Rich, “Well, Greg, Shilo, and I think the two of you are perfect for each other.”

“Me and who?” He asked.

“Commander O’Roury naturally. Trust us, you really are not fooling anyone, and we were wondering if the two of you wanted to bunk together after this mission starts. As far as we’re concerned, you two are 100% a couple already.”

Greg thought about denying it, but scuttlebutt has a way of becoming bulletin board material on a small ship. “Are we that obvious?”

Shilo nodded. “It is odd, but not unique, for a captain to be married, and to a member of his crew, that situation is difficult at best. However, in this instance, she is not a command officer and technically reports to me, so I personally see nothing improper.”

Shilo shoveled a heaping spoon again, and Rich spoke.

“Greg, have the two of you thought about making this a permanent arrangement?”

He felt like he was in high school or something, “We talked about it and thought it would be best to wait until after this mission.”

“A word of advice an old officer told me about ten years ago, Life is short, son, so if you find something or someone that brings pure joy into your heart, the smart thing to do is find a way to experience that joy every morning when you wake up and every evening before you fall asleep.”

“I remember that. I am the OLD guy, huh.” Greg said.

“But you were right,” Rich said.

“Captain, I took the liberty of researching a union between the captain and a member of the crew. There are no limitations or restrictions. It is, however, not recommended. Therefore, I can only assume it will be approved if requested. The proper approval paperwork will have an admiral’s signature. Would you happen to know of an admiral who is understanding?”

Rich looked at Shilo, “....where are we heading again?”

“Some Starbase....” She replied to Rich.

“Captain, would you happen to know if there is an understanding admiral on that Starbase?”

“Alright, alright. I’ll talk to him!” He looks at Shilo, “Commander, inform Ramona about this conversation, please, and that she is invited to the Admirals dinner. But this topic is closed. The population is increasing.”

“Yes, sir.” Shilo said, “I shall inform Commander O’Roury that she is invited to the Admiral’s dinner as the Captain’s date.

Greg was about to say something but, looking around, the room was beginning to fill up.

CHAPTER 3-5

“Captain, we are within hailing range of Starbase Cochrane.”

“Ramon’s to the bridge,” Greg said as he pressed a button on the arm of his chair.

He glanced around back and looked at each person on the bridge. “On screen.” Ricardo and Yvonne exited the turbolift.

An admiral popped up on the viewscreen, “Greg, welcome to my home. Are you here for a little R&R, or is this a business call?”

“A little of both, actually. R&R and a shopping trip.”

“Have you been picking up strays on the road, Greg?”

“Oh, those two. They wanted an adventure or something. You know them?”

“Meh, a little.” They were both grinning from ear to ear. “What’s their names again?”

“Not sure. Around here, we just call them the twins. Ensign Y and Ensign R if we only need one at a time, but they came as a set after all.” Greg grinned.

“Hi, Dad,” Ricardo said

“Hello, Dad,” Yvonne said.

“Hello, my precious baby’s. I see you are being forced to work for the big, scary Captain.”

“We’re fine, Dad,” Yvonne said. “Besides, he has some great stories about you he’s been telling.”

Before the Admiral had the chance to reply to that, Greg spoke.

“Admiral, I am invoking protocol 92.”

“Understood. Ramon out.” The face on the screen shifted from the admiral to that of the docking control center with a Trill ensign center screen.

“Scorpion. You have priority docking clearance. Bay 19G.” She became more relaxed. “Just get close. The tractors will dock you smoothly.”

“Acknowledged. Try not to scratch the paint. Scorpion out.” Greg smiled, “You heard the lady. Get us close to 19G and let go of the steering wheel.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The ship smoothly closed in on docking port 19G and came to a complete stop. A moment later, the station tractor beams grabbed the ship and gently tugged it sideways. A couple minutes later, a gentle bump and the starship came to rest.

“All stop, Captain,” Steele said. “Docking port attached and pressurized.”

“Shut the system down. Let’s go visit the station.”

Shilo opened the comm, “All departments, full maintenance protocols, begin R&R rotations, let’s go shopping.”

Greg and Rich smiled at each other. “Captain, can I buy you a drink?”

“No, Commander, you can buy me two.”

Everyone on the bridge smiled. They knew when they showed up at the bar, Commander Steele would buy them a drink also.

“Helm and nav, you are no longer needed. Go away.” Greg said.

“Yes, Captain.” They stood and walked to the rear of the room, entered the turbolift, and disappeared.

Shilo asked, “Where did they go?”

Rich replied, “Both of them are headed to the galley to help out. They enjoyed cooking and wanted to assist Donald and his staff with their shopping trips.”

“Excellent,” Shilo said.

Greg stood and left the bridge. He headed for the connection to the station. He needed to be the first one off the ship since he knows the Admiral would be waiting for him.

He exited the turbolift and walked around to the tunnel. There were already a few crew members waiting to head over.

Juan tapped a button, and the door opened on this side of the shaft. He took a few steps, and the other door opened. As he entered the station, the admiral extended a hand. Greg bypassed it and gave the Admiral a hug. It was returned.

“Where’s mine!” a female voice said.

Greg gave her one also, then dipped her back and brought her back upright.

“Admiral, Governor, the crew of the USS Scorpion would like to thank you for your hospitality.”

“We are honored by the presence of the crew of the Scorpion, Greg. You are welcomed here any time.” The woman said.

“Thank you, Governor.” He paused. “By the way, I believe you misplaced a couple things.”

The Ramon’s walked through the crowd and smiled at their parents. Greg said, “Mom and Dad, may I present your bouncing baby Ensigns.”

They all hugged. After a few minutes of personal family time, “Does this mean the cat is going back with you?”

“Yes, Mom, the captain, and the first officer are permitting me to bring my baby with me.”

“Greg, for that, name your price!” The Admiral smiled at him.

Yvonne said, “Dad has a cat allergy.”

“OH!” Greg replied. “What is the cat's name?”

“Fred.” She replied.

“Admiral, my price is dinner for you and your family on the ship tonight.” He winked at him, “I also have something we need to

discuss later over bourbon.” The Admiral was the person who first used the conversation levels, and bourbon is the most sensitive.

“By the way, Greg, there is a dilithium and trinket trader here on the station you need to meet. Markus A. Gibsonius is his name. He was hanging out in club Pluto; I think he’s been waiting for you to arrive.”

“What makes you say that, sir?”

“He has inquired the computer as to your arrival multiple times and requested your itinerary from command on occasion. So, now that you’re here, you can head to the club for a drink. I can meet you there a few minutes later.”

“Will do.” Greg looked at Shilo. “Admiral, we should meet this guy with Commander Steele.”

“Rich Steel! Please keep him on a leash, Greg.” Rich barked a couple times, and the Admiral smiled. Rich entered into view. “See what I mean.”

Rich put his hand over his heart, “He loves me, I can tell.”

“Commander, I take it you know the Admiral,” Shilo asked.

“Yes, I do. I worked with him on Rigel and on the USS Lexington. He also recommended the advanced Klingon training seminar and a few other things I cannot mention. But, all in all, I would say he knows me just about as well as he knows Gregory Boy here.” He pointed a thumb at the captain.

“OK,” Greg took over the conversation. “Here’s the game plan. First, we need to find this trader and see what he wants of me. Then, Shilo, get us parked and secured and send out the shopping teams. The ship is on standby, so only two are needed on the bridge. Perfect time for an Ensign to have the bridge.”

He turned slowly and saw Johnston standing at the engineering console as he approached the ship-side of the tube. “Johnston, you have a few specialized components you need to have available over the next while, so that is your mission. Find a friend to help you and have some fun along the way.”

“Aye, sir,” Johnston replied.

Greg walked to his quarters for a moment. He needed to pick something up before he went to the station. Rich followed him for some reason.

They walked back to the turbolift, headed to the station, and Greg tapped his communicator, “Ship-wide.” He said, and the tones could be heard. “Attention, crew, this is the Captain. We are docked at Cochrane Station, and shore leave is authorized. We will be here for a few days. Section chiefs, rotate your staff as you see fit. We have plenty of open cabins, and very few of you are in more than one crew member room. Those who have a roommate asked for it. If you want to have your own room on this mission, request it from Commander Steele. If there is anything you want to make our long-term trip better, get it on the station.” He paused a moment. “Have fun, but not too much. Binotti out.”

He and Rich entered the lift, “Docking port.” Greg said.

“OK, Rich. Got a question. How many weapons are you carrying right now?”

“Why?”

“Curiosity mostly.”

“18,” he smiled. “Before you ask, 11 are single-use, and the remainder is multiple uses.”

“Funny thing is, I thought there would be an even 20. I guess even you have limits.”

“Oh lord, now you challenged me.” His eyes opened wide and darted from side to side for a moment. “I will meet you at the station in a few minutes, Greg.”

The lift opened, and Rich took off to the right. Greg walked out and headed left.

“Captain,” Yvonne said.

“Glad you are both here already. Now we are waiting on Rich as I challenged him to something, and he needs to show me up.” Greg looked at them. They were waiting for him to continue, “I asked

him how many weapons he was carrying, he told me 18, and I mentioned to him that was a lower number than I would have thought.”

The twins grinned, “You like messing with him, sir?” Yvonne said.

“Yes, I do. It's so easy and fun.”

Greg saw Rich approaching. He made it to his quarters and back in record time.

Rich walked into the lift on the station as they entered, “22,” he said flatly. “12 and 10.”

Meaning 12 single-use and 10 multi-use. “Good,” Greg replied, and the lift started moving towards Pluto’s.

When the lift stopped and opened, “Have one for us, sir?”

“Heading to visit the parental units?”

“Yes, sir, and get my baby.”

“Just so you know, I like to cat sit. Shilo’s cat finds her way into my quarters at times. She spends the night, we talk, share a snack. It is wonderful.”

“Good to know, sir, thanks.”

“Cap, you wanna sit with my baby?” Ricardo said.

“You have a cat?”

“No sir, a targ!”

“Sir, he has a stuffed targ, a toy,” Yvonne said.

“Interesting, Mr. Ramon.”

Rich added, “We need to talk later.”

The twins turned left, and Rich and Greg maintained their heading. Walking through the station's corridors a few minutes, they entered the Pluto Bar and Grill. Greg looked at the sign, MEDIEVAL TIMES. “Really?”

Rich replied, “You never been here before? Pluto’s Medieval Times Grogery!”

“First time at Cochrane.” He paused a brief moment, “Actually, it’s my second. But the first time, I never made it onto the station. I was an ensign, on report, restriction, and additional duty.”

Rich came to a dead stop, “I need that story later, over a drink.”

“We’ll see.” Greg smiled.

They entered the Medieval Times Grill, and it smelled like some animal was slowly roasting over an open fire.

The bartender looked at Rich, moved his eyes to a table in the back. A man was sitting alone nursing a drink. Greg and Rich walked up.

Greg said, “I hear you been looking for me.”

The man stood, and Rich stood at the ready. “I am Marcus Aurelius Gibsonius, a trader in dilithium and trinkets,” He paused and smiled a very sinister smile. “I also dabble in information, Klingon weaponry, and security.”

“So, what is it you have for us?” Rich asked.

“Commander Steele, for you, I have this....” He pulled a Klingon Dagger from a box on the table. Rich’s eyes got wide.

Rich accepted the dagger and pressed the toggle, and the side blades extended. He looked it over. “There’s blood still on the hilt.” He said.

“Why, of course, there is. This is the execution weapon of the assassin Kowon. He was executed 100 years ago for sedition, treason, and attempting, and failing, to kill his D’har master. It was a public execution, and this blade was specially made for the occasion. As per tradition, the blade was given to the family of the last person he killed, the D’har master.” He smiled, “His descendants gave it to me and told me they wanted it out of their house since the Empire is no longer the Empire they recognized. I knew it would find its place in your collection one day. And here we are, negotiating a price.”

“AH! Price. And where does your price negotiation begin?” Rich asked.

“I was thinking about that, long and hard, on the trip here at warp three. Warp three, can you believe my ship can only attain Warp 3? It is rather slow, challenging to get anywhere fast.” He paused and grinned again. “But first, Captain, before the Commander and I negotiate a price for this wonderful weapon of history, for you, all I can offer is this padd.” He handed the captain a padd, and Greg toggled it.

On the screen:

Facial recognition, DNA, voiceprint match.

Gregory T. Binotti.

**Captain, Starfleet, assigned to USS
Scorpion as commanding officer.**

Enter response code to open system:

Mary had a little lamb.

Greg smiled as the padd requested the passphrase. He tapped the response to keep it secret; **THE DOCTOR FAINTED**

Rich laughed, and Marcus attempted to read what he typed.

Starfleet Intelligence outlined a plan to get them across the neutral zone border in one piece.

“According to this, we are to take you with us on our trip and drop you a few days of travel from the border. After that, you have the rest of the plan and will tell us when we are on our way.”

“One last thing,” Marcus said. “My ship will fit in your bay, but no one is to see it enter, and no one is to know I am there.”

Rich asked, “No one?”

“Except for your crew, of course.” He turned to Rich, “Now for the price. Commander Steele, you have some information in your head regarding a family in the capital city. An overheard conversation, I do believe. My price is for you and me to have an intelligent conversation, nothing more, nothing less.”

Rich squinted his eyes a bit, “I believe I know the family you are referring to, and if that is the case, I will provide any information you need. My price for the information is this blade and your employer’s name. So, I can be certain the information will be used properly.”

“Agreed. My employer made that option available to me if need be.” Marcus winked.

“Great. We will be here a few days.” Greg added. “In the meantime, we will not associate with you to maintain the ruse except for the purchase of trinkets, of course. You depart a day or two before us and meet us at these coordinates.” Greg pointed to a spot on the star map a few days travel for his ship. “From there, you will be our guest. All future communications will go through Commander Steele and hidden in the guise of making a sale.”

“Understood, and commander, I have a few other special items from Kronos you may be interested in.”

Rich and Greg nodded to him and walked off to the far end of the bar. Taking a seat at the stool at the far end of the bar, the bartender glanced at them. Rich held up 4 fingers, “SCOTCH.”

The bartender brought two glasses, each nearly full. “Two double scotches, Commander.”

“Excellent,” Rich replied.

“Compliments of the Admiral.” He smiled at Rich and Greg.

“In that case,” Greg said, “I hope it is the good stuff?”

“Top shelf Cap! Only the best.” He winked and went back to his spot.

They took a tentative sip and loved it. Then knocked it back and ingested the remainder. A moment later, the bartender returned.

“I was also told that when you finished your drink, you are to report to the conference room next to the control center.”

“The Admiral seems to tell you a lot of things for a bartender.”

He put his elbows on the bar and got close to them, speaking softly, “Well, you see, I was a Marine Lieutenant assigned to the protection of the admiral a bunch of years ago. He and I had some great conversations. I protected that man for nearly a year, and I trust him with my life, and I hope he trusts me the same. I would do anything for him, and I know when to talk and what to say. So, you see, he is a friend.”

They understood. Greg spoke next, “Well, we have marines on our ship who will be rotating onto the station for a few hours liberty.” Greg tapped his glass. “After they sit and before they order, they each get one of these, my compliments. No, actually, compliments of Captain Binotti and Commander Steele.”

“They will love that, sure thing Cap. You got it.”

Greg and Rich left and headed for the briefing room. “OK, how do we get to the briefing room,” Greg said.

“I thought you knew!” Rich replied.

They headed to the computer interface; Rich asked, “Computer, identify the fastest route to the command conference room.”

A moment later, a light appeared on the wall, “Please follow the yellow light.”

They followed it to a turbo lift a short walk away, and the doors closed, and they were whisked away.

The doors opened, and they were ushered to the conference room.

“Captain, glad you made it. How was the meeting with our favorite trader?”

“Productive.”

Shilo beamed into the room onto the pad in the corner.

The Admiral began to speak, “Excellent, now, let’s get down to business, computer, seal the room.” The room went into a security lockdown, and the classified briefing started.

The group sat around the conference table and began to talk.

CHAPTER 3-6

“Captain, I am not certain the Admiral understands what he is asking us to do,” Shilo said when they were alone.

“Commander.... Shilo, the Admiral, knows precisely what he asks of us, but he also knows we are not a conventional crew. Nevertheless, we will survive this mission, all of us.”

Greg started walking away to leave her quarters. He went to her quarters mainly because of her face when the Admiral outlined their true mission. He wanted to help her through the feelings she had. But, unfortunately, Greg knows those feelings, like this is the mission she would be killed.

He turned to her, “Shilo, I need a few special items from the station. We need to build a huge and devastating bomb, no propulsion system, but it needs some guidance. As basic as possible, with as little technology as possible and as powerful as can be designed. But still, small enough carry.”

“What would it be used for?” She asked.

“Think of it as a mine. Several of these need to take out a ship; at warp, it should take only one. So I figure opening the rear shuttle bay and tossing one out and throwing it at an enemy ship following us could prove to be an effective weapon. That, and it would just detonate with no advanced warning. They would think we had a new weapon that was undetectable, and by the time they mentioned it to anyone, they would be debris.”

“Can I recruit a couple tinkers?”

“By all means, but this needs to be as quiet as possible. Oh, and I want one on the bridge at all times. It needs to be set that if it is transported, it detonates 3 seconds after arrival. I need this one to look like a high-security safe or something. If someone attempts to steal it, they will get what they deserve. Besides, I have the feeling it will come in handy on this mission.”

“Greg, you seem to cover all the bases. The just in cases or what-ifs. Is there anything else you have in mind?”

“Actually, three of four other things, but we have the time.” Shilo looked confused, “I need to clarify them in my mind first, then you will be the first to know about them.”

He nodded to her and left the cabin. She was sitting in her favorite chair, the one she brought from home, holding her cat, who was nearly asleep and purring up a storm.

“Computer, open a classified log file. Start log, Tossed Salad. Gather all information you can find and not be noticed. Subject, designing a very powerful but small explosive device. It needs to be very stable, and the components need to be easy to acquire.”

“Security level?” Asked the computer.

“We shall call this security level Omicron.”

“Should any others require access?”

“Yes. Aside from myself, add the captain, Commander Steele, Lieutenant Johnston, and Ensign Ramon.”

“Define which Ensign Ramon?”

“Ensign Yvonne Ramon.”

“Complete. Shall I notify them?”

“No, ask them to report to my quarters in ten minutes, except for the captain.”

“Invitations sent.” Replied the computer.

Shilo stood and walked to the replicator, “Computer, what do you have in the way of an appetizer tray, finger food but not too messy to eat.”

“Vegetable platter, fried chicken – bone-in or boneless, Asian dumplings, egg rolls, spring rolls.”

“Stop. Create a large platter using all of the items you mentioned.”

“Standby.” 20 seconds later, the tray appeared. Shilo picked it up and placed it at what she referred to as her dining room table. A few minutes later, her bell rang. The three guests arrived.

“Enter”

Rich walked in and headed straight for the food. “I smelled the wings in the hall. I hoped it was you.” He said to her as he tore into a bone-in wing that was very spicy.

“Did I get the snacks...” she said tentatively. “...right?”

“Definitely. Excellent choices. Something for everyone, and look at this, the meat is separate from the veggies. Great idea.”

She was about to tell him it was not her idea when her bell rang again. “Enter.”

Yvonne and Johnston entered together.

“Can I get someone a refreshment?” Shilo asked.

“Blood wine, 2241, please. It will complement the wings perfectly,” Rich said.

She looked at the others and raised her eyebrow. Yvonne asked for a pina colada, and Johnston asked for the exact blood wine.

Shilo picked them up from the replicator, walked to where they sat, and handed the drinks out.

Johnston spoke as he received his beverage. “Never had blood wine before, though it may be a good day to try.”

Rich roared, and Johnston grinned. “How long have you had that in your back pocket?”

“A while, sir, glad you liked it.” He and Rich looked at each other, but the others in the room had no idea how funny.

Rich explained, “There is a Klingon adage, Today is a good day to die. It is a play on words.” He looked at Johnston. “Please, never say it around a Klingon; the slight pain you feel as the knife slips between your ribs just may be the last sensation you have.”

Everyone’s eyes were wide, “Yes, sir. Noted!”

Shilo took over. “We have a lot to discuss, but first, let me fill you in on a few things.”

They all stopped as Johnston brought the cup to his lips and tasted the Klingon drink. He took a tentative sip. And coughed.

He did not say a word, simply stood and walked to Rich, handed him the cup. Rich nodded, “It is an acquired taste.”

Johnston headed to the replicator, “Irish coffee, double sweet, double strong.” A large clear mug appeared, and he sniffed. “Now, commander, this is what pairs well with everything.”

Rich looked at him, “May I?”

He handed the cup to Rich, who took a large sip. “Very nice. I’ll need to remember that for a later time. Should go good with breakfast!”

“Sir, this contains a triple shot of Irish Whiskey.”

“OK, I’ll need to bump it up. Good catch.” He winked at Johnston as Shilo sat there amazed.

She took over again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, and Rich.” He winked at her. “We are a classified group intent on designing the most devastating explosive we can create that has the fewest items of technology possible and cannot be detected by sensors. It will not require a propulsion system. If they are used, we will simply toss them out the open shuttle bay doors. However, they may require a fundamental guidance system, and they should detonate on contact.”

The other three in the room sat there with their mouths open. Finally, Shilo broke the silence, “OK, ideas?”

Yvonne opened her mouth, and everyone looked at her in anticipation of the first idea.

She closed it again and sat back, taking a sip of her pina colada.

Rich spoke, “Yvonne. In this group, no idea is wrong or bad or stupid. Speak. You may not have a great idea, but it may spark an idea in one of us.”

She leaned forward in her seat and spoke softly, “I remember in the historical weapons seminar, there was a type of explosive called nito or nitor or something.”

Johnston spoke, “Nitro, as in nitroglycerin. A potent explosive, to say the least, but very unstable from what I remember. That was a great seminar, by the way.”

They all looked at him, “You were in that seminar? Were you thinking about tactical?”

He smiled, “No, not at all. I met an interested girl, and we went together; I realized I would need to help her out, so I learned a lot about it to tutor her when needed. She is a Lieutenant Commander on the Orinoko and the tactical officer. I thought it was fun, actually.” He paused a few moments. “We can make something similar using dilithium resin. Put it into a large bottle with a small amount of antimatter suspended in a magnetic containment chamber. Surround the antimatter chamber with the resin and a cooling unit to keep it at the temp of space, and it will blend into the background. The temperature should keep the resin stable.”

They all looked at him and grinned.

Rich spoke first, “Johnston, you are one devious SOB. I like you! Arming will be easy. Deactivate the cooling unit. As it warms up, it will become unstable. I would guess 60 seconds, and the slightest knock will set it off.” They nodded to each other in agreement.

“OK,” Shilo said. “We need to meet each day or so to make this happen. This is classified; no talking to the crew about it, please. We cannot experiment until we are underway. Lastly, one needs to be on the bridge in the guise of high-security data storage. The Captain feels a ship chasing us will attempt to remove our secrets. If we appear to have an old fashion safe or some such on the bridge, they may attempt to transport it off, and if they do, he wants it to explode

in their face.” She paused and looked at the others. “Think along those lines as we meet tomorrow.” She stood

The others all stood, and Rich walked to the replicator with the 2 empty Klingon goblets. “Another blood wine!” He said. It appeared and drank it in one gulp, finished it, and took a breath. Then, as he sat the three goblets on the pad to recycle the materials, he looked at the group, “One for the road.”

Johnston laughed.

~~~~~

Greg walked down the corridor and passed a few crew members, who smiled at him. He was dressed in the attire for the place he was heading, a holo-program he enjoyed.

“Computer, run program, Binotti mountain top.”

“Program running from saved location. You may enter when ready.”

Captain Gregory T. Binotti was dressed in buckskin, a coon skin cap, and wrapped in thick furry pelts. The door opened, and he saw a blizzard in front of him.

He walked into the holodeck and felt the biting cold. The snow pellets stung as they hit the bare skin of his face. He loved it! This was his favorite place to be. He loved the snow and the cold.

He saw smoke from the cabin, a short walk away, and wondered if the computer had started a fire to warm the place. Nice touch, he thought.

The air was bitterly cold, and the wind howled around him. The blizzard was getting worse, and he knew a few hours here was a welcome respite from commanding a starship.

He opened the door to his cabin, and as he entered, he smelled food cooking. Someone else was here. But who?

Closing the door he just entered, he looked around and no, there was really no place to hide. Confounded by the fact the program was not running when he started it, the intruder had to be a holodeck character of some sort.



As he stood there wondering, a man walked in the back door. He stopped when he saw the new mountain man standing in the living area.

“Marcus, what are you doing in here?”

“Actually, I’m not Marcus. I am Tyrone Bellamie. Say it, please.”

“Tyrone Bellamie?”

As he said the name, a box appeared. Greg walked over to the chest and looked at Marcus... or rather Tyrone. Tyrone simply gestured to the box.

Greg opened it, and inside was a standard-issue padd. Greg activated it and read the first line.

“Classification: Compartmentalized – Captains Eyes Only.” He looked at Tyrone, “What is this?”

“No idea. But before I leave, I need to tell you a few things. Let’s see, ONE: The Admiral had this program adaptation added to this holo-program while you were at the station. TWO: He used the likeness of Marcus because it needed to be someone that was not him telling you this. THREE: It would only activate if you entered the holodeck alone, and it was past a certain day in your mission. FOUR: That padd contains a complete intel package on the location you are heading. Lastly, FIVE: It was really nice meeting you. In a minute, I will vanish, and the adaptation to your program will erase itself. The padd is physical only in this holo-program, and the data on it does not really exist, so you cannot transfer it to the computer. Therefore you cannot bring out into the real world. Oh, by the way, I left you a bottle of the Admiral’s bourbon and a pot of beef stew. Compliments of Mrs. Admiral.”

Tyrone waved to him and vanished.

Greg walked over to the stove and grabbed a bowl of stew; it smelled great. He saw coffee also and grabbed a cup, and poured a hot cup.

The room was warm, relatively speaking. It was still chilly in the room compared to his regular quarters, but it was downright tropical compared to outside.

He sat on the chair near the fireplace and started reading the padd. He knew it was from the Admiral. 100%

Tyrone is the name he wanted to name Ricardo. But he caved in and named him Ricardo in honor of his wife's father, who had recently passed away a few months before the twins were born. Bellamie is the name of the bar they used to go to after a grueling meeting when they were at Starfleet Command.

The first page was the standard mumbo jumbo of security classification, but it was a personal note from the Admiral as he opened page two. As he flipped the page, a voice recording started.

“Hi Greg, I bet you are wondering why I used a holo of Marcus for the delivery? Well, it's mainly because I needed a person you knew but did not trust. I needed someone known in the security circles, but most importantly, I needed someone whose image I had already scanned into the matrix. So, here we are. About to embark on a suicide mission. I chose you for this assignment because you have a tendency to make your own score. You seem to out-odd the odds. I was not aware you would drag my babies into this, but you were right on both counts. They are perfect for this assignment, and they would have been bored and stagnated in that teaching position. The rest of the information in this padd is everything we know about the Romulans and everything the Klingons know. Good luck, and when you get back, there are plans to make you an Admiral. Got the perfect assignment for you too. See you when you return.”

### **The message ended**

Greg sat and read the document for a few hours; had some coffee and the delicious stew. He was about to pour a second coffee

then realized a bottle of bourbon was available to him. He uncorked it and sipped from the bottle as he read the file.

He fell asleep reading, and the fire went out. He woke up a few hours later as the cabin's internal temperature dipped below the comfort level.

He was about to leave and head back to reality, seeing as he had been in the cabin more than 10 hours already.

"Computer, activate character Tyrone Bellamie."

"Unable to comply. No such character exists."

"Computer, how much data is stored on this data padd?"

"Please rephrase the question."

"Computer, scan this data padd and determine the amount of data it has stored on it."

"Unable to comply, there is no data storage device present on this holodeck."

"Well, that settles that." Then, Greg thought, he decided he needed to bring a few people into this security fold, and they needed to be HERE to review the data. So, an overnight camping trip it is.

Greg spoke out loud, "Now, it's time for another bowl of stew and some more of that bourbon."

~~~~~

"Commander Steele, please."

The face on the screen was that of Marcus, a trader in dilithium and trinkets. However, the comm officer did not know him, and he was not sure if transferring the call to the second officer was appropriate.

Pressing a few toggles on his panel, one of them muting the screen, "Commander, a trader is asking to speak to you."

"AH good. Thank you. Put him through. I hope he found the Klingon items I am looking for and make this a private call, please."

Marcus appeared on the screen, "OK, what you got?" Rich said.

"Commander, can you meet me at the station, please? I have a mek'leth you may be interested in and its sheath. More than a hundred years old and a history steeped in battle."

"I have a mek'leth, given to me by the Chancellor himself." He smiled at Marcus, "That is not why you called me, is it?"

"No, I pulled this blade," showing it to the camera. "from the chest of a Romulan who dishonored a Klingon and his house. Durn and his house did not want it back after being deep inside a Romulan commander. Join me, and I can recount the story; I have a bottle of blood wine we can share."

"I heard about this; it is a tale."

"No, it is not. I was there on Bor'Na when the Romulans landed and attempted to take over the colony. The Klingon men were out hunting, and the Romulans thought they would roll over and die. They did not expect that the women and children of the town would be so formidable. The colonists killed all of the Romulans and captured the commander. When the hunting party returned a few days later, the colony leader gave the commander a chance to fight to the death. He lost."

"Where shall I meet you?"

"I am in the bar, at my normal table. Selling trinkets to the passers-by. Do you prefer your bloodwine ambient or chilled?"

"What year?"

"2222"

"Rare and old. Chilled. I will be there in 15 minutes."

The channel closed.

Rich stood from the workstation in his quarters and walked to a very Klingon-looking box in what appeared to be a shrine to KaLess. He reverently opened it and began to remove items, bladed weapons from the container, and hid them in places on his person. When he hit 18, he stopped.

He held number 18 in his hands and stared at it a moment, remembering the day he received it. Each of them he now wore was a gift by a Klingon on the day he passed the test and was granted the status he now held. Klingon Warrior. He was not the first human to attain this status, but he was the first to complete all challenges so well.

By gifting him a personal weapon, each of these Warriors states they would fight and die at his side. The throwing blade he held was from the Chancellor himself. Impressed by his desire to complete the path, he was more impressed at his drive, stamina, and ability to move forward in the face of extreme hardship.

The blade bore the seal of the Klingon Empire and the Chancellor himself. The Chancellor gave him the knife, and the Chancellor's wife approved. She grabbed Rich and hugged him; he hugged her back. They briefly kissed, turned left, and spit to seal the deal. He was a member of the Chancellor's house, and on Kronos, he will be treated as such. The sash he wore was the same as the Chancellor, but he never spoke of it to outsiders.

When they met, the Klingon Ambassador saw the sash on the Nightwing, but Rich motioned not to say anything. Later that evening, the Ambassador showed up at Rich's quarters with a bottle of bloodwine, and they spoke, in confidence, about the subject.

Rich smiled and placed the knife in his uniform behind his neck. Then, looked in the mirror to ensure nothing was visible; he left for the station and his meeting with Marcus.

He stopped a moment and picked up a small box, then he left his quarters and headed for the airlock that would take him to the station and his meeting.

The transporter was a faster way to travel to the station, so he entered the transporter room. Greg was in there talking to the Transporter engineer. Greg and Rich stood on the pad.

"Energize when ready," Greg said.

They vanished from the ship and appeared on Cochrane.

“Welcome to Cochrane station.” She looked directly at Rich, “Sir, since I know you have been here before, may I add welcome back.”

Rich looked at her a moment and had a realization, “Really nice to be back, Jennifer. What time does your shift end?”

“In 90-minutes. Meet me at the pub for a drink? We can finish that discussion we started last time you were here.”

He glanced at his captain very briefly, “That is a great idea, Lieutenant. That conversation was very stimulating. 90-minutes in the pub, our regular table if it is available.”

“See you then, Commander.” She smiled.

They walked out of the transporter room, and the moment the door closed, “Stimulating conversation, eh?” Greg laughed. “My guess is a drink, maybe a little dinner or at least an appetizer, then a walk to her quarters to begin that stimulating conversation.”

“Greg, my friend, I never kiss and tell.”

“Good for you, Rich, good for you.”

“Where you headed,” Rich asked.

“State dinner or something. You?”

“The pub, apparently Marcus, has a few toys for me to look at.”

They departed in different directions, but Rich was stopped abruptly by three Klingon’s. All they did was look at him and his sash.

“What gives you the right to wear that emblem?” The tallest one asked.

Rich pulled a small dagger from behind his neck and pointed the business end at the man. Then, expertly, he flipped it over, exposing the crests. “This gives me the right. Presented to me by him and approved by his wife.”

The tall man relaxed, as did the other two who stayed silent up to now. “You are the one. We heard there was an outworlder who completed the training.”

Rich replaced the dagger in its sheath. “Join me for a drink. I found a trader that has access to some rather rare Klingon weaponry.” He smiled a devilish smile. “Besides, I want to see his face when the four of us show up at his table. He is a rather skittish type, a sheep. But he does find me some fascinating items.”

He walked to the Pub, and the bartender noticed he walked in with Klingons, Rich held up four fingers, and he nodded back.

They managed to walk up to Marcus unnoticed, and Rich cleared his throat a small amount. Marcus looked up at him and then noticed the other guests. His mouth drooped open; Rich pushed his mouth closed with a finger. “I brought friends. Impress us.” Is all he said.

The bartender arrived with a small barrel and 4 Klingon goblets. The tall Klingon looked at the barrel, then at the bartender.

“Where did you get your hands on this priceless bloodwine?”

“My secret. I’ll put it on your tab Commander, enjoy. Qapla’!”

The shorter Klingon punched through the top of the barrel, dipped a glass into the liquid, and handed it to their host. Rich accepted it, tasted it, and nodded. The other three joined him.

In unison, now that they all had their first glass, they all turned to Marcus. The third Klingon said vjIjatlh. Which translates to speak. Marcus either spoke Klingon or understood.

“I have 7 or 8 items of interest to show you. Commander, this is the item we spoke of if you are still interested. I have several other weapons, including a mek’leth, a bat’leth, and yes Commander, for you I made sure to bring a d’k tahg since you appear to not be fully dressed.”

Marcus pulled the blade from his jacket and handed it to Rich. “I took the liberty of making it more like your uniform. The sheath is new. I created it this afternoon.”

“You replicated this sheath?” One of the Klingon’s asked.

“No, sir, that would be an insult. I have a store of targ hide I sell to a few of the Klingon colonies from time to time. This is from an albino targ. I cut and sewed this sheath to fit this blade and placed the fixpoints in such a way that it will stay secure on the Commander's uniform. The albino targ skin used is almost a matching color to his uniform.”

“SOLD!” Rich said without hesitation. He picked up the blade and placed it on his right side. He wore his phaser on his left and a mek’leth and bat’leth on his back in battle, so this would be perfect.

The taller Klingon asked, “Will your human Captain allow you to wear that weapon on duty?”

At that moment, Greg walked up behind them. Rich noticed and ignored him.

“I believe that if my second officer desires to be properly adorned and dressed while on duty or off, I will not only allow it but make it a permanent part of his uniform.” Greg was dressed in civilian dress, comfortable and subdued.

All three of them stood, “Captain, we meant no disrespect....”

“Sit. Be at ease. The Commander and I have known each other since we were very young. I trust his judgment, his council, and his friends.” He picked up Rich’s goblet, and the others just looked at him. He drank the remainder in the glass down, allowing some to ooze from the side of his mouth, and wiped it with a sleeve. “2250, I believe. An excellent vintage.” He looked at them, “Have you eaten well recently?”

“No, sir, everything here is dead.”

“Allow me to offer you the last of our special food from a small banquet.” He nodded over to an Ensign who approached the group. “I assume your business is concluded?”

“Yes, sir, it is. This trader had some fascinating items, and we purchased them all.”

The Ensign placed the containers on the table in front of the four, and the bartender brought another barrel of bloodwine.

“Warriors, please enjoy.” They lifted the covers and exposed gagh, pipius claw, and blood pie. “We have Omat’Gri tea if you prefer.”

“No, the bloodwine is fine. But Captain, no disrespect intended but what Federation banquet would have such food.” He noted the gagh was still alive.

“A meeting was held this afternoon, and this is the remaining food. I prefer the pipius claw myself.” He turned toward the door. “Ah, the guest of honor has arrived.”

Rich turned to see the ambassador enter the bar. The bartender brought a third barrel and several additional goblets. Rich jumped to his feet and grabbed the ambassador, and lifted him off his feet. Then, he turned to the other Klingons.

“It was decided, by a special friend, that I do this. Since bashing foreheads together will most likely kill me the second time if the first time does not kill me.”

“Special friend?”

“He means me!” The Chancellor entered the bar, and the Klingons stood. He walked over to Rich, “Brother.”

“Brother,” Rich replied.

Greg grabbed a claw and walked off to the bar. “Three fingers of your best scotch.”

A moment later, the glass slid in front of him. He ate his claw and sipped his scotch. He actually really liked the claw. It had the texture of chicken, and it sounds strange, but it tasted somewhat like a cross between lobster and beef.

The Klingons were telling tall tales, singing, and carrying on like it was expected. Marcus joined the captain, and he motioned to the bartender to give one to Marcus.

“Join me for a drink.” Marcus nodded and sat on the stool next to him. A moment later, a glass slid and stopped neatly in front of Marcus.

“Wow, Captains have some interesting superpowers.” He smiled and held his glass up, “To Klingons. Not conversationalists, but fun to watch.”

“To Klingons.”

“Can I get in on that toast as well?” The guy on the other side of Marcus said.

They turned and saw the Admiral in civilian clothing. “Mind if I join you?”

A glass stopped in front of the Admiral.

~~~~~

Greg woke up in his cabin, realizing he had just a bit too much to drink. Real scotch provides a real hangover. He took a shower and dressed and had no interest in food, but coffee is what his targeting system needed to acquire.

He got his coffee, double espresso, from his replicator and headed to sickbay.

Arriving at the door, he entered and saw the doc sitting at her desk. “Doc, had a bit too much scotch last night. Got anything that can fix it?”

She walked over and shot him with a hypospray and handed him a glass, “Drink this.” As he did, she hit him again with the hypospray.

“What the hell was all that?”

“My cure. Double B12 shot with a dose of electrolytes chaser.”

“That works?” He asked.

“4...3...2...1, so?” She said to him.

“Wow! Gotta remember that one. Headache is still there, but manageable and I think I can eat now.”

“Wait for 30-minutes, please. Then, I will meet you in the Galley. Just get another coffee in the meantime.”

“Thanks.” He left and headed to the bridge for a few minutes. The lift opened, and he saw a Lieutenant in his chair. He put a finger to his lips, and everyone on the bridge stayed silent. Greg walked up to the command chair, saw the lieutenant reviewing diagnostic panels, and sat unnoticed in the first officers’ seat.

In a different voice, he said, “Captain, is there anything that needs to be done?”

The Lieutenant looked up and saw the captain and smiled, then said to him, “Not at this time, go get breakfast.”

“Very good, thank you, Lieutenant.” The captain stood and walked off the bridge. Most of the bridge crew were used to his antics already, and nothing really surprised them anymore. Everyone respected him and appreciated his humor and his tactics.

## CHAPTER 3-7

Greg exited the lift and headed towards the galley. When he arrived, he got coffee and sat at his table. In mere moments, his table was filled with commanders.

“Where do you all come from at the same time?”

Larry looked at him, “The commander factory, of course.”

“True! And every once in a while, the Commander factory has a reject, and they label it a mere Lieutenant Colonel.” Rich said.

“HEY!” Larry replied.

“SIT!” He sat, and Greg added, “Good Marine!!” Major Lanning barked. It was beginning to be an odd day.

“Greg! Here’s a new one for you. The Klingons need a ride.” Rich said. “I think we can manage it.”

“Where to?”

“Our new stop number one.”

“So, you already said yes?”

“Uh, I did.”

“Have you also assigned them quarters?”

“Yes.”

“Anything else I need to know?”

“Well, their shuttle will fit in the shuttle bay with Marcus’ ship, I checked.”

“You do understand classified, right.”

“I do, but I also trust these warriors.”

“OK, so three more passengers...”

“Well, three is not the right number.”

Greg just looked at him, as did all the others at the table.

“More like 8, 9 if you include the Chancellor and 10 if you include his wife.”

Shilo jumped in, “Hold on, the Chancellor of the Klingon Empire is aboard this ship?”

“Yes, he is. I invited him to breakfast. He should be here momentarily.”

“When did he board?” She asked.

“Last night. Gave him and his wife the VIP quarters.”

“That explains the noise complaints I read this morning. I believe he and his wife were.....active.”

“Commander Ariel. Klingons, male and female, are always active.”

Shilo laughed.

Rich touched his communicator, “Steele to Ensign Monroe.”

“Monroe here sir, how may I assist you?” She asked, and you could tell she meant it.

“In maybe 15 minutes, the Chancellor of the Klingon Empire, his wife, and a few officers will be joining the Captain and command staff for breakfast in the mess. Can you whip up something they may enjoy?”

There was a pause, “Yes, sir. I believe I have just the thing.”

“Excellent,” Rich replied.

“Commander Steele, thank you so much for the advanced notice.” A pause, “Monroe out.”

Shilo was grinning from ear to ear.

“What?”

“She told you....”

“Yes, but did it in such a way as all I could reply was your welcome. I think she is becoming a Klingon!”

“That is your fault. You and Kord, actually. I hear she has been studying the Klingon culture since she received her gifts.”

“The same kinda thing we gave to the crew member on the Nightwing.”

“Yes, but she really wants to be a Klingon Warrior.”

Rich thought for a moment, “In that case, I will teach her what she needs to know and sponsor her when we return. I bet I can get the Chancellor to acknowledge her also.”

“Greg finished his coffee and headed to the large pot near the door. About that time, the Chancellor and his party entered. He put down his cup, and the Chancellor approached, “Qapla!” Greg yelled.

The Chancellor approached the captain and extended an arm. Greg extended his, and they grasped forearms as a greeting. “Qapla!” replied the Chancellor.

Ensign Monroe approached the group, and in Klingon, she told them to follow her. Greg smiled.

She led them back where Greg originally sat, and he noticed the Chancellor was seated on his left with his wife to the Chancellor's left. In front of him was a covered cloche, as were all seats at the table occupied by humans except for Rich.

The large round table held 14 humans typically. A Klingon was approximately 1.5 humans. Each cloche was lifted, and a standard breakfast was presented. “Chancellor, I was limited in my preparation time for this meal, and I present to you and your wife my offering.”

She lifted the rather large cloche, and there were a couple large serving trays. “Fresh Gagh, Rokeg Blood Pie, Targ eyes in a semi-sweet sauce.”

A server approached, “And of course, Raktajino.”

“Ensign, you created this for my staff and me, impromptu?”

“Yes, Chancellor. I am honored to do so.”

“I am looking forward to seeing what you can do if you have time to prepare.” He stood, grabbed a handful of gagh, and ate it. “Ensign, this is the best meal I have had since I left home. It was prepared with honor for my party. You do a service to you and your shipmates.”

“Thank you, Chancellor.”

The Chancellor’s wife asked, “Ensign, I notice this is not replicated by the flavor and texture.”

“No, Ma’am. I prepared each offering personally.”

“If the Ensign desires, we can meet later, and I can train you in the art of Klingon cooking?”

“Yes, Ma’am. I would value our time together. Besides, I can take what I learn from you and experiment on Commander Steele.”

The Chancellor, and his wife, laughed. Rich asked, “Experiment? Interesting choice of words.”

The Ensign nodded and walked back into the kitchen.

“Captain Binotti, your crew is quite interesting. They want to please us, make us feel welcomed, feed us offerings that make us happy. Why?”

Rich spoke before Greg could, “Chancellor. The crew of this ship is a family. One mind, one heart. If a single person is left out, that is not acceptable. You are on this ship. You are my brother. For a time, you are a part of this crew. Captain Binotti will treat you as an honored guest and protect you with his life.” He paused, “I have already pledged to do so, Chancellor; I wear the emblem. Your wife honored me in the great hall. I tell you now, you are our brothers and sisters aboard this ship, and always.”

The Chancellor squinted at Rich. “Commander, you are a man who is so filled with targ dropping, but it flows sweetly out of your mouth.” He turned to Greg, “Captain, I appreciate the crew and your honor, for myself, my wife, and my protection party.” He grinned a vast, very evil, very Klingon grin. “Except for this silver-tongued devil.” He picked up a small handful of gagh and threw it at Rich. Rich, and all the Klingons, laughed.

Greg introduced Commanders Ariel and Martinez, Major Lanning, and Commander O'Roury.

The Chancellor's wife looked at Ramona, "Commander, we have heard a great deal about you. You have chosen well."

Rich leaned over to her and whispered, "She knows about you and Greg and is complimenting you on your choice in mates."

"Thank you." She replied.

Greg realized Rich told them a lot about him and his command, but he also remembers Rich did the same in return.

Breakfast concluded, and a second Raktajino appeared at the table for each Klingon. A mug was placed in front of Shilo also, and the crewman leaned in close, "It's your tea, ma'am. We did not want you to look out of place." Shilo smiled.

They sat at the table for quite a while, talking about many subjects—answering questions about each other, their cultures, families.

"Chancellor, this has been a great discussion. Commander Steele, please see to our guests. I have an appointment on the station with the Admiral shortly."

"Captain, as do I." The Chancellor grinned. "It appears we have the same appointment."

Greg stopped in his tracks, knowing it was a classified briefing and strategy session for the mission he was about to embark on, but why is the Chancellor involved.

Greg stood and faced the Chancellor full-on, "It would be my honor to walk to the briefing with you."

He found himself wrapped in a Klingon transporter beam a moment later and materialized in the Admirals office standing next to the Chancellor. The chancellor turned to the Captain, "Captain, why walk...."

Greg shrugged his shoulders, and they both laughed.



The Admiral turned as they started to appear, and once their exchange ended, “Good, you met. This will be much easier.”

“Make what much easier?” Greg asked the Admiral.

“The Romulans have caught wind of your impending breach of the neutral zone and have gone on high alert. The Chancellor here will spread some decoys around to make it appear they are probing the neutral zone from both the Federation and the Klingon borders. Hopefully, they will not be looking for you on the complete opposite side of their space.”

Greg was about to speak, but the Admiral continued.

“Your orders, at least getting there, have been changed and will take you an additional 6 months at low warp. The Klingons will be loading a couple of additional backup cloaking devices to your ship if your primary is disabled or destroyed. Also, there will be a Klingon added to your crew for a time, and she is to be assigned to Commander Steele.” The Admiral paused. “She is an engineer specializing in the cloak....”

“My best...” The Chancellor added. “Who she is is of little concern, but in matters of the cloak, she is our most skilled. She and Commander Steele have an assignment on the planet, one she will reveal once you are underway. She and the Commander know each other. They have worked together before.”

Greg spoke, “Chancellor, in your experience, is it possible to have multiple cloaks attached but not active. In the event the primary fails, the secondary can be switched and activated.”

“Interesting concept. Suggest this to Dotar when she arrives.” He paused a moment and looked at Greg, “I just hope she does not become NICE!”

Greg laughed, and the Chancellor joined him. The Admiral had no idea what they were laughing at; Greg would have to fill him in later, over a scotch.

## CHAPTER 3-8

“Commander Ariel, we need to have a little talk.” Captain Binotti said through the comm badge. “Gather the table, please.”

“Yes, sir, see you in the galley in 30-minutes.”

They have started completing each other thoughts. She has turned into the best first officer he has had.

“How is my other hobby?” Greg asked regarding the old school bomb.

“Nearly complete. We can run a test shortly.”

“Excellent, be prepared to brief on this also.”

“Yes, sir, I would feel better if my team was all there.”

Greg thought for a moment, “Agreed.” The link disconnected.

“Binotti to Steele.”

“Go ahead.”

“On our mission, we will have a Klingon technician assigned by the Chancellor.”

“Dotar?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“She and I completed the ritual together. We discussed a great many things, including what she is most experienced in, and yes, she’s a good and proper addition to the crew for this mission.”

“Understood.” He paused. “Binotti out”

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Greg entered the galley and saw his table populated with various Commanders, a few Ensigns, and a single Lieutenant. He walked over to the coffee pot and grabbed a cup. The large urn was empty, and he put the cup down and tapped his communicator.

“Ensign Baker.”

“Yes, sir.” He said rather nonchalant, knowing full well what was about to happen.

“It appears the coffee pot is empty.”

“Yes, sir, there is a perfectly prepared cup sitting at your seat at the table.”

“Really?”

“Yes, sir. It should be at your exact temperature now.”

“I have a specific coffee temperature?” Greg said as he walked to his table.”

“Yes, sir, you do. I learned you enjoy your coffee when the temperature is between 65 and 75 degrees. It should be about 70 right now, sir. Give it a try.”

Greg reached his chair and picked up his coffee, and gave it a taste. “Well, Baker, it seems you are correct.” Not disconnecting the comm, he turned to Shilo. “Commander Ariel, can we promote him again?”

“Yes, sir. But SPO and Command would get the impression you have....shall we say....issues.”

“You know, you may be right at that, Binotti out,” Greg said before Baker could retort.

Greg looked around the table and stopped on Yvonne. “I figured you would be with Mom and Dad.

“Rick and I have dinner with them tonight in their quarter's sir, you and Commander Ariel are invited. Dad said if the other one is available, he's invited too.” She thumbed at Rich. “Mom wanted me to mention she is making pot roast for some reason. She never made pot roast before.”

Greg smiled, “Ensign, that dates back to a few years before you were born. It's your mother's way of telling me to bring red wine.” She smiled back at him.

The briefing went well, but then again, all briefings appear to go well. It is the implementation when things go sideways.

Greg was closing the briefing, “As for the safe, I need it installed on the bridge in a very conspicuous location that can be seen when the view screen is active. It needs to be secured to a bulkhead that will not cause danger to the ship if removed. And the shields above that exact spot need a toggle to become weaker on command to allow the transporter beam of the enemy to remove the safe at their convenience.”

Everyone stared at him, but it was Yvonne that spoke.

“Sir, am I to understand that this is to be used as a weapon, not a security feature?”

“Correct,” Greg said flatly.

“Interesting. So, I am assuming you think someone will bombard the shields and beam it away hoping to find secrets?”

“Well, can’t get anything past you, Yvonne.” He smiled, “I also need for people to appear to put data modules into the safe when the blue light on my left console arm is lit. I don’t care who does it, but it needs to look like it is a common event, and you are not acting like it is important. So, if the code is entered, it opens fine, giving the illusion it is nothing more than a secure storage container.”

He paused, “But if a transporter beam is sensed, it detonates within 3 seconds after the cycle is completed.”

Johnston added, “Sir, that part we got down. We made a few tests, and 3 seconds after the cycle ends, the light comes on.”

“Well now, I am assuming you used a light, meaning the detonation signal?”

“Yes, sir. Works perfectly. We do need to test the starship grenades, though, sir. There is really no way to test them on the ship.”

“I hear a suggestion coming, Commander Ariel.”

“I feel the same way, Captain.”

“Well, spit it out. What’s your plan?”

“Although stopping at an asteroid field would be fun and all, may I suggest I take a marine craft with a good pilot and perform a few tests at the far end of this system. We can be there and back in 36 hours.”

“Colonel Lanning,” Greg said, tapping his communicator.

“Yes, sir. How may I help you?”

“I need one of your little ships, a fast one, and your best pilot. 40-hour mission. One passenger, lots of fireworks. Who is your best pilot?”

“Second lieutenant Rhonda Bratelsheimer.”

“I need you and her in the galley in 90-seconds for the mission briefing.”

A few seconds later, the two of them were transported into the galley. “Creative!” Greg said. You could tell the lieutenant was nervous transporting within the ship. It was a significant no-no.

“It sounded important, so the two of us thought, well...damn the rules.” He grinned at Greg, “Besides, it was her idea.”

The room started laughing.

“Lieutenant Colonel Lanning, you know I have the power to make her and you swap ranks?”

“Not till we are underway, sir, and till then...well, let’s just see what happens.” Larry winked at him.

“Take a seat.”

As they sat, Greg addresses Johnston, “Well, this is all your idea. Start the briefing.”

The briefing was short. Fly to a part of the system on the other side of the star and destroy some huge rocks. The fun part is stopping the ship, opening the canopy, and throwing the explosives at the rocks. He is bringing 5 of them to test with. Two will be wrapped together to see if the combined force is more than two singles.

“We will be using quarter charges, smaller and safer.”

“Uh....safer?” Rhonda Bratelsheimer asked.

“Well, you pack a full load of dilithium resin, tri-cobalt, and antimatter into a small box. You really do not want to shake it all that much. Besides, fuses arm 1 to 10 seconds after release, so we should be OK?”

Rhonda looked at Larry, “Should be OK? Uh....Sir, may I take some time to redraft my will before this mission?”

“Yes, Lieutenant, you may. I just may join you; these guys are nuts.”

“Yes, sir.”

“You do know we are all sitting here and can hear you?” Shilo asked.

“Yes, Commander.”

“Well then, Shilo, arrange a date and time for our testers to take an invisible trip. Rich, keep an eye on things happening in the area and in the system. Yvonne, need one more thing. You and I can discuss it later in the engineering conference room with Commander Martinez.”

He looked at Larry and Rhonda, “Marines, go redo your will! Dismissed!”

Larry laughed, and Rhonda stared at him.

“Is there something wrong, Lieutenant?” Larry asked after the others all left the room. They were alone at the moment.

“Sir, may I speak freely?”

“Yes.” He said, wondering where this is going.

“Well, sir, I may be pretty new to the fleet, but this guy is like no other commanding officer I have ever heard about or experienced.”

Larry rubbed his forehead a moment and looked at her, “Let me tell you about the first time I met our commanding officer. I think you will understand him better.”

He stood and walked to the window; it was beautiful. Looking out the window at the stars and the other ships milling about. “Captain Binotti, when I first met him, he was a Lieutenant

Commander. We were assigned to Rigel, me to protect, and him to aid the ambassador. A constant thorn in my side, I was a captain back then, freshly minted Captain, by the way. The Orion syndicate put a contract out on one of the employees of the facility where we were stationed.” She stood and joined him at the window. “No one important, no one vital, a cook. Greg caught wind of it and grabbed me, and filled me in. There was nothing I could do. My jurisdiction ended at the gates. He followed her home that night, and as a group attempted to attack and most likely kill her, he sprang into action. He dove into the middle of the group and began to fight them all off. He did really well, better than I thought he would actually.” He paused a moment and smiled a little.

“I just happen to be following him, so I gave him a little assistance. Neither of us had weapons, but we both know several fighting styles from locations other than Earth. We held our own, and once all 6 of them were unconscious, we looked at each other and nodded. That was it. Not a spoken word between us. He and the woman went one way, where he escorted her home to her family. I went the other. I never knew her name, only that she was a cook. She knew me, though. The next day, at breakfast, I ordered my normal bacon and eggs. She handed me a plate with eggs benedict and a filet mignon. All she said to me was, ‘you deserve this. You were out late last night’. Greg got the same breakfast from her, and we sat at the same table. It was the first time we socialized.” He paused briefly to collect his thoughts.

Continuing, “I realized at that moment this Starfleet Lieutenant Commander was someone worth knowing. Not because he could do anything or not because he was powerful; he is worth knowing because he understands the words honor, loyalty, trust, friendship. So, I got to know him. I trust him with my life, and I hope it is reciprocated. If you are ever in a bind, find me. If I can’t help, I will call him. The same goes for Commander Steele. That man has trustworthily tattooed on him somewhere, I’m sure.”

“So, Colonel, I have a little problem. I know you may not be able to assist, but he may. Can you and I have a talk with the Captain this evening?”

Larry looked at her, not pressing the issue. "I will make the arrangements." She got up and walked out.

Tapping his communicator, "Lanning to Binotti."

"Binotti here."

"Greg got someone who needs to talk to you."

"Coffee?"

"More like scotch, but I suspect bourbon."

"2030 hours."

"Understood."

They spoke in shorthand. He trained all his senior officers this quiet speak. It was efficient and confidential. Coffee was a casual conversation. Scotch was important, and bourbon meant it was deeply personal. Only one higher, Cognac. That was urgent.

Disconnecting his communicator, Greg thought about the conversation. Someone needs to speak to me. Personal and important.

It was approaching 1300 hours, and he realized he had not had lunch yet, so he headed to the galley.

"Captain!" Someone yelled, and he could not place the voice.

Greg turned and saw the station commander; he likes to call her Mrs. Admiral. She shakes her head every time.

"Yes, Ma'am!" He replied.

She looked around, making sure they were alone. "I just received a security flash. It seems there was a kidnapping early yesterday morning on Mars, and the person kidnapped has a sister on your ship."

"Let me guess. The last name is Bratelshumer."

"How....never mind. You seem to be well informed."

"Actually, Lt. Bratelshumer asked to speak to me this evening on a personal matter. I had no idea what it was until this moment. Do you have any news?"

“Your SSD team is on their way back to the ship. I understand they left abruptly and without warning before you arrived. They will be here at about 2300 hours. I have a private channel with them if you would like to use it?”

“Send it to Commander Steele. He likes this kinda thing. I am assuming that they have the kidnapped person in their charge, and the culprits have been brought to justice?”

“You could say that. They have the Lieutenant’s sister with them, and the 6 who committed the act are....let’s just say they will never commit this act again.” She smiled. “Or any act for that matter.”

Greg cocked his head to one side. This was a side of her he had never seen. “You seem like you are OK with 6 deaths.”

“In this case, I am. They kept asking her questions about the ship, what her sister is doing, and several other topics, all related to your mission. They sent a message to the Lieutenant and informed her they would kill her sister if they did not receive information about the mission in 36 hours. The planet they were on has a 36-hour day, and there are so few of them that the Section 31 team knew where they were. They headed for the planet before she was taken there somehow and arrived when they were eating a meal. The sister was in the other room. Bound, gagged, secured.”

Her eyes hardened, “They transported a stun grenade into the room, on the table actually. It was set to detonate when the transport cycle was completed. It worked. They beamed into the room and removed the victim to their ship, and set huge explosives on each of the 3 entrances to the building. If the bad guys set it off, they set it off.” Her mouth edges turned slightly upward into a twisted grin, “They set it off. Not by accident either. The entire building was decimated, no survivors.”

“They chose to blow themselves up?”

“Yes. Knowing that if they failed, they were dead anyway. A contract would be set on each of them, so the leader walked over to the main entrance and activated the explosive. They were all linked. A simultaneous explosion.”

Greg stared at her a moment, then “Well, Governor, it appears the situation is cleared up. Does Rhonda know her sister is safe?”

“No, you cannot tell her until at least 2100 hours. There is an operation in place to locate the mastermind of this event.”

“And it will be completed by 2100?”

“Correct.” Without saying a word, she turned and walked away. Evidently, she had known about this for more than a week since, as far as it can be determined, that’s when the Section 31 team, Larrimore and Regis, departed and took their new agent with them.

Greg stood there a moment, contemplating his subsequent actions. “Computer, notify Commander Steele to meet me in the gym in 10 minutes.”

Greg made his way to the gym and the meeting with Rich.

He spent the remainder of the day on the bridge thinking about all the crap he knew that others did not know. He knew many secrets, personal secrets, Federation secrets, Starfleet secrets, Section 31 secrets. Someday, they will come back to bite him in the ass. He is waiting for that day. Someday.....

CHAPTER 3-9

Greg sat in his cabin reading a fiction book from a bit more than 100 years ago. He had gotten into the story just as the computer interrupted, ripping him back from that relaxing universe and into reality. He had about 15 minutes until the meeting with the two Marines.

He closed the book and placed it on his side table, next to his favorite chair, then walked to the cabinet and pulled out a bottle of bourbon and three small glasses. He had an area of his cabin set aside for just this event—entertaining, but not social entertaining.

He placed the bottle and the glasses on a large round table surrounded by eight comfortable chairs. He put the glasses in specific locations with a chair or two between each, hoping his guests would take the hint.

He wore an off-duty set of clothing, very colorful. He found it on the South African continent on his last vacation and found them the most comfortable lounging garments he ever wore.

“Binotti to bridge”

“Yes, sir, Lieutenant Commander Leake here.”

“Well, anything to report?”

“No sir, absolutely nothing actually. I could be here all alone, and still, there would be nothing to report.”

“Good. Binotti out.” The comm disconnected. “Note to self,” Greg said quietly to himself, “That boy needs therapy.”

Beep.....

“Enter.”

Larry and Rhonda walked into the room, and he ushered them to the seating area. Without prompting, they took seats as he designed. Larry, one seat between him and Greg, and Rhonda two seats from either of them.

Once he sat and adjusted a bit, Larry reached over to the bottle, uncorked it, and poured a full glass for each. He pushed them to Rhonda and Greg.

Greg picked up his glass, and the others followed suit.

“To openness in communication, honesty in speech, and off-the-record understanding.”

“Here here,” Larry replied

Greg and Larry drank the glass in one gulp, and Rhonda did not want to be left out so, she did the same. You could tell by the look on her face she liked the bourbon.

They put their glasses down, and Larry refilled them as if it was his primary duty. Greg picked up his and settled back into the chair, placing his slippered feet on the edge of the table. Very relaxed and comfortable.

Larry picked up his glass and sat back also, using the table as a foot stool, though. Rhonda looked at him, amazed at how comfortable he was in the presence of the ship’s commanding officer; she settled into the chair, crossing her legs.

“So, there is something you need to tell me or talk to me about?” Greg said casually.

“Yes, sir.” Rhonda started. “I have no idea where to start.”

“How about when the Orion syndicate contacted you for information regarding this mission, and unless you provide the information, your sister's life would be forfeit.”

Larry sat there with his mouth open, “Uh Larry, please close your mouth. You may attract flies.”

“Is he right?” Larry asked, staring at Rhonda.

“Yes, sir, he is. But how?”

“Let’s just say I have access to an abundant amount of information from a variety of sources.” Greg took a sip. “Start at the beginning. Tell us everything you remember.” That specific phrase informed the computer to begin recording, with no audible responses.

Rhonda took a sip on her glass then paused, bringing the glass back to her lips; she drained it and placed it on the table in front of her. Larry quickly refilled it. You could see it in her face; since the proverbial cat was out of the bag, there should be no holding back.

“A few weeks before we left Earth, I received a message on a padd I was carrying that I needed to provide extremely detailed information relating to my next assignment. The fact it popped into my padd meant they were close, but being in a public area on Starfleet grounds rather shocked me. I thought it was a joke.”

Picking up the glass again as a way to collect her thoughts, she took a sip from the glass freshly filled by her commanding officer.

“Captain, I had no idea what to do.” She paused. “The note had implicit instructions as to what I needed to give them; the frequencies I needed to transmit the data on that changed every minute with no data burst longer than 30-seconds. I wanted to tell Colonel Lanning instantly, but that statement they made at the end, tell anyone and your sister is dead. That nagged at me.”

For the next half hour, she reiterated everything she knew, which in reality was very little. As for the information she passed on to the Orion’s, nothing about the new processes, technology, or compliment of the ship, personnel, destinations. She mentioned they were in training classes learning about minor system updates, new Marine procedures, weapons, and tactics but no practical information, so that was a plus.

“Rhonda...” Greg looked at his old cuckoo clock. “There is something you need to know. Your initial message was intercepted by Starfleet intelligence, and a rescue mission was mounted a week or so ago to get your sister.” Greg’s comm badge clicked once. “As a matter of fact...” He stood and walked to the door.

At his approach, the door opened, and Rhonda’s sister was standing there. A little bruised and old wounds on her face but otherwise none worse. Rhonda ran to her and grabbed her. The covert trio entered and sat in the empty seats. Larry moved over next to Greg.

Larrimore, Regis, and the new guy held glasses to Larry. He wondered where they came from but filled them anyway.

After a few minutes, the sisters made their way to the seating area and took seats around the circle.

“Ladies, I hope you are feeling better now?”

“Captain,” Rhonda started. “How can I thank you?”

Commander Larrimore spoke, “Lieutenant, the Captain, did not run this op. We did.” She motioned to the trio. “Briana was rescued by us, and we were never here.”

The trio downed their shot, put the glass on the table, and vanished.

Everyone in the room, except for Briana, was quite familiar with the Scalosian water. Greg looked at her, but she did not seem phased by the abrupt exit.

“Briana, do you understand what just happened?”

“Well, Captain, the truth is, I have been experimenting with the water for the past several months on Earth, so yes, I have been quite accustomed to colleagues randomly disappearing in the middle of a conversation.”

“Excuse me?” Rhonda asked.

“We experimented with a possible covert process that contained a sub-dermal implant. Pressing it releases a few drops, and a moment later, you can walk out. We implanted it under the left arm near the rib cage. Reintegration was implanted on the other side. Left is leave; right is return. As in leave and return to your normal time frame.”

Greg spoke into the air. “Computer, read current employment registry for Briana Bratelsheimer.”

The computer read off her recent history—doctor of molecular biology, physiology, chemistry. Her current assignment is classified.

“Unseal the classification, authorization Binotti Sigma 14.”

“Captain, I doubt your clearance....” Briana started to say.

“Current assignment is USS Scorpion; mission objective is to ensure safety and aid the crew in any way possible with the current mission.”

“WHAT?”

“Welcome aboard, Doctor. You will be assigned to the medical bay. Rhonda, please have quarters assigned for your sister.”

“Captain, what can you tell me about this assignment? How long is it scheduled for?”

“A couple years maybe less, and...” touching his comm badge... “Commander Steele, we have a new crew member, Briana Bratelsheimer, assigned to medical. List her rank as Lieutenant Commander under Dr. Piper. Your assignment is to get her up to speed on the Scorpion, our assignment, and our mission ASAP.”

“Yes, sir. On my way.” Rich appeared standing next to the Captain. “Reporting as ordered, sir.”

Everyone laughed a little and knew what he did.

“Rich, what took you so long?” not even a breath, and he continued. “This is Briana, and she is one of the researchers who studied the water in depth evidently, and the sister of our favorite Marine who, sometime tomorrow, is heading to the asteroid field with your pet project to test the mini bombs. The bombs that he designed.”

Briana stood, “Talk to you later, sis. This may not be so bad after all.”

Rich and Briana walked out. As they left, Rich was heard speaking to Doctor Piper. It seems they were heading that way first before he found her a cabin.

“Rhonda, I have been reviewing your sisters’ jacket and determined her clearance level equals that of a Starfleet Captain. So, Greg, it seems she can know everything.” Larry added casually.

Larry poured one last glass for each.

Greg held his high, “To the mission.”

Larry added, “To the adventure.”

Rhonda added, “To...well, my sister!”

They drank up, and Rhonda put the glasses in the cleaning unit. These were not replicated, so she washed them by hand. Greg and Larry thanked her.

The room emptied, “Computer, end recording, and store under my personal vault, filename Briana 31.”

“Completed.”

Greg made one last call, “Binotti to O’Roury, do you have a minute? I need to talk.”

“Be there shortly.”

“Computer, two strawberry daiquiris.”

A moment later, they appeared, and Greg removed them. Then, walking to the sofa, he asked the computer for some lightly salted popcorn. It materialized as he placed the drinks on the table, and he retrieved the popcorn and set it between the glasses.

He had a large screen in the living area, “Computer, prepare to play the next episode of The Witching Hour.”

The screen came to life and paused on the title page. Greg sat in his seat, and a moment later, Ramona walked through the door.

“Hi, what’s up?” She asked. Looked at the screen, the popcorn, and the drinks. Then, smiling, “Give me two minutes.”

She ran to the bedroom and changed into comfortable clothing. She returned to the living room and sat in her spot, grabbed her drink, and took a sip. The popcorn was between them on the sofa.

“Computer, begin playback.” She said, and the episode began to play.

CHAPTER 3-10

Greg sat in his cabin reading the same fiction book he was reading the other evening. He was getting into an exciting part of the book, a time travel series. The Archives: Education. A story of a class of strangers who work to learn the art of temporal research, including time travel.

“Jump team Delta 645-team-L, you will travel back 18 months to the training rooms located in a secure area. You will return in 10 minutes temporal, 16 hours local. Are you prepared?”

The console operator recited. The operator tossed a button to Tony, and he attached it to his jacket. It was a light green button with a dark blue dot inside of it and a bright yellow triangle inside the blue dot.

‘YES,’ responded Tony and Benjamin.

“Sub-Q Check!” The operator thought.

“Operational,” thought Tony.

“Me too,” thought Benjamin

“Jump team Delta 645, Team-L. Beginning transfer.”

Benjamin got a bit nervous when he heard or felt the build-up of raw power surrounding the chamber. That feeling converted itself into near fear when he seemed to have felt the power enter his person. It was inside his body. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the sand. There was a structure above his head, more of an overhang, really. He felt a wave of dizziness come over him as he attempted to move his head. Next, he found himself.....

Alarms sounded, klaxons, bells....

Tapping his chest, “Binotti to bridge, report.” Then he realized he was not wearing his comm badge and walked to the desk and pressed a toggle.

“Binotti to bridge, report!”

“Captain, this is Commander Ariel. It seems that several Romulan scout ships just materialized in a triad around Cochrane Station. In the past 30-seconds, since their unannounced appearance, they have done nothing, nor are they targeting anything.”

“They are just sitting there?” Greg asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“On my way. Get the Admiral on the vid and prepare to contact the Romulan ships.”

He put an old playing card, the joker, into the book's page, where he stopped reading and placed the book on that old familiar side table. Maybe he would get the chance to finish the book, and the entire seven-part series, during the mission.

“Aye, sir.”

A minute later, he was on the bridge but not in uniform.

The Admiral was on the screen. “Greg, stand down.”

“Sir?”

“I need you, your marine colonel, your #1 and #2, and Larrimore here before I finish talking.”

“Binotti to transporter room. Lock onto me, Larrimore, Ariel, Steele, and Colonel Lanning and transport us instantly to Cochrane station, Admiral’s office. No notice, energize.”

Looking at the screen, they appeared in the room with the admiral. “Cochrane out.” The Admiral said, and the screen went black.

Commander T’Pell took the center seat, “Tactical display, wide area. Let’s get a birds-eye view, to use a human phrase.”

The display changed as though the camera was a few kilometers above. The station in the center with ships parked and

stationary around the station, and 500 kilometers from the station at equidistant spacing were three Romulan Scout ships.

T’Pell spoke, “Tactical projection on the Romulan ships?”

From behind her, “Sir, in a firefight with those three ships, I believe the Scorpion can disable and/or destroy all three of them in less than one minute. Since there is a Marine starship approaching at high warp, I can safely say there is nothing to worry about.”

“Binotti to Scorpion”

“Captain, this is the Scorpion.”

“Good, T’Pell. Stand down the ship from the alert. Go into passive mode. Monitor. And T’Pell, think Surak.”

“Understood, Captain. Awaiting your orders.”

“Stand down from alert,” T’Pell said. She disconnected the signal. “Return to normal operation. Mister Johnston to the bridge.”

A minute later, Johnston appeared.

“Mister Johnston, I do not care what you need to do, nor am I interested in hearing that you did it. I need ears on those ships and for them to not know we are doing it.”

“Commander?” he said to her.

“You have your orders dismissed.” Johnston entered the lift and was gone. T’Pell asked, “Are the Ramon’s still on board?”

“Yes, Sir. They are scheduled to depart in an hour for the station.”

“T’Pell to both Ensign Ramon’s. Find Mister Johnston and assist him in any way you can.”

“Yes, sir,” they said at the same time.

“Now, we wait.” She said to no one in particular.

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“Captain, this is the Scorpion.”

“Good, T’Pell. Stand down the ship from the alert. Go into passive mode. Monitor. And T’Pell, think Surak.”

“Understood, Captain. Awaiting your orders.”

“Stand down from alert,” T’Pell said. The screen went dark as she disconnected.

“Do you think she understood Greg?”

“I do.”

“Greg, may I make an observation?”

“Sure thing.”

“You appear to be a bit too friendly with your crew. Are you certain that’s wise?”

“Admiral, may I respond to that.” Everyone turned to Shilo in surprise. She continued, “I will take that as a yes.”

She paused briefly, “Captain Binotti is an anomaly. He is unique in his style. On my planet, we believe the only way to accomplish a goal is through rigid discipline and intense organization. For the past year, sir, I have experienced roughly 2% organization and possibly 8% discipline.” Rich and Larry started to laugh, but one look from the Admiral stopped them fast.

Shilo continued, “I applied for, and was denied, on 9 separate occasions a transfer to a posting where I felt as though I was gaining a new experience, learning, and felt like my talents could be of use.”

They all sat around the conference table, but Shilo did not break her stride.

“Truth be told, sir, I have learned more about leadership and being a leader from this commanding officer than all of my previous posting. He leads by example. His crew would defend him to the death. They would walk through the fires of hell for him, sir, to coin a human phrase.”

She collected her thought for a heartbeat, “He leads the crew joyfully. Nothing he speaks or does is said in anger, nor is it designed to tear a person down. He praises in public and corrects in private.

Sir, this man has no ego I have been able to find. What he does, all he is is for the crew and the mission.” She looked at the Admiral. “So, Admiral, to answer your original question, no. The Captain is perfect for this mission, and I plan to hold the gates to hell open for him!”

Rich began applauding. Larry and the rest joined in.

The Admiral put up his hand to get them to stop. Once they were quiet, the Admiral spoke.

“Commander Ariel. I did not expect you to speak. I actually expected Commander Steele to defend the Captain. However, your words were refreshing, and I can safely say because of your impressions, meaning you see how he lacks discipline and organization but manages to get the job completed, I feel better about this next phase of the mission.”

Tapping his desk, “You are cleared.”

A pair of Romulans appeared in the room. Larry stood knocking his chair back but did not attack as he saw Greg’s hand go up, indicating he was to stand down.

“Greg, this is Torm, supreme Romulan commander of this area of the Empire. He knows about your mission, hell he suggested something similar a few months ago, and he is here to offer assistance. He feels the Empire is walking a tightrope. The Praetor is hell bound on starting a war and expanding the Empire. Torm feels that a war with the Federation and the Klingons would eradicate the Romulan Empire, and I tend to agree with him.”

Greg looked at Torm. “Admiral?” He said. Torm nodded slightly. “Admiral, may I assume you have no intention of hindering our mission?”

“You are correct, Captain.” He nodded to the Commander, obviously his aid. “Verelan, please give the Captain the case.”

Greg accepted the case, “Verelan, beautiful name. It means Grace, I believe. I have a sister named Grace, or rather someone I consider to be a sister at least.”

She spoke, “Captain, you are mostly correct. The translation to your language would be Graceful.”

“Most fitting,” Greg said as he opened the case. She very briefly smiled. “Data modules?” He touched his communicator, “Binotti to Scorpion.”

“Scorpion here, sir.”

“Who is working on the problem?”

“Sir, the problem has been resolved. But to answer your question, it was Johnston and the twins.”

“Have them stop and bring what they have to my location, all three of them, ASAP.”

“Aye aye, sir. Scorpion out.”

A minute later, the three appeared in the room.

“Oh, the twins. Now I get it. So Greg, does everyone on your ship refer to my children as the twins?”

Torm and Verelan looked shocked but did not say anything.

“Pretty much, Dad,” Yvonne replied as she walked over to her Captain and handed him a padd.

Greg did not even look at it but handed it to Shilo, who studied it for about a minute. “Shilo?”

A minute or so later, she said, “It appears we downloaded about 87% of the ship's database. The really classified files would take a bit longer. They are not currently on a mission but listed as on patrol. It appears they have gone rogue. A Romulan warrant is out for the arrest and/or execution of the Admiral and his officers. It appears that Commander Verelan is his daughter, which makes perfect sense as to the reason he trusts her as he does.”

Verelan asked, “Captain, Commander, may I ask what you have?”

“Hand her the padd Shilo.” So she did, and the Romulan Commander stared at the padd with wide and unbelieving eyes.

She looked at her father, her commanding officer. “Sir, the database mentioned is our ship's database. So I would expect they have everything.”

The admiral opened communications, “Communication open, sir.”

“Is there anything out of the ordinary?” He asked.

After a moment, “No sir. All is status green. Is there something specific you are looking for, sir?”

“Please determine if the computer has been covertly accessed?”

“Yes, sir.” About 3 minutes later. “Sir, it appears our system was accessed about 15 minutes ago by Romulan Command directly using a very low power interlink. It would have gone unnoticed if you did not alert us. Admiral, they know where we are!”

“No, they do not. I will explain when we return. Torm out.”

“Captain, can you please explain how you managed that feat?”

“I did nothing but request my acting captain to learn passively. Johnston?”

For the next 10 minutes, he and the twins explained how they managed to see the open connection in the ship's communications system and request from it the countersign. Then, using a code they purchased from an information broker a year ago, they connected and had full access to the ship's computer. They simply downloaded it.

Torm spoke, “We were not aware that our system was open to attack or that our superiors were able to connect to and infiltrate our computer system. Now, how can this be closed?”

“Admiral,” Johnston looked at his Admiral. “With your permission, sir?”

“Please, Lieutenant.” The Admiral replied.

Johnston approached the two Romulans and stretched out his hand. In it was a data module. “Sir.” He said to the Romulan who accepted the sign of respect graciously. “This data module contains the what and the how of our infiltration. That was my role, to get in. The twins...I mean, Ensign Yvonne Ramon and Ensign Ricardo Ramon determined the extent to which this opening had access and from where it stemmed.”

Yvonne continued, “Admiral, there is a file named ‘close’ in your language. If you run this program, you will effectively shut out all attempts to connect to your systems. By the way, sir, I expect that if you become under attack by ships sent to capture or destroy you, their plan was to use this command code to disable your shields and disable or destroy your ship.”

Ricardo took over, “Lastly, sir. There is a file called ‘create.’ This file will allow you to recreate your command codes so no one can access your systems in the future. I recommend all three of your ships enact this new protocol.”

Torm looked at his Starfleet counterpart. “It seems the children are smarter than the parents. I will take this into consideration once the code is reviewed and verified.”

“I understand, sir,” Johnston said. “There is a text on the data which would be the best starting point for someone in code review. But Admiral, I strongly believe you need to implement the new protocol before heading back into Romulan space. If not, I firmly believe you will not live to regret it.”

His daughter spoke, “Lieutenant, perhaps your team would like to join me on my ship. I have several data officers who would be interested in this information.”

“Torm, may I suggest you recloak your ships in case there are prying eyes nearby.”

He nodded to his daughter, who spoke quietly into her communicator. A moment later, she nodded to her father.

BEEP. “Ramon.”

“Sir, the three Romulan ships just cloaked.”

“Thank you, Ensign, cancel all alerts.”

“Aye, sir.” He disconnected.

“Binotti to Scorpion.”

“Scorpion here, sir.”

“Report?”



“We have canceled all alerts and returned to standard rotations. Space is clear at the standard sensor range. Commander Martinez requested permission to ‘play with the warp core,’ his words sir, not mine. Three cloaked Romulan scout ships are orbiting Cochrane station at a range of 1,000 kilometers. Our current location is equidistant to the command ship and the closest counterclockwise ship. Shields are available, weapons are available, power and reserves are all nominal.”

Greg saw Admiral Torm speak quietly into his communicator, which on the Romulan was attached to his left sleeve. A moment later.

“Sir, the lead Romulan ship is moving at thruster toward the station. 100, 200, 300, 359 kilometers closer, sir.”

“You can see through our cloak?” Torm asked.

“Not exactly, Admiral,” Johnston spoke first. “We realized all cloaking tech works similarly. We just determined the non-standard radiation when cloaked and can localize it...” He trailed off.

“May as well explain it to him, Lieutenant,” Greg said.

“Yes, sir.” He handed him a padd.

Torm accepted it and reviewed the information. “But if this is the case, why has command not informed us of this breach?”

“I am fairly certain they know about it but chose not to tell you.” Admiral Ramon said. “Torm, my friend, be brutally honest with me; if you had to choose right now at this moment to trust us, these Federation officers, or anyone in your chain of command, who would that be?”

“Admiral, after standing here for the past few minutes, I believe my trust would fall on those under your command, my friend.”

“Right answer.” He turned to Johnston, “Lieutenant Johnston, I’ve heard of you, you know. My understanding is you are a misfit, on a ship of misfits, commanded by the head misfit himself.”

Johnston smiled, showing teeth, “Yes sir, correct, and thank you, sir.”

“Can you direct those on the Romulan ships to hide this breach and make them completely invisible?”

Johnston thought for a moment then looked at his Captain, who bowed, nodded really, slightly to him. “Admiral, with the assistance of your daughter, I believe we can correct the flaw in the Admiral’s ship, and the process can be repeated on the others. Also, Admiral Torm, we can show you how to detect the flaw and use it for a targeting lock.”

Torm was stunned, “I accept.” He looked at his daughter. “Would the two of you transport now to my ship with my daughter?”

“Yes, sir.” They said in unison.

She opened communications, but Johnston held up a hand. Then, from a hidden place, he handed Ricardo a small phaser, as did Yvonne.

“OK, ready now.” He looked at Greg, who was about to bust a gut. “Well, Captain, I figure since we are friends and all a couple teeny little phasers against the entire ship made no sense. Unarmed from the start, well, tensions would be a lot lower.”

Admiral Ramon spoke, “Smart. But, hey Greg, somehow this misfit is turning into a real Starfleet officer.”

“No need to be nasty, sir,” Johnston said to the Admiral, who simply smiled and shook his head as they vanished.

Torm asked, “That weapon is the smallest Federation phaser I have ever seen.”

Ricardo handed one to the Admiral.

“Sir, there are 6 settings. Minimum is light stun up through dematerialize. Heavy stun is normally about setting 4, setting 5 kills, setting 6 cleans up your mess.”

The Admiral grinned. “I would like a couple of these for personal use.”

He turned to his father and his Captain. "Sir, I believe we could reconfigure a few of these for use on the Romulan ships. I mean, the power cell is not compatible currently. So, sir, tomorrow I can have a few sent to you. How many do you think I should modify?"

Admiral Ramon spoke, "Son, I think 11 would be a good number. Captain and first officer plus one extra of each ship."

Admiral Torm spoke, "That is 9. You said 11."

"Why Torm, of course, you and your daughter would have one of your own." Admiral Ramon said with a smile and turned to Greg. "Good work Greg."

"Then until tomorrow." A moment later, Torm vanished.

"Colonel Lanning, do you think there is anything on the Romulan ships that would pique your interest. Disruptors or..."

"You know, a couple of their oldest and nearly falling apart disruptors would be good for our covert ground operative. Side holsters can be designed and created. I'll talk to the Admiral about it."

"Then you are all dismissed."

They filed out of the room. Ricardo handed the small phasers to Colonel Lanning, who stowed them in a hidden pocket in his uniform.

"Ensign, you are dismissed unless you would like to join us for a drink."

"I would be honored, sir."

"Then, to the bar. Binotti to Scorpion."

"Go ahead, sir."

"Ensign Y and Lieutenant Johnston are on the lead Romulan ship helping them out. Maintain a transporter lock. If asked to check something, please oblige them. In the meantime, transfer the Shilo Champagne program to the station computer."

"Consider it done, sir."

They entered the turbolift, “The Pub.” Rich said.

As they dropped, Rich asked, “Rick, what is your drink of choice?”

“Well, sir, I like Romulan Ale, but I prefer bourbon. As long as it is good bourbon.”

“Perfect,” Greg said.

They entered the bar and found a table. Rich held up 4 fingers to the bartender. A minute later, four glasses were in front of the four officers.

Ricardo picked up the glass and held it in the air, “To the journey, may boredom never tickle the back of our necks.”

All four of them said, “To the journey.”

They took a large drink and sat and chatted for a few minutes. Rich saw a few old friends walk in, finished his drink, and excused himself. Ricardo finished his and excused himself.

Sarge and Top walked in, and Larry motioned to them. As they sat, they were greeted with a round of bourbons.

Sarge looked at his glass, “Hello, my old friend.”

Top asked the bartender, “Who’s the angel?”

He nudged his head to Greg.

Top toasted quite loudly, “To the Cap. One odd duck, but he sure quacks more gooder.”

Greg and Larry held up their glasses, and in unison, “QUACK!”

## CHAPTER 3-11

In his cabin, Greg sat in his favorite chair and looked at the table next to him. There's that damn book again.

He stared at it a moment as if it was talking to him or mocking him, "It seems as though every time I pick you up, something happens. What do you have to say for yourself?" Silence. Did he really expect anything else?

Next to the book, he tapped the comm panel, "Binotti to the bridge, report please?"

"Sir, nothing has changed since you left the bridge 10 minutes ago. May I suggest you have some dinner, then get some rest."

"Thank you for the thought, but my job is to worry, and I take that responsibility seriously."

"Yes, sir, and we appreciate it."

Greg smiled, "Thank you, commander. Binotti out."

"Binotti to Ariel."

"Yes, Captain. How may I serve you?"

"You are always so formal. If you have a few minutes, can we meet over an ice cream Sunday?"

Shilo put her dessert down on the table next to her, "Yes, sir. I was just thinking about a snack myself. That would be wonderful."

"Your place or mine?"

"Come here, Captain, my baby likes when you visit."

"Agreed, I need some fur time anyway."

Shilo broke the connection, took the last bite, and cleaned up her cake, depositing the remnants, plate, and fork on the pad to be recycled. Next, she found her baby, picked her up, and sat her on Greg's favorite chair, where she curled up into a ball and seemed to be waiting for Greg to show up and start rubbing her fur.

A moment later, her chime rang. KONEKO raised her head and looked at the door.

“Enter.”

Greg walked in dressed in casual attire. Koneko instantly started purring. “I realize it is very late, but I like talking to you. You have a way of helping me work through problems.” He walked to the replicator, “Hot Fudge Sunday with all the fixings topped with a couple of shots of bourbon and coffee liquor.” He turned to Shilo, “And for you?”

“Computer, Hot Fudge Sunday with all the fixings.” The computer made the selections, “What are the *fixings*?”

As they appeared, she looked at the bowls. One was unmistakably wet; that must be the bourbon.

Shilo commented, “Interesting, I think I like this way to order. Never had Hot Fudge before, so this will be a very unique experience.”

Greg picked up both bowls and walked to her. She sat at her dinner table, and he placed her bowl in front of her and sat with his. The cat was on the chair next to him and jumped onto the table and nuzzled his face.

“Computer, one order of Koneko number 12,” Greg said into the air.

The bowl appeared, and Shilo stood to get it and brought it to him. She took a sniff, and her smile turned into a scowl. He put the bowl near him, and he and the Koneko had their snack.

“What is Koneko 12?” She asked.

“A tuna and salmon mix, nearly every Earth cat thinks it is the greatest thing in the world.”

“Good to know. I have never offered her seafood before.” She paused a moment and took another bite of her Sunday. “Wow, this is good, and the chocolate sauce is amazing. I like how it is quite warm, and the ‘fixings’ make it more than just a sauce-covered bowl of ice cream.”

“The SAUCE is called hot fudge, and it is a delicacy for humans of all ages. I have been a fan of hot fudge since I had my first ice cream Sunday.”

She looked at her boss, “So Greg, what is this all about?”

“I have a problem, and there are just two people on this ship I can confide in, you and Rich. So, for fun and frivolity, I’ll talk to Rich. Then, for some reality-based advice, I talk to you.”

“So, as I said when you called, how can I be of service?”

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Greg made his way back to his cabin after nearly 3 hours of talking to Shilo. On his way back, “Binotti to O’Roury.”

“Here, sir.”

“So formal.....can you please meet me in my cabin when you have the chance? I have something I need to discuss with you?”

“Yes, sir, on my way.”

“He entered his cabin a moment later and headed to the replicator. Tapping a few times, a bottle of champagne and two glasses appeared. He tapped again after removing them, and an ice bucket appeared.

Placing the perfectly chilled bottle into the bucket, he moved the bucket to the living area and put it in the middle of the small table.

When she arrived, she simply walked in. She had the code already.

“What’s up, Greg?” She looked around and saw the ice bucket, and her eye opened a bit wider.

“Ramona, it appears 99% of the crew, and every one of Lieutenant and above on Cochrane, know about us, so I would like for you to consider something. After we are underway, I would like for you to officially move into my cabin with me. This assignment will last at least a year, maybe more, and I would like for it to be the beginning of our lives together.” He paused.

“I spoke to the Admiral, and he approves of this arrangement, but he did ask if we would like to make it official. So I left the question unanswered until I speak to you. So....”

She walked over to him and kissed him, “Yes. Yes, on both questions.”

He popped the cork, and they celebrated.

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“Johnston to Binotti.”

“Go ahead,” Greg responded after tapping his communicator.

“Sir, can you please come to the engineering conference room.”

“On my way.”

Greg left his quarters; Ramona was still asleep as he showered and dressed. As he walked through the ship and headed to engineering, he marveled that this was his ship. Maybe not his first command, but by far his favorite. This is an excellent ship with the best crew in Starfleet. It took a couple of minutes to get there, but he saw several guards standing outside in the corridor when he arrived. They greeted him as he passed between them and into engineering.

He found several of his crew and several Romulans gathered around a console in the conference room.

“Good, Captain. We have a request. It appears that the operating system will not permit the Romulans to rewrite their code and disconnect the bypass; the odd thing is we can do it from here but would prefer to let them do it.”

“You have a request, Lieutenant?”

“Can you grant permission for the Romulans to have access to the method we used to determine the breach?”

Greg thought about it for a minute. His friend and mentor trusted this Romulan Admiral, and the technology to pull the command codes from the system was discovered by chance. So, no



actual harm in letting them know how they found the command codes and give them the ability to be safe.

“Go ahead but limit it to needed protocols. Also, can you remove the block so in the future they can make the modification on their own?”

“Aye, sir, I believe so. Thank you.”

Torm approached the Captain, “Captain, thank you for this information and the education. We are learning a lot about our ship and the back-door, as your Lieutenant calls it.”

“My pleasure Admiral. You realize that when the Romulan fleet finally catches up with you and they cannot disable you, they will not be pleased.”

Torm grinned, “Yes, that thought had crossed my mind.”

“May I suggest routing a weapons path through a warp relay. You may get only a single shot off before the relay melts, but it will be a good one. Possibly a shoot and run to get away from a situation where you are outmatched.”

“Interesting idea. Is that how your phasers operate?”

“Not yet!” Greg grinned back at him. The Admiral returned the grin.

They talked a few more minutes, but Greg was needed on the bridge. So he excused himself and left engineering and headed to a turbolift, then on to the bridge.

As the doors opened, “Report!” he said more out of instinct than curiosity.

Rich was in the center seat at the moment, and he stood at the sound of his friend's voice. Greg walked towards the con and stopped dead in his tracks. There was something new on his bridge.

Looking it up and down, he asked Rich, “Is this it?”

“It is,” Rich replied.

“It’s so small?”

“Yes, it is. It is the main computer bridge tie-in, storage module 471. Measuring 35cm x 35cm x 8cm. Estimated yield if transported out is roughly twice that of a fully charged photon torpedo.” Rich smiled, “Good enough?”

Greg looked at him and smiled, “Good enough!”

Rich continued but directed his view to the arm of his command chair, “Press the blue and the green toggles at the same time, and the shields protecting that little gem will flicker a couple times then disappear. The tests went well with our mad bomber, with more power than we initially estimated. Sending more than one at a time increases the concussive force geometrically.”

“So how many do we have, and where are they?”

“We have 32 handheld mini bombs in the main cargo bay. They can be launched out of the bay easily using a pneumatic launcher by a single person, and no EV suit is required. There is a computer and a manual interface. The launcher will swing down from above the door and slip outside the atmospheric shield. The launcher can only be operated from two locations, the shuttle bay and engineering. Each tube has a charged 350-atmosphere plenum chamber. The burst disk can be ruptured at the touch of a button or the pull of a string.”

“Range to arm?”

“From the moment they leave the launcher until it is fully armed is 2.5 seconds. Calculating a 350-atmosphere burst and length of the tube, we estimate it will arm in less than 200 meters. So, as it passes the end of the nacelles, it is deadly and cannot be shut off. That means if it is launched, it will explode even if it does not hit its target; something, someday, will set it off.”

“Well, not perfect. But the last resort.”

“Can a terminal fuse be added? Say 24 hours, and it will auto-detonate. No sense potentially hurting someone a year or a decade from now.”

“Good thought. That would be nothing more than a simple detonator with a timer. I will get that done.”

“Captain, the Romulan Admiral is hailing you.”

“On screen.” He waited a moment. “Admiral, what can I do for you?”

“Captain Binotti, we just got word that we are being sought after, and they believe we are in this area of space, near Cochrane. So we will be leaving to protect you, your mission, and the station.”

“Is there anything we can offer that can assist you?”

Torm grinned at the screen and got very close to the optical pickup. “Captain, we know you have a new type of explosive charge that is completely undetectable. Could we trouble you for a dozen or so?”

He turned and realized no one was on the bridge from engineering. “Lieutenant Johnston, report to the bridge on the double.”

A moment later, he stepped off the turbolift.

“Your son was watched. Admiral Torm here witnessed your little playdate in the asteroids. He is wondering if you have a dozen or so more of your little toys that he can disperse on his three ships.”

“Admiral, we can have them ready in less than an hour, but I have a question, sir. Would you like them to be fully manual or detonate after fully materialized?”

The Admiral smiled broadly, “Lieutenant, provide 6 of each, and I will trade my best case of Ale. You will need to share it with your Captain, I’m sure.”

“Commander too!” Rich added.

“I will have them to your ship shortly, sir.”

“Transport them when ready.”

“Uh...Admiral. Remember that they detonate on the completion of the transport cycle? So I will bring them on a shuttle, sir.”

“Thank you for not allowing me to blow myself up, young man. Make that 2 cases of Ale. Torm out.”

The connection terminated.

Greg looked at him, pointing a finger to him, then to Rich and back a few times. “By the way, we like Romulan Ale.”

“Yes, sir. Understood.” He smiled at his CO and winked at Commander Steele.

Johnston turned and left the bridge; he had some work to do. On the lift, before the doors closed, they heard him contact Yvonne for assistance.

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“Johnston to Scorpion, open the garage. I’m home.”

“Did it go well?” Shilo asked.

“Yes, Commander, we managed to make 3 dozen of each, so a dozen of each for each of his ships. I had the parts for two launchers and showed them how to install and load them. They will make the third and set it up similar to how ours operates.”

“Very good. Park and secure the shuttle and assist Commander Martinez with the task at hand.” She paused a breath, “Scorpion out.”

~~~~~

Greg sat alone on a pitch-black darkened bridge; all of the lights and consoles were off, the room was dark, even the emergency lights were not working. Gravity plating was nonexistent, so he had the thigh restraints in place to remain in the chair. Yet, it was the most peaceful, quiet, dark place he has ever experienced. He had a flashlight, a small one, but it was not active. Darkness allows the mind to wander. It allows the mind to relax.

He has been there for nearly an hour while they reconfigured the power distribution system, the special weapons mod he mentioned to Torm. The only sound he heard was the beating of his heart and his breathing.

PING!

He looked to the left like he could see what the sound was, he had his eyes opened, but the difference between open and closed at the moment was undetectable. So he chose to not have the lamp turned on. Instead, he said to himself, ‘I really like the dark.’ Gave his mind a chance to ponder.

PING!

It was something striking the hull, a pebble or something.

The pings increased but not hard enough to get through the hull. Reminded him of when he was a young boy. It sounded like it was hailing, and he had a metal roof. He found it relaxing.

The emergency lights came on, and he felt gravity again.

He looked around, eerie. Shadows and allusion surrounded him. Finally, a few of the consoles activated, and after a time, the remainder of the consoles came to life.

The last thing to come back to life was the main lights, but he thought he was looking at a nova when they did. It actually hurt his eyes for a few moments.

A second later, “Martinez to Binotti” A very minimal pause. Then, “We’re done.”

“Excellent, how was it?”

“On a ten scale, maybe an 8. We had a little trouble replacing the warp relays and routing the forward phasers through the new relay, but it was all done simultaneously—saved time and no safety issues since there was no power anywhere in the system. I would like to test a few things first, maybe a shakedown cruise of a few lightyears and back. In the last few weeks, there were a lot of changes to this little ship.”

“Understood, we shall be leaving in the morning? Will you be ready.”

“Perfect. By the way, Ensign R came up with a thought regarding the new phaser relays. So we set up 2 phase cannon-style weapons and routed them through 3 relays each. Best guess, they will

last for multiple shots. We will need to align them manually once we are underway. They work in unison. Martinez out.”

“Computer. Randomly select 60% of the crew excluding the command staff.”

“Completed. 60 crewmembers have been selected at random.”

“Verify all workspaces are sufficiently staffed and operational.”

“Verified.”

“Notify the other 40% they are to remain on Cochrane for this shakedown, they depart the ship at 0700. Additionally, notify Cochrane they will have 60 additional guests for a week, compliments of the USS Scorpion.”

“Cochrane station notified.” There was a pause. “Cochrane station is hailing the ship.”

“On-screen computer.”

“Greg, you’re leaving half your crew here. What’s up?”

The Admiral knew precisely what was happening.

“Admiral, we only need half of us for a shakedown. Let the rest have some R&R, and you may need some conduits polished or something.”

“Good timing Greg, the Chancellor, has returned to the station, and the ensign I assigned to pilot the shuttle reported to sickbay, something about the smell or his sinuses or something.”

“Let the Chancellor and his party know to be back on board before 0700. We depart at 0800. After that, a run to Kronos and back will be a good test.”

“Will do. Ramon out.”

Greg turned to say something to Shilo and smiled when he realized he was alone on the bridge. Then, tapping the console on the arm of the chair, “Binotti to Ariel.”

“At your service, captain.” He had gotten used to that phrase over the past year, but at first, he hated it. He is a Captain who

believes all are equal, more or less. He serves the crew and the ship, as does the crew. After so many late-night conversations with her, they found mutual respect, and a friendship has grown.

“Shilo, take care of getting the remainder of the systems up and running, and in the morning, we can head out on our shakedown cruise. You have the places we need to be, and when you and Rich figure it out, send it to the helm, and at 8 am, we depart. The first step is to drop off our Klingon friends. So Kronos it is.”

“Understood, sir. The time is 23:50, so may I insist you get a few hours’ sleep? I will have Rich do the same, and I will see to the systems restart. I need less sleep than you.”

“No need to tell me twice. I will be on the bridge by 0750. Good night Commander.”

“Good night, Captain, pleasant dreams.”

Greg walked into the turbolift when the bridge crew arrived, giving their commanding officer pleasantries, which he acknowledged. He entered the lift, and as the doors opened on his floor, he noticed his door was slightly ajar.

Not suspecting anything sinister, he entered his cabin and looked around. He looked at his bed and saw Shilo’s cat sleeping soundly.

“Binotti to Ariel.” He said quietly.

“Ariel here, sir.”

“It appears during the power outage the doors to the cabins were ajar, and I have a small furry visitor.”

“I am not able to get her at the moment, sir.”

“No, Shilo, I was just letting you know she will be spending the night in my cabin. I will drop her off on my way to breakfast.”

Shilo was somewhat amazed at how easily he would cat sit, “Ok sir, thank you. I would have been worried sick if I returned to my cabin, and it was empty.”

“Well, Koneko and I will have a snack and then head to sleep. I will have her back around 0615.”

“That should be about the time I head back to my cabin. Sleep well, sir.”

“Perhaps you can devise a tracker of some sort for the pets on the ship, and the computer can locate them easily.”

“Good idea sir, I will have Yvonne look into it for us.”

“Perfect. Talk to you in the morning. Binotti out.”

Greg turned to Koneko, “Well, young lady, do you need a snack? I know I do.”

Greg walked to the replicator, Computer, one hot fudge Sunday, and one bowl with a single scoop of vanilla ice cream.”

They appeared. Picking up both bowls, Greg placed his Sunday on the table in front of him and put Koneko’s on the opposite side of the table. He tapped the table, and she got the idea and jumped up. Sniffing the bowl a bit, she realized this smelled good and took a tentative taste.

Greg dug into his snack, and she looked up at him then attacked her bowl.

“O’Roury to Binotti”

“Go ahead.”

“Where are you?”

“In my cabin...but I am with a very pretty young lady.”

Ramona laughed, “OK, great, almost there anyway.”

A few bites later, she walked in.

“You’re right, beautiful lady. I take it Shilo’s baby walked here during the power outage?”

“Yep, good guess. I found her asleep on my bed. I am going to let her sleep here tonight since Shilo is working straight through to finish.” He looked her in the eye. “You staying?”

She nodded.



“Computer, one hot fudge Sunday!” She grinned at them both. They both looked up when the replicator made its noise. “Sounds like a good idea.”

They all sat at the table and finished their snack. Ramona picked up the bowls and put them into the replicator to recycle.

Koneko went over to the couch and curled up in a corner, set for the night. Ramona went over to Greg and did the same.

~~~~~

“Computer, time?”

“The time is 0512.”

He turned over to look at Ramona and was staring at Koneko, but not her face. Apparently, she had plopped herself between them during the night. Greg started petting her, and she began to purr pretty loud and woke up Ramona. Considering Koneko’s nose was millimeters from Ramona’s ear.

“When did she get here?” Ramona asked.

“Sometime after we fell asleep. I need to get up anyway. Best 7 hours I had in a long time.”

Koneko jumped off the bed and made her way to the chair Greg liked to sit in. Maybe it smelled like him. Ramona rolled over and kissed him passionately. Who knows? A good morning.

An hour later, he had finished his shower, and Ramona was taking hers. He dressed, and after a few minutes, she dressed also. Finally, they walked toward the door, and Koneko simply followed them into the turbolift.

They stopped on Shilo’s floor, and the door opened. “I’ll meet you in the galley,” Ramona said to Greg.

Walking the few steps to the door, Greg and Koneko stopped, and he tapped his communicator. “Binotti to Ariel, Koneko is back.”

As they approached, the door opened and Shilo, wrapped in a towel, stood near the entrance to her bedroom. Koneko entered, and Greg followed until he saw her.

Coming to a complete stop, “I’ll meet you at breakfast.” They were not embarrassed, more respectful. Shilo had become like a sister to Greg, and as such, he told her things he did not tell anyone else.

He backed out of the room and headed to the galley.

Shilo dressed and made her way to the galley also. As she left her quarters, she saw Koneko sleeping soundly on her bed.

Greg was working on his second cup of coffee as Shilo entered. Breakfast already finished, he sat and chatted to others as they sat to eat. As Shilo approached the table, Ramona stood, “Here you go, Commander. I need to head to the office.”

“Thanks!” Shilo replied. She sat next to Greg and enjoyed her morning selection.

Greg looked up, “There goes the neighborhood.” He said as a flock of Commanders filed into the room and headed to the serving line.

They all brought their food to the table and sat in their customary seats around the table.

CHAPTER 3-12

“Captain, we are entering standard orbit of Kronos. Orbital command knows we are here and is telling us where to park.”

“Binotti to Chancellor Damar. 15 minutes and we can beam you to home.”

“Understood, Captain, you and your crew are glorious warriors. May you die well.”

“Thank you, Chancellor. I will meet you in the transporter room. It seems Starfleet has seen fit to offer the Scorpion as a shuttle service. I understand we are carrying replacements for a few Klingon vessels along our path. I find it both rewarding and an honor to perform this task for you. My second officer would like for you to know it is his honor to serve the Empire.”

“Captain, I am not certain which of you is more filled with Targ dropping, you or your second officer, but understand, I believe both of you are the most honorable officers I have had the opportunity to meet.” The Chancellor snarled but in a humorous way, “Qa’Pla!”

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The orbit and the movement of Klingons went reasonably well. There were very few cabins, so they converted the cargo bay into a barracks, took on a great deal of food and blood wine, and Rich managed to visit a few friends in the few days he had on the Klingon homeworld. He returned several times to the ship to have a shoulder reset or a bone repaired, but he had fun.

The 35 Klingons in the cargo bay stayed to themselves pretty much and enjoyed fighting in the holodeck a great deal. They mainly had replicated food, but Rich managed to “borrow” a few trays of real food.

Juan turned cargo bay 2, smaller than the other but not by much, into a holodeck in just a few days with the aid of a lot of engineers. Rich brought on board a freshly killed targ, and he created a program to simulate the mountain range near the city where he lived

while on the Klingon homeworld. Then, setting up a fire and a spit, Rich invited the 35 Klingons and a few of the ship's officers to join them in a relaxing meal and a few barrels of blood wine, which Johnston provided. He wanted to get an expert opinion of the taste of his efforts.

The Commander of this group called Johnston over, "Lieutenant, no planet in space has there ever been blood wine that a true Klingon could pallet except on Kronos. Although not the top shelf as humans would say, your 'home-brewed' blood wine is good. We are honored that you have made not only the attempt to produce blood wine but a good substitute when none is available."

"Thank you, Commander. I am honored by your words."

"Now, let me offer you a few ideas as to improving your yield in both flavor and quantity." Johnston and the Klingon grabbed a couple bottles and headed to a corner. Over the past few weeks, he has become accustomed to the taste.

The gathering lasted two days, all of the blood wine was consumed, and the food was erased from existence.

8 days later, the night before they arrived at the ship, Johnston entered the cargo bay with a grav cart. Strolled right up to the Commander, and the room was silent.

"Commander, I have heeded your advice and produced a new batch of blood wine." He removed the sheet covering it. The Commander was amazed and smiled, an evil smile, and tapped Johnston on both shoulders.

The commander grabbed a bottle and, with his teeth, removed the cork. Then, a tentative sniff and put the bottle to his lips and drank deeply.

Commander Steele walked into the bay and saw what was happening, and grabbed a bottle himself.

"Brother, this young pup of yours makes very reasonable blood wine."

"Agreed. It is very close to a 29."

“Lieutenant, I will drink with you.”

“Thank you, Commander, but on the cart is 35 cases – each with the name of a warrior. My gift, my gratitude, for all I have learned over the past week. You and your warriors have taught me to fight better, taught me to fall better,” Some laughter at that, “and helped me understand the true meaning of honor, and, sir, you have taught me to make the best blood wine I can and appreciate its many flavors. There are also 3 red cases on this cart. So 36 bottles to enjoy tonight. I know Commander Steele would be here, there is no place on the ship he would rather be, and now I understand.”

“Qa’Pla!” Johnston grabbed a bottle and pulled the cork, and drank deeply. He handed the bottle to Rich then to the Klingon officer, who did the same.

“Now, I must tend to my duties. Commander, warriors. Die Well!”

The entire room, in one voice, shouted Qa’Pla.

Rich was proud as a papa.

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“Computer, what will the stardate be, the new set, in 5 months.” But, of course, Greg already knew the answer.

“Stardate 180 using the modified Scorpion calendar.”

“Computer, notify me when I wake up on Stardate 180 it is time for promotions.”

“Complete.”

“What was that all about, dear?”

“Well, Ramona, in 5 months, I plan to do two things. First, on stardate 180, I will promote various crewmen to the next rank, and our trader will be transmitting the promotions to Starfleet for us. Also, we will be entering the R1 system, and the ship will be on minimal energy to avoid detection, and if I am right, our SSD crew will depart the ship and head for their mission, whatever that really is; you cannot get a straight answer from them, ever.”

“What about me, is there a chance I will get promoted to Commander?”

“Slim, the rank of Commander, is a fleet rank, and special permission is needed. I will have two promotions to Commander I can utilize that have been pre-approved by fleet, and one is for Rich. He has been a Lieutenant Commander for some time.”

“Who is the other one for?”

“I would rather not say at this time. The crew member has no idea they are up for a promotion.” Greg smiled at her. She was so beautiful.

Greg’s comm chirped.

“Binotti.”

“Captain, you are needed on the bridge ASAP.”

“On my way.”

On the way, Greg was thinking of the past week. They received all of the information from Shilo’s family and from the Klingon High Command. They had specifics for their mission, a timeline, and knew when they needed to be where. All that was left was picking up the crew he left on Cochrane and shoving off into the great sea of dots.

As the doors opened, “REPORT!”

“Sir, we are approaching Cochrane Station and have been cleared to dock. We have communicated with all Scorpion crew, and they are ready to return to the ship. The Admiral is on hold for you.”

“Lieutenant, you put the Admiral on hold?”

“Yes, sir, but for just a few minutes, should I have played music for him?”

Greg nearly started laughing, and as the Admiral appeared, “Captain, your Lieutenant put me on hold!”

“She did, sir! I will reprimand her as soon as this conversation is over for not playing music for you while you were on hold.” Neither of them could hold the false anger any longer and started

laughing. Then, in his best old world operator's voice, "Hold, please." Greg said.

"Lieutenant, you were correct to put me on hold. However, a briefing to the captain always takes priority over a vid from an Admiral."

"Yes, sir, thank you for your understanding."

The Admiral spoke, "Greg, gonna miss your leftover crew. The banisters are finally shiny."

"I need them back sir, ours are getting quite dull." He looked at the screen thoroughly. "All of our little side trips and taxi services are completed, and we are ready to start our exploration of beyond what is known."

"Good, I am really tired of the Scorpion hanging around. Now, go out and do something!"

"Yes, sir. Scorpion out."

Docking was achieved, and the crew all returned. All shopping trips completed and a fresh supply of fresh produce in stasis. Juan and Johnston set up 11 stasis chambers off the galley for their use, and all totaled, they hold more than a metric ton of fresh foods, fruits, and vegetables. One was reserved for Rich. Strange Klingon cuisine was the label on the door.

They dropped off the Klingon technician at Cochrane, and she will find a way home. They determined it would be easier if she trained the crew in the cloaking technology for the past couple of weeks and then departed the ship. It would be better for all. She and Rich got close and exercised together a lot in the holodeck.

Marcus left a few days ago, and doing the math, he would be at the spot in space in 4 days. The Scorpion can get there in less than 2, which means another day and a half on the station.

Lieutenant Commander Tolar joined the ship at the last stop, Regula Station. Lieutenant Ma and Commander Tolar moved to a larger cabin, freeing up her place for someone else to use. Greg dropped off a few bottles of Romulan Ale for the Regula station commander, compliments of Admiral Ramon and the USS Scorpion.

“Binotti to Steele.”

“Go ahead.”

“Got a minute?”

“Am I in trouble?” Rich asked.

“Why? Should you be?”

“Headed your way.”

The comm disconnected a minute later the chime rang.
“Enter.” Rich walked in.

“Rich, how many empty cabins are on the ship?”

“Well, that’s easy. 21. Why?”

“Once we are underway, can you foresee a reason not to allow those with roommates; how many sets of roommates are there anyway?”

“At the moment, non-couples sharing a cabin are 11. So if we split them up, if they wanted to split up, that could leave us 10 open cabins. The 21 mentioned at single crew quarters up to VIP.”

“Good. Figure it out and get it on paper. Then, after we are underway, make them the offer.”

“Gocha. Something else?” He paused a heartbeat, “Put Ma and Tolar in the largest open cabin.”

“Already did.” Greg gave him the thumbs up.

Rich winked.

Greg sat there a minute and looked at the wall. He rubbed his forehead and eyes with his right hand and relaxed a bit. “There is one other thing. Ramona said yes.”

“To moving in with you or marriage?”

“Both.” Greg paused to collect his thoughts. “The admiral will marry us later this afternoon on the station if we want. So we need this to stay quiet. Understood.”

“No problem, Cap, or should I call you Commodore?” Rich smiled, looking at Greg’s new uniform.

“Captain is fine. Commodore on the uniform, but this ship has but a single Captain. After all, the SSD and the Marines use the same structure. Larrimore is a Colonel.”

“True.” He thumbed to the door. “Gotta run. I have an appointment I really need to keep.”

Greg smiled, “What’s her name?”

Rich grinned back, “You never met her, she is on the station, and since we are here for a day or so, I think I can hang out with her.”

Greg looked him in the eye, “Does she have cranial ridges?”

Rich winked and nodded slightly.

“Dismissed Commander, have fun and try not to break too many bones.”

“No promises.” He ran out the door.

Captian Gregory T. Binotti was alone in his cabin. After this afternoon, that will be rare. He is getting married to Ramona O’Roury. A woman he has known for decades and loved nearly as long.

He sat in his seat, in the silence. “Computer, turn off all lights.” The room became pitch black except for the stars out the huge window.

His seat faced that window, and he sat there and stared, not focusing on any single star. Then, finally, he closed his eyes and began meditation. 15 minutes a day. Prescribed by Dr. Piper to reset his attitude, his emotions, and his general well-being.

At first, he hated it, but somewhere along the way, he looked forward to it. So now, he just does it.

CHAPTER 3-13

“Captain, we are ready to depart the station,” Shilo said

Greg, Shilo, Rich, Juan, and Piper were all on the bridge. This was it, the beginning of the mission.

First, pick up Marcus and his little ship and carry them close to the Romulan Neutral Zone, where he will head in a different direction to play decoy. Johnston fine-tuned the engines for him while the ship was in the bay, and he thinks he can comfortably hit warp 4.5 now and for a short time warp 5 or a little more.

Still not enough to get away from a pirate, but enough to get where you need to get to a little faster. Marcus was so happy about it he gave Johnston the pick of anything in his cargo bay.

Johnston casually walked around the bay for 20 minutes, then back up to Marcus. “I decided. There is a small case back there, and inside the case is a mini warp core that needs some work. The case is a couple meters tall, not sure what it went to originally, but I like tinkering.”

Marcus hoped to sell it for a profit, and since he found it floating in space a few years ago, it would be all profit. “Agreed. What are you planning to do with it?”

“Well, we have a while on this trip, and I hope to get permission to build a mini-warp shuttle. A bit larger than the worker bee, but fast. It will keep me busy anyway.”

“Tell you what, kid. Walk through the back hatch and pick one. It will give you a good start anyway.”

Michael walked into the back-cargo area and saw several small crafts. No power to anything, but he saw a lot of potentials.

“This one.” He chose a bright yellow industrial maintenance bee. The core should fit, or at least close and all of the wirings was intact.”

“I actually found that floating less than a light-year from the core you now own. Have fun!”

“Johnston to the transporter room. There are two pieces of cargo in the trader's ship that need to be transported into bay 4.”

“Can you identify them, please?”

Johnston scanned each with a tricorder and sent the data to the transporter console. “Got it!”

They vanished a minute later. Now he had to tell his boss about his new project. He planned to create a mini-warp-shuttle. He said quietly to himself, “What weapons can I put into such a small package.” Then he grinned, “Maybe even a cloak!”

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“Binotti to the crew. We depart the station in 8 hours. Section leaders rotate your people for a few hours on the station, last-minute shopping, or whatever. Twins go tell Mom and Dad goodbye. Binotti out.”

The bridge was barely populated, Rich and an Ensign or two. Greg stood and walked over to Rich.

“You have someone you can say goodbye to also on the station. GO! I got this.” He looked around the bridge. “Take them with you.”

“Sir?” Said one of the Ensigns.

“Go to the station, have a little fun, check out the shops, whatever. Just go!”

The three ensigns looked at Rich, “Don’t look at me. He kicked me off the bridge too. Just get out of here, see you in 4 hours.”

They left, “I’ll be back in 4 hours, and you can take some time. Where is Shilo?”

“In medical, she and Piper are doing some research. She said it will be completed in about 6 hours, so I added a few hours to that time and POOF, the new departure time. Oh, that reminds me.”

Greg walked up to the communications console. The Trill controller appeared on the screen. "Cochrane station, new departure time will be 2100 station time."

"Thank you, Captain. New time noted. Kinda late for the Admiral, but I am pretty certain he will be here to cut the ribbon."

"Noted, you can set up his warm milk for later." The controller laughed briefly, "Scorpion out."

He looked at Rich, "You still here?"

"Nope. See you in 4." He left, and Greg was alone on the bridge of his ship.

"Computer, open Captain's Personal Log." The computer chirped. "Captain's Personal Log, Ship Day 39. The crew is amazing. Every member of this crew is an expert in their specialty and at least one or two others. Multitasking is normal on this ship, and I love it! My command staff is consummate professionals and, except for my first officer, will proudly drink all of my prize bourbons if the situation should ever arise. She would, I am pretty certain if she consumed alcohol."

He stood and walked around as he talked. "I don't mind it though, they have all become friends, and I would bet my life on any one of them. Shilo is ready to command a ship of her own, and Rich needs a little more experience in the position of First Officer, but he also would do well as Captain in a year or two. Then, perhaps he can Captain the USS Loose Cannon."

He laughed at that joke but left it in the log and continued, "Colonel Lanning has become a fine starship commander, and when he returns from this mission, the new Charger Class Marine vessel in the works will be perfect for him. Captain Marlan and I discussed that ship in detail, and our suggestions have already been implemented into the ship. She and I have also done similar things to our own ships making these three little ships unstoppable."

He considered his words, "I have no intention of letting him know about his future command, though it needs to be sprung on him eventually. I will most likely do that later in this mission so he can get more center-seat time. His promotion to full Colonel and captain

of the new ship is in his future, and he will be ready. I will see to that. On the Scorpion, no one is aware of the new ship other than me. I suspect our SSD gang has an idea about it also but has not mentioned it yet. I will make Commander Ariel aware of this and ask her to lead his education around ship date 60. I think the name USS Cupam, NCC-1225 is perfect for him. Cupam is Latin for Whiskey, and 1225 is the date, using the old Earth calendar, for the Colonels birthday and Christmas Day if I remember correctly. So this ship will be his gift.”

He sat in Shilo’s chair. “Commander Ariel is unique. I really do not want to lose her as the first officer because I value her in that position. She drives the crew and me to succeed. But she would be a Captain who did great things, I know it. Therefore, Commander Ariel and Colonel Lanning have my highest recommendation for the position of ship’s captain when this mission is completed. And in that light, my second officer, Commander Richard Steel, would move into the First Officer position where I suspect a year or so from now would make him ready to command a ship of his own. Shilo would be perfect in a Nebula class Science vessel. Her scientific curiosity, logical mind, and overall intelligence would pair perfectly in the world of science.”

He sat at the science station, a place Larry sat when he was on the bridge, “Colonel Larry Lanning will fill the shoes of a Starship Captain in the Charger class Marine starship perfectly. His attention to detail and ability to see multiple sides of a cube tend to give him unconventional methods for a given outcome. It has taken me a while to instill this in him, but it is now second nature. Both of them, their skills and abilities would match well to those crafts.”

He walked over to the engineering console and laid his hands on the back of the chair. “Commander Martinez! For certain, he would make a terrible starship Captain; just ask him, he will agree. In all honesty, he is not a ship captain material, nor does he intend to ever accept that position if offered. However, he would be an excellent Captain of Engineering with a posting at Starfleet overseeing new ship designs and procedures. That is something he would enjoy and excel in.” He thought a moment and briefly, “On the other hand, Juan can and does lead his team of engineers, but he leads by example. As a starship Captain, you need to have the technical

expertise, but you need to allow your crew to do their job. That is where he would have the issue. He likes the doing part.”

“Now for the golden child, Lieutenant JG Michael Johnston. This young man would be perfect for taking over Juan’s posting but at the appropriate rank of Commander when that happens. Johnston has been an officer for less than a year and already has the respect of his subordinates. He knows how to work with people, and although his service record does not reflect this, he is a fine officer. Like Juan, I think he would also enjoy something to tinker with instead of a position where he commands. As for his people skills, impeccable, I think he read a book about it or something.”

He continued, “I did not consult Admiral Ramon when I had his twins reassigned to the Scorpion for this mission. But it has turned out to be the best snap decision I have ever made. They have integrated into this crew seamlessly and found a place where they can excel and teach others. They will make fine officers in the future, and I can see a decade from now Ricardo running a starship and Yvonne working in Starfleet intelligence.”

Greg walked to his chair and sat. “I want to register my commendation into the record of each member of the Scorpion crew. Over the past 2 years for accomplishments above and beyond the call of duty. If I have my way, when we return, Starfleet will acknowledge the crew of this ship for the hero’s they are, although this mission is classified, the duties and jobs they perform and the sacrifices they have and will make are and will be impressive.” He thought a moment. “Lieutenant Commander Ramona O’Roury. She and I are getting married this afternoon, and I have removed myself completely from her chain of command and placed her fully under the structure of Commander Ariel. If a promotion for her is in the future, it will be from Shilo, not me. I have instructed Shilo to not even consult me in this matter. She has my full support and confidence in this matter.”

He took a breath, “End log.”

Greg sat there a moment and contemplated what he had just said.

“Computer. Transmit this log to Admiral Ramon, Admiral Maddox, and General Fowler.”

“Log transmitted with a security classification.” The computer responded.

“Computer, play some soft jazz.”

Music filled the bridge. He had a bit more than 3 hours till Rich returned.

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Greg returned from the station. Rich relieved him for a few hours. Admiral Ramon met him in the pub, they shared a drink. The Admiral told Greg a case of bourbon was delivered to his cabin a few minutes ago. His delivery boy, naturally, was Rich Steele.

He stopped at a small shop and picked up a few trinkets and things to give Ramona over the next year. Little gifts that mean something only to them.

As he entered the bridge, he walked past Rich and lightly slapped him on his shoulder. Then, he walked up to and stopped next to Shilo. She nodded to him, and he returned the nod. Then, he casually walked to his seat and sat. Waiting for departure.

Greg looked around the bridge; he saw that all seats were filled. The mission was about to begin, finally. Next stop, they’ll pick up Marcus and his little ship and take him to near Romulan space and kick him out to play decoy so they can get through to infiltrate the Romulan Star Empire, complete a crazy mission, and get home in one piece.

The biggest unknown, will they survive?



CHAPTER 4-1

“Captain, we’re ready to depart the station,” Shilo said

“Excellent. Lieutenant Commander Steele, trade seats with me please, you have the bridge.”

They traded seats; Greg tapped a toggle, “Cochrane Station, This is Commodore Binotti. It is my pleasure to inform you that I put Commander Steele in command of the departure.”

The Admiral appeared on the screen and replied, “Scorpion, does that mean the departure will be standard per regulations?”

“Admiral,” Greg said, “You have met Commander Steele.”

The Admiral inhaled and dropped his head. “Crew of the USS Misfit, you are cleared to depart at your convenience, best speed, or whatever ‘HE’ decides. But, Commander Steele, please don’t hurt the station.” There was a pause.

A new voice, “USS Scorpion, I mean USS Misfit, you are cleared to depart on course 216 mark 35. All traffic is cleared for 4 lightyears.”

Rich responded, “Admiral, Control, thank you for the clearance. I hope 4 light-years is enough. Helm, take us out at whatever speed you feel like, whatever floats your boat, whatever tickles your fancy.” The comm was still open.

“Aye, Commander,” She said, “Retracting mooring, reverse thrusters, Z plus 4 kilometers.” The ship backed out of its slip, then went vertical before it halted its reverse direction. It passed all levels of Cochrane as it rose, straight up, for 4 kilometers above the station. She smiled a scary grin. “Cochrane Station, USS Scorpion.” She said, “Thanks for everything. USS Scorpion, the misfit collection of professionals, has cleared the dock and the station.”

The controller and the Admiral spoke together, “Godspeed Misfits.”

The helm operator grinned a little broader, “Full impulse. Now.” And they were gone. The vid was still connected.

“Binotti to the crew. We’re off!” then he smiled, “And Commander Steele has the con!”

Many calls came into the bridge requesting transfers a few moments later because Rich was currently in command.

Rich touched the arm of the chair. “Crew of the USS Scorpion, I want to take this moment to thank you all for your trust, loyalty, and confidence in me and share with you my thoughts on Klingon opera.”

Rich did not continue, but Greg stood and walked to the turbolift, “And with that, I’ll be in my quarters. It’s moving day.”

~~~~~

Cabins on a starship are not known for being spacious, but Greg insisted that each crew member had their own space, even if they shared a room. Therefore, roommates may share a room, but they each had their own space; their sleeping area with a desk and computer.

As you grow in rank, your cabin grows as well. This ship is not designed for children or spouses who are not a part of the crew. There are a couple crewmembers who are married and a couple who are living together. A few sets of roommates like it that way, and all of these are left alone.

The Captain, by default, has the largest quarters on the ship. The first and Second officers have the next and so on. The captain’s quarters are a large 2 bedroom apartment compared to most, but in Greg Binotti’s case, it is nearly identical to his apartment in San Francisco. By design! There are many meetings in his quarters, official business and social, and he needed the space to make both types of gatherings comfortable.

Greg’s quarters had a very comfortable living room with a holographic fire pit, a small kitchen, and a dining area when you walk

into the cabin. There is a hallway to the left of the kitchen. At the end of that hall is the master bedroom. The master bedroom also contains a lavatory and a closet. As you are lying in bed, to the right is a large exterior window facing the starboard docking port. This is the primary docking port used.

There is a room to the left as you approach the entrance to the sleeping area. It is the outer ship wall, containing a desk and a huge window. Across from the office is a small room used mainly for storage and extra clothing. Greg referred to it as the shed.

Now that Ramona is moving in, he cleaned up a lot of this room, and she has roughly half of it for her storage. Greg had another desk moved into his office, and they both can work in there as needed. Full system tie-in.

The bedroom, being twice the size of the office, has a bed measuring 2.2 by 2.2 meters. Greg was assured it was the most comfortable bed in the universe.

Clothes closet, well, Greg had a fourth of the space used, and he gave Ramona the rest. Another small cabinet was installed in the facilities for Ramona. The restroom already had a double sink. Across from the sink was a tub, and yes, large enough for two. The sonic shower, however, also had full water capability, as did all senior officers.

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“Set special channel, contact Marcus,” Greg said to the comm officer.

J’Kalel replied, “Aye sir, channel open.”

“Marcus, need a lift?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

“Put the ship in the shuttle bay, and let’s get moving.”

“Sure thing Captain.” Marcus moved his ship behind the USS Scorpion and slowly approached the open and awaiting shuttle bay.

“Captain Gibsonius, cut all power, and we will tractor you in.” Said the helm officer.

“Cutting power now. She’s all yours.”

The ship slipped into the bay, and the doors began to close. When they were about halfway shut, Marcus opened his cargo hatch and exited his ship. The atmospheric shield over the shuttle bay entrance was working perfectly.

As Marcus exited his shuttle, he was eating a ration pack. A dehydrated meal, add water, pull the tab, and the meal will cook itself in a minute or two. He finished it off as Commander Steele and a few crewmen entered.

Rich came to a stop, “Is that Beef Stroganoff?”

“Yes, commander, it is. I have 31 cases of these ration packs I need to unload.....I mean to sell to an individual.”

Rich smiled, “I may take a few. Excellent as a backup meal, or maybe on a covert operation.”

“Well, there are 31 unique meals as in 31 cases, with 18 meals per case. Carnivore, vegetarian, vegan, pescatarian, and yes, Vulcan and Klingon ration packs also.”

“We’ll talk later.” Rich winked and directed himself to the ship. “OK, what is needed?”

“Lieutenant Johnston knows all about it. He cleaned it all up and made it more efficient and a tad faster. I am quite happy with the result.”

“Then follow me to the Captain.”

Rich turned and walked toward the exit; the crewman went to the shuttle to put it to bed. It would be a few months before it needed to fly again. Marcus followed Rich into a turbolift, “Conference Room.” Rich said.

Greg was sitting in the conference room with Shilo and Larry, waiting for Marcus, who had the next puzzle piece. Rich walked in, followed by Marcus.

“Cap, here he is,” Rich said. Rich took a seat opposite Commander Ariel, who was on the Captain’s right, with Colonel

Lanning on his left. Marcus sat in a chair between Greg and Larry, by design. It was the only open seat at the moment.

“Speak!” Larry said.

“Captain, I was instructed to give this to you when we were alone. But, in case you are not aware, we are not alone.”

Greg simply put his hand out, and Marcus handed him the data cube. He felt a slight vibration as the data cube touched his hand, but otherwise, no outward sign the data cube did anything. Greg placed it in a slot on the table, and the display in front of him came to life.

Greg reviewed the data, and Larry and Shilo were able to see the screen as well. A few times, Larry pointed to areas, as did Shilo. Finally, after about 2 minutes, “Interesting. Is this your plan?”

“No. I have never seen it.”

“So, you had it in your possession for who knows how long and never looked at it?”

“Correct.”

“And why is that?” Larry asked.

“Mainly because it was not able to display until you touched it. DNA encoding or something. Now, mind you, I did plug it in in a feeble attempt to look at it; I will admit that, but it told me it would self-destruct if it was not disconnected in 5 seconds. So, since I was not sure if it was an explosion or the wiping of the data, I removed it and put it somewhere for safekeeping.”

Greg looked at Shilo, “OK, put this into a timeline and draw up a plan. That is what you are good at, so this is your project.” Next, Greg looked at Marcus, “What do you need other than a ride?”

CHAPTER 4-2

Greg was restless, not able to sleep. He tried not to disturb Ramona, but that was never going to happen. It has been a few weeks since they left Cochrane and this mission. Why is it under his skin? What is it?

“Can’t sleep?” She asked.

“No. I feel like there is something I’m missing, something I cannot see, and it is staring me right in the face.” He sat up on the edge of the bed. “Computer, lights at a minimum?”

The room took on a soft but eerie glow as he got out of bed and stood, “I am going to take a walk, clear my head.”

“Have fun. I’ll be right here holding down the fort.” She smiled, “Try not to wake me up when you get back.” She rolled over and pulled the blankets up snugly.

Greg got dressed in his uniform since he did not expect to get any sleep anyway. He exited his quarters and made a left.

He walked for maybe 15 minutes and decided to go into a crawlway. He rather enjoys crawling through the ship. However, he needs to test his sense of direction. He crawled for maybe 10 minutes, thinking he was a mouse looking for the cheese, and heard something ahead. Voices.

The closer he got, the louder it was, and he crawled as silently as he could. He remembered up ahead was a crawlway hub that contained deflector relays, and if someone was sabotaging those relays, it could be bad in many ways.

He stopped and listened, realizing three distinct voices, one male and two female, the SSD trio. He heard what they were saying, but it made no sense. They spoke like they were going to sacrifice themselves for the mission. All three of them agreed on this, and he sat there on his hands and knees, wishing he had gotten there a few minutes earlier.

“Regis, the one thing we need to ensure is that the ship gets home. We will need to be hidden until needed. Once the ship is in orbit, we can make our way to the surface and hide out. When they are about to depart, or if they are seen, we can make our presence known to divert their attention away from orbit.”

“Well,” said the new guy, “as the Klingons say, it is...or will be...a good day to die!”

Greg sat in the crawlway and listened to their plan for maybe 10 more minutes, but its meat was said before he arrived. The trio left and returned to whatever dark corner they were headed. He slowly made his way to the hub, and it was empty. Instead, there was a side crawlway he took that exited into engineering. A few minutes later, he pushed out the panel, and Juan was standing a foot away.

“HEY!” Juan yelled, “Someone call the exterminator. We have rats in the crawlways.” He smiled at the captain, “Never mind, it’s just the Captain.”

“Funny man,” Greg said as he stood up. “I’ll talk to you later.” He started walking out and turned to Juan. “Commander, you may want to replace that panel. It gives the engine room an untidy appearance.”

“Great idea, Captain.” Juan and Greg smiled at each other, and Greg walked into the corridor.

“Computer, what time is it?”

“The time is 0512.”

Greg headed to the Galley. His second favorite place to be alone on the ship. A close second to the holodeck with his program running. His program, which he commissioned and paid a pretty penny for, was a secluded mountain top hunting lodge during the winter. Stocked with types of food that are period-specific for the late 1800s. He has run the program twice on the ship but has not taken anyone to experience it with him. Once they are underway, he plans to bring Ramona for a couple of days, a vacation, or a honeymoon. He thought about getting Rich to the lodge once, maybe....

“O’Roury to Binotti.”

“Go ahead, Ramona.”

“Where are you?”

“Galley. After my stroll, I thought about some coffee. Join me.”

“Be right there!”

The room was empty now, and he sat at his favorite table facing the window to the universe. After a minute of staring out the viewport, he stood and got a refill, then returned to the table and sat on the other side, his back to the stars.

The Galley crew arrived, prepping for breakfast.

“Captain, I did not know you were here. Is there anything I can get you?” A crewman asked.

“No. Just coffee for the moment. Thank you for asking.”

The crewman nodded and returned to the kitchen. A moment later, Ramona entered and grabbed a cup of coffee. Walking to the table, she had a couple of donuts on a plate.

“OK, where did you find those?” Greg asked.

“Next to the coffee. Want one?”

“Actually, yes. The cruller, please.”

She handed it to him and was happy with the choice. She liked the chocolate-covered chocolate donuts with chocolate sprinkles. She also knew crullers were his favorite.

The galley crew milled around and did what they needed to do, ignoring them. Ramona got up and grabbed another cup of coffee and one for Greg, just as Shilo walk in.

“Commander. Good morning.”

“Good morning to you. I see the captain is in his usual spot. May I join you?” Shilo asked Ramona.

“Always.” Ramona smiled.

“I will get something and be there momentarily.”

Ramona sat next to Greg, “Shilo will be joining us, and I suspect the rest of your command staff will also. They seem to run like a flock?”

Greg smiled, “Well, we talk a lot. But you are welcomed to join us, you know?”

“I know, I feel out of place a little, and besides, I really have no need to be in that group. All I do is take care of moving things around. The sad part is, once we are underway, I kinda become redundant.”

“I can find you are part-time job once you are obsolete.”

“You are far from obsolete,” Shilo said as she approached the table. “As a matter of fact, I would like for you and your department to meet with me later. I have some thoughts on the matter.”

Ramona was taken by surprise, “Sure. So I can assemble my team say ... at 1300?”

“Perfect. Cargo Bay 1?” Shilo said as she sat across from her Captain.

Ramona replied, “Meet you there. 1pm it is.”

As Ramona left the galley, she had a smile on her face. She contacted her team and let them know they needed to meet with the First Officer at the 1pm meeting. Then she headed for her office.

Greg, after Ramona left, asked, “Shilo, what was that all about?”

“After we depart, the Logistics department will not be as busy, but they are well adapted to spacial orientation. So, I figured they may be a good addition to the team. Maybe they will see a pattern no one else does, possibly in the Romulan shipping and logistics schedules, and I figured that your poster child, Johnston, can lead the team. I figure they can meet once a week for a few hours or so to get their take on it, but it would give them something to do other than move things from one side of the room to the other.”

“Good thought. Meet with Ramona at noon first and get her take on it. Once she understands the necessity and is on board, her team will follow. Take Johnston to that meeting also.”

“Do you think a pre-meeting is needed?”

“I do. I think she will enjoy it too. But, it needs to be made clear this is your idea and not mine. You value her experience and expertise and the service to the ship her team will be adding to the mission. She also needs to understand that she is not in charge of the team or the project but a trainer or an advisor to Mr. Johnston. She is a great leader and valuable in her ability to teach. If you spin it like that, everyone wins. You will have a much easier time making it happen as you want than simply telling her and her team how it will be.”

“I see your point. Humans from Earth are very fragile.”

“In a way. But extremely stubborn. Circumventing that stubborn streak is not difficult, but it does take finesse.”

“Alright, Captain. I will ‘spin’ it as you say. Should I keep you posted on the results?”

“No, your weekly reports will be sufficient. However, if you have any questions regarding Earth natives, let me know. Mr. Steele can give you some enlightenment also to some extent, from the opposite polarity.” He smiled, and Shilo squinted slightly as if wondering what the captain meant by that comment, but she did not ask. “I shall be more than happy to enlighten you on how we operate or react.”

Shilo grinned, shook her head, and walked away. She did not say a word.

“Computer, time?” Greg said.

“The time is 0625.”

Greg said under his breath, “A few minutes and the gang will arrive.”

He saw Marcus enter the galley, grab some coffee, and walked to his table. "Captain, may I join you?"

"Please do," Greg replied. "I was getting up in a few minutes anyway. Need to get to the bridge."

"Captain, can we speak candidly?" Marcus looked around to appear covert. "It has come to my attention you are not all that fond of me."

Greg looked shocked and put his hand to his chest. "Moi?" He said in french. "I neither care for you or against you, Marcus. You are simply here and a tool for me to use to reach my goal, to complete the mission at hand."

"At least I know where I stand. Thank you for that. As to that, I have some thoughts."

"I'm sure you do. Let's hear them."

"When we part ways in a few months, I need for you to attack my ship. I will get away, but you will lose me."

"And who is going to believe that one?"

"Ah, but I have a secret weapon. Mini-torpedos. Not powerful, but small and in great numbers. One would barely be noticed, but 500 of them on a nacelle will take it out of commission for a day."

"You have mini-torpedos?"

"Not actually. I need to fabricate a launch system that can launch the little buggers, but alas, I will be fresh out of them after using them to get away from you."

Greg smiled, "Nice idea. Speak to Johnston and Martinez on that one."

"Great, my escape from the hands of the Federation, and Starfleet, is therefore assured." Marcus stood. "Good day, Captain. By the way, the coffee is rather weak on this ship."

“I agree!” Rich said as he walked to the table. “Marcus, try a Raktajino from the replicator. It is Klingon coffee.”

“I am familiar with it, Commander, and thank you for the tip.” Marcus walked off.

“Odd fellow!” Greg said. “Very odd. However, he is rather intelligent and creative.”

“Yes, he is.” Rich looked at his boss. “What did he say?”

“He needs for us to develop and install a mini torpedo launcher on his ship. It will fire 500 of the little things and all targeting a nacelle. Because they are very slow and no real threat alone, they will pass through the shields and hit a single nacelle. I expect it will damage a drive coil rendering the ship stagnant for a bit of time. We are to hit his ship with phaser fire as he gets away from his almost Federation captures.”

CHAPTER 4-3

“Captain, Marcus and his ship are ready to depart,” Shilo said.

“Open a secure channel.”

Greg heard a tone, “Marcus. The past few months have been unique, be safe, be well.”

“Captain, it has been a pleasure to be ferried by you and your crew. I hope to see you again to allow Commander Steele to regain some of his lost credits.” Rich shook his head. “Now, if you would so kindly drop to a lower warp, I shall make my escape from the clutches of Starfleet.”

“Understood. Scorpion out.”

The cargo ship slipped out of the shuttle bay and went below the Scorpion. “Ta ta,” Marcus said. His ship went to warp, and he was gone.

“Helm, all stop. Engineering, make it appear the port nacelle is damaged and you are repairing it. Weapons, 4 photon torpedoes with max yield, auto detonate at 4-second intervals progressing as if you were attempting to destroy a ship that was trying to escape. Fire when ready.” Greg paused a few moments as the torpedoes launched, traveled a distance, and exploded. “We’ll sit here till breakfast tomorrow, then resume our path.”

Several Aye’s could be heard.

The engineering crew upgraded a few of Marcus’ ship’s systems over the past few months, making it a warp 5, maybe 6, ship if he pushed it. If they upgrade it again, they may need to put in a new deck on the way home. It all looks like it was cobbled together by the pilot, who knows the system intimately if it needs repair. The ship’s warp signature does not appear to be as powerful as the ship itself, maybe warp 4, so he could be a bit covert. Shields were upgraded, and the mini-torpedo launcher was installed and connected to his console.

Marcus had plans for the little missiles, but sadly, it appears as though he used them all escaping from Starfleet as his story will be told. They were not warp-capable weapons, solid propellant, actually—concussive fuses and 22nd-century explosives. With their slow speed and lack of technology, they will pass through shields, and you got a single shot, so target the nacelle, pray they hit. If they do, 500 little explosions will take their nacelle offline for a day for repairs.

Marcus knew a Romulan weapons manufacturer who could make them, and he intended to have the system reloaded. It was a great idea, after all. But, unfortunately, there was no way he could ever make the launcher and install it, and the Scorpion crew did a marvelous job creating and installing it like he designed. Made to appear as though the launch tubes had carbon scoring from a launch. They also did an expert job on the plans for the missiles, and he hoped they function as well as they theoretically appeared to work.

“What is his current speed and trajectory?”

“Warp 4 and headed for the Neutral Zone, sir.”

“Good luck.” He said as he watched the blip that was Marcus slip out of sensor range.

Greg stood and walked to the engineering console, the long way. Finally, he walked past everyone on the bridge, nodding and smiling to each of them, and stopped at engineering.

Next to engineering was the new data safe. He knew it would come in handy, and if worse came to worse, he could have a transporter lock on it and beam it off the ship.

He had a few months to consider it.

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The USS Scorpion has been traveling at low warp and cloaked for several months. The tracking device on Marcus’ ship allowed the Scorpion to know where he was. He knew they put it there. This way, when he crossed the zone, they could coordinate the movement.

“Approaching the boundary, sir.”

That came from the helm officer of the moment, Colonel Lanning.

“Colonel Lanning. Slow to warp 1, change course to 358 mark 42.”

“Changing course to 358 mark 42 at warp 1.” He paused. “Boundary in 45 seconds.”

“Slow to  $\frac{3}{4}$  impulse. Set for silent running.”

The ship dropped out of warp, consoles and lights went out. A blue light on all walls in the vessel illuminated. Silent operation is in force—no EM transmission of any type.

“We are past the boundary,” Larry said.

“Good. Stay on this course and speed for 90-minutes, then increase to warp 1, an hour later warp 2. We’ll stay there till after breakfast and see if they spot us. If not, we may increase to warp 4 and get there in a couple of weeks. If not, at warp 2, it will be a couple of months.”

Greg stood and began walking to the turbolift, “Colonel Lanning, you have the con.”

“Aye, sir.” Larry stood and walked to the command chair, and another officer sat at the helm.

“Uh, Colonel Lanning. Is there any rotation you would like to repeat or do? You have completed your bridge training successfully.”

“Well, sir, I have been away for a bit. I would like a rotation in the Marines.” He smiled, “But, I have not had the chance to sit in with or as the Science Officer. That sounds interesting.”

“Noted, I will get you signed up to tail the Science Officer for a few weeks, and then maybe you can be a Marine for a while.”

“Thank you, sir. Always wanted to be a Marine.”

“Don’t thank me. I was asked to get you up to speed as a ship captain, the General has plans for you, and I think you will hate it at first but fall into loving it shortly after that.”

“Kinda vague....” Larry said.

“Thank you,” Greg said as he left the bridge grinning; Larry hated that.

Once the doors closed and carried the Captain away, Larry said, just loud enough for all to hear, “That man drives me nuts.”

The entire bridge crew responded in unison, “Yes, sir!”

“Would anyone like to tell me what that was all about?”

“My apologies, Colonel, but that information is compartmentalized to the rank of Commander and above.” But, of course, coming from a Vulcan made that all the funnier.

Larry started to laugh, loud. “This entire ship is filled with crazy people!”

“No, sir.” The Vulcan Ensign said, “We are misfits.”

Larry laughed all the harder. “Report?” He said, still half chuckling.

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“Approaching the R1 system.”

“Slow to ¼ impulse, take the impulse engine off-line and coast into orbit.”

“We’ll arrive in just under 2 hours.”

“When we get there, find the worst spot for EM radiation and park us there.”

“Aye, sir.”

Ramona walked up, handed Greg a cup of coffee.

“Thanks; how did you know I was thinking about that?”

“Just had a feeling.”

They had been in the same cabin for nearly a year now, a year since the mission started. It has been Greg’s favorite year ever.

“Captain, it appears there is something in the spot I intend to park.”

“Ah, so they know about this spot. OK, can we mimic the signal from that probe?”

It took a moment, “Sir, the signal changes every few seconds. We can mimic it, but it would be jibberish.”

“True. Is there something in orbit we can park near they would have no interest in or fly into?”

“Scanning.”

“Put up the bird's eye view on tactical.”

The planet appeared in the center of the screen, with all orbital platforms, satellites, and asteroids out to a million kilometers visible and identified.

“Sir, it seems there is an old orbital platform, no energy readings of any kind.”

“Size?”

“Large enough for the Scorpion to fit inside, sir.”

“Colonel Lanning, please join us on the bridge.”

Greg grinned. Larry walked onto the bridge and looked at him. “What’s up?” he said as he approached the chair.

“See that?” He pointed to the derelict station on the view screen.

“Cool!” He looked at Greg, “I guess you want it explored.”

“You guessed right. You will need a couple engineers, though.” He tapped his console. “Crewman Sarch and Johns, Lieutenant Johnston, report to transporter room 1 for an away mission. Take whatever you think you will need to evaluate an abandoned, derelict Romulan space station. Marines, condition blue. Commander Steele to transporter room 1, weapon up!”

“You do realize condition blue mobilizes the entire squad?” Larry asked him.

“I do. Have the transporter deposit 4 groups around the station. An engineer or Rich in each group. Let’s see if we can waste as little time as possible and see what this is.”

Larry winked at him, "...or was?"

"True. You have your orders, Marine."

"Aye Aye, Cap," Larry left the bridge.

A few minutes later, a cluster of minor orange blips appeared on the station, "Tactical display." He said, and the screen changed to a view from above.

"Lanning to Binotti."

"Go ahead."

"Transport complete, all is well. We got the lights on already; your crewman Sarch is pretty good."

"Give them all a chance to play. They earned it and need to have a little engineer-type fun. I sat and talked to Sarch and Johns in an access tube. Can you believe they wanted to explore a derelict ship?"

Sarch looked at Larry, "Cap, he's giving me the eye. I need to be nice to him."

"I think I know that look. Watch yourself."

"Will do."

"Excellent, you have an hour."

"Understood. Lanning out."

40 minutes later, "Johnston to Scorpion. Emergency transport home, now!"

The 4 teams were all transported back.

"Sir, shields just went up, at 135%."

"What?"

The station exploded, and the shields were only singed. Johnston and Lanning walked onto the bridge.

"Sir, my apology, I missed one of the booby traps. It eroded their version of the containment bottle, and the matter and antimatter

mixed freely. There was no way to stop it. I did manage to slow it a bit to minimize the explosion some.”

“My fault Greg, I was in command, and I let Johnston here have free reign. Told him to get the system running if possible.”

“Neither of you is to blame; it was rigged to do what it did. Now the question is did we get any information from it?”

“I grabbed a lot of these from a room that appeared to be a briefing room.” Johnston held up their version of a padd.

The link to the transporter room was still active, “Sir, this is Crewman Johns. Crewman Sarch and I managed to download their database.” Rich jumped in, “I found a weapons locker and grabbed a few things. We need to find a place we can test these out and not on the ship. Does not appear to have any settings except for on and off.”

“So not a total loss, and we managed to remove a hazard from space. OK then, I can accept that.” He turned to the Science station, “Has anyone taken note that the station exploded?”

“Yes, sir, a pair of smaller impulse ships are³ approaching. They have no weapons capability and one lifeform in each ship.”

“Helm, move us away in the best path to avoid detection. Navigator, find us a new place to park where no one will run into us.”

“Colonel, work with Commander Steele and find a place to run a test of those weapons. We need to know if they are defensive or offensive weapons or a type of Varon T.” He raised his voice, “Cloak and ship’s systems all working?”

“Yes, sir, no issues to report.”

“All away personnel, report to the briefing room in 30-minutes for a debriefing. Lieutenant Johnston will lead what he found, and Crewman Sarch and Johns will assist. Marines, I need a tactical assessment of the station when they complete their briefing. Whatever you remember.” He paused a moment. “Nothing is too trivial. Senior staff is invited to this briefing, Binotti out.”

He turned to Larry and Michael, “You still here?”

A pair of Aye Sirs and they left.

Greg looked around the bridge. His eyes stopped on the Science Station, "Lieutenant, is there an uninhabited planet with an atmosphere nearby where we can test those weapons?"

"Yes, sir, 4.6 lightyears away. No designation, but it is a moon of a gas giant. Radiation is minimal if we stay on the dark planetary side of the planet. Breathable atmosphere, more or less. Temperature is steady at 14 degrees."

"14C, a bit chilly. Will the landing point be in the local sun?"

"Yes, sir. Full daylight."

"Define breathable."

"Well, sir, there are several volcanoes, so the aroma will be unique, most likely a sulfur smell. Oxygen content at the last probe 8 years ago was 12%. I recommend a triox injection before transport to help minimize common O2 effects." He paused and grinned, "There are animals on the surface, mean ones. Perhaps targeting one as a test could answer questions."

"You are recommending killing an innocent animal to test the effect of a weapon? Not a great idea." Greg stood, "Send this information, and your recommendation, to Commander Steele as he will be briefing about this. I hate using an innocent creature in this way. But in the event the away team is attacked, they will need to defend themselves. Besides, if Commander Steele takes your suggestion, he may find himself hosting another bar-b-que."

He walked to the turbolift, "Lieutenant JG Kane, you have the bridge. Get us to that planet to run this test."

Lt JG Kane, the youngest and lowest ranking on the bridge at the moment, looked shocked. "Aye, sir." She stood and walked to the con. She just looked at it.

Lieutenant Commander T'Mar said. "Lieutenant Kane, please take your station."

She sat uncomfortably. Took a deep breath, "Report." All stations reported. "Helm, change course to the coordinates Commander T'Mar will give you. To get us there in one hour, what speed should we set?"

“Warp 2.5 will get us there in an hour and fifteen minutes.”

“Set course, speed is warp 3, engage when ready.”

A moment later, “Course set, speed is warp 3, here we go.”

Greg looked at the small screen on the desk in his quarters and saw the changes. ETA is 52 minutes. Nice, he thought.

Greg comm chirped. “Binotti here.”

“Captain, on course, the ship is nominal. ETA is 51 minutes.”

“Perfect. Carry on. Binotti out.”

Now to get to the briefing and hear it all out.

CHAPTER 4-4

“Captain, Marcus just crossed over the internal neutral zone border,” Shilo said from her place on the bridge. “According to sensors, a warbird stopped him, boarded, inspected, and departed.”

A few minutes passed, “He is back on the road.” She looked at him, “Sir, there is a lot of activity in that area. 8 warbirds are moving in his general direction. They seem to be following him. He is heading directly for Romulus.” A pause, “We are clear for 18 lightyears.”

“Set speed to warp one. Alter course by 18 degrees off-nominal every 13 seconds, left then right. Extreme passive sensitivity on all sensors, all active sensors off. All running lights off. Any and all EM transmissions off. Cloak at maximum. Let’s stay as quiet as possible.”

Several Aye’s could be heard.

Rich interjected, “No burping!”

Greg just gave him a look. Shilo gave him a look. Rich looked around the bridge; everyone was giving him a look.

“Good gravy, people. Relax.” Rich said to everyone. “They really can’t hear you if you burp.” Then, he grinned a devilish grin, “But if you fa...” He stopped in mid-word as he looked at the Captain, who had a look on his face that could melt deuterium.

Everyone smiled at him. He was joking. They knew it.

Thankfully, Shilo interrupted, “Captain, Marcus’ tails appear to be veering off. All different directions, and they went to cloak.

Greg stood and looked around the bridge, “Ensign Marlo, you have the bridge. Shilo, Rich, with me.” Greg looked up, “Computer, where is Colonel Lanning?”

“Colonel Lanning is in the Galley.”

“Shall we?” Greg said, and the top trio departed.

Ensign Marlo left life support and made his way to the command chair. He looked at it a moment, then sat. T’Pell walked over to him.

“Customarily, the first thing you say when you sit is report. This gives you an overall status of the ship at that moment. Then, your goal is to try not to run into a star.”

Timidly, “Report?”

“Pardon me, Ensign Marlo, was that a request that may or may not be fulfilled, or was that a request, an order, from the command chair,” T’Pell said to him with complete visibility from all on the bridge.

Ensign Marlo resettled into the chair, “REPORT?”

T’Pel commented, “Much better. It will get easier with time.” From around the bridge, reports flowed.

After everyone gave their reports, T’Pell added. Ensign, and all of you, please remember your role when sitting in that seat is to not remember or know everything. If it were, you could be alone on the bridge. Your part is to know what questions, or more precisely which member of the bridge, to ask a specific question to get your answer, and make the decision that keeps this ship and crew the safest.”

Ensign Marlo asked, “Lieutenant, thank you. That is very helpful. Could you mention that to the Captain, please? He seems to go out of his way to put us in danger.”

T’Pell, smiling ever so slightly, replied, “Well, the Captain is different.”

Everyone nodded and returned to their duties.

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The trio exited the lift just outside the Galley, and as they entered the room, the room stood at attention.

“As you were.” And they all sat back down. “Who called the room to attention?”

Sarge stood up, “I did, sir. Sorry about that. Reflex and all. You know how it is when a high faluting officer walks in a room, people get anxious.”

Larry just about started laughing.

“Sarge, since you created this nightmare, I have a hazardous mission for you, but....” He grinned, “You get to pick your partner in crime.”

“Anyone?” Sarge asked with a renewed interest.

“Yes, anyone.” He smiled at Sarge, “We’ll talk later, but I do think you will appreciate this assignment. Think covert, think low tech, think no energy weapons. Originally, this assignment was going to be assigned to Commander’s Steele and Dotar, but she stayed home, and I need someone to go on this assignment with a will stronger than this hull.”

“Sounds like fun Cap, got the perfect person too.”

“OK,” Greg turned to the rest of the group, “That’s all the disruption I needed to make. Do you mind if we sat in on the briefing?”

Larry said, “Well, it means we can’t talk about you but sure, join in on the fun.”

This was the weekly marine stand-up meeting. Always a fun time.

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The chime to Greg's quarters beeped. “Enter.”

Lieutenant Colonel Lanning, Commander Ariel, and Lieutenant Commander Steele entered. A minute later, Lieutenant Major Regis and Colonel Larrimore arrived.

“Good, all here, now put on your parkas and follow me.” He asked them each to bring a parka to wear. Time for some intel information.

Over the past few months, he had been in the program alone and reviewed all of the data on the padd several times, just about memorizing it in the process.

They walked the short walk, maybe ten minutes, to get to the holodeck, and once in the holodeck, they hike in the blizzard to the cabin; Greg opened the door and entered. “Computer. A large pot of coffee, six cups.”

He walked to the kitchen, picked up the wooden tray, and brought it to the living room.

“Computer, increase seating to accommodate current guests.”

Several chairs and a sofa appeared. Everyone sat and had some coffee. “Computer, one hot tea.” It materialized on the table next to Shilo like it knew she was the only one without a hot beverage.

“I brought you all here because this is the only place in the known universe where this can be read.” He handed the padd to Shilo, who was seated next to him.

“Good grief!” She exclaimed.

“You wanna share with the class?” Larry said.

“You may not like it, Colonel,” Shilo said.

Shilo handed the padd to Larry; he reviewed it and looked at Greg, then Shilo. Finally, he looked at Rich, but at this moment in time, Rich was clueless.

Shilo handed the padd back to Greg, “Larry, it seems that Admiral Ramon, and Marine 1, Admiral Fowler, has seen fit to give you a ship. Before we left Earth space, I was tasked with getting you up to speed on being a Captain. They need a Marine Captain to captain a Marine Starship.”

“I’m getting a ship?” Larry smiled from ear to ear. “What kind?”

Greg looked at Shilo, he nodded, and she took over the conversation. “Well, Colonel, your ship is an exact duplicate of this ship. That is the reason you were chosen for this mission. As are all

of the Marines under your command. Also, they have all been working closely with someone on the Starfleet crew to learn to do the job because soon, they will be the primary. Fleet has chosen Lieutenant Bratelsheimer to be your XO, which is why she has been working with Shilo.”

“Ah, to learn how to wrangle the Captain!” Rich said.

Shilo, Larry, and Greg looked at him. He simply shrugged his shoulders.

Greg spoke again, “Once the mission is completed, you will be promoted to full Colonel and take command of the ship.”

“Does it have a name?”

“USS Capum.”

“Capum, what’s that?”

Rich added, “If I am not mistaken, it is Latin for whiskey.”

“How did you know that?” Greg asked.

“I grew up with a religious family, and as such went to a catholic high school where the Latin language was mandatory.”

Shilo asked, “And Commander, whiskey came up in the curriculum?”

“Not exactly, but teens will be teens. So we needed to know the good words and the good words we found in dictionaries, searches on the net, and several other places.”

“Interesting.” It was silent a moment, and Greg asked, “Would anyone care for some beef stew?”

All hands went up.

“Computer, one large pot of perfectly cooked Tyrone Bellamie beef stew.”

The pot appeared on the central table with bowls, spoons, and jalapeno cornbread.

Rich asked, “OK, who is Tyrone Bellamie?”

“Long story, I’ll tell you while we eat.”

Regis scooped out stew for everyone and handed them their cowls and spoons; Rich passed out the cornbread.

“What is cornbread?” Shilo asked.

Larrimore asked, “You have been on Earth for all those years and never had cornbread? Before you taste it, do you like spicy hot?”

“I do,” Shilo replied.

“Give it a taste,” Larry said.

Shilo tasted it, and her eyes opened really wide. “This is forlin. Uh, hard to explain, but this is forlin. The exact reason we make it is to crumble in stews and what you may call chili.” She smiled and said, “Computer, softened butter, and a knife, please.”

She split the cornbread and spread the butter on both sides, then dropped the cornbread butter side down into the stew and began mashing it into the stew. Everyone simply watched. She looked up at them, all of them.

Rich grabbed the butter, did the same, and passed it around the circle a moment later. Shilo grinned from ear to ear.

“OK, let me tell you about Tyrone Bellamie. After we eat, we can have a briefing on the data. Once we each review it, that is, but I suspect that our SSD operatives already are aware of this data?”

“We are, but we were not aware of the fact that you were aware of it. You have an efficient intel network, Captain.” Rowan said to the group, Larrimore just ate her stew.

Greg changed the subject, “Tyrone.... Great name.”

CHAPTER 4-5

Breakfast was over, and Rich jumped up on the table.

“OK, let’s see.” When he stepped onto the tabletop, the room got quiet. “Today is day 390. We see ahead of us is an area of intense ionizing radiation. We think this is where it appears the Romulans destroyed our friends’ little cargo ship, but there is no debris in the area from what we can see; that and we are still getting the new tracking signal, and it is moving at just under warp 6, good job on his engines Mr. Johnston. We should be in orbit of the target planet in a few days, before the next briefing, so it goes without saying, the next few weeks or months will be the greatest danger we have all been through.”

Rich paused a moment, “Let’s see. Marines, once in the area, each cutter will need to be manned and ready to deploy in 30-seconds. We will have a Marine, Top, in command of security. He will deploy all security personnel, Marine and Starfleet, as he sees fit to preserve the Scorpion and its crew.”

Top gave him a thumbs up.

“Now, Sarge, you will take the hunk of junk into the planet and crash land, making it as impossible as possible for them to reassemble the ship. Then, of course, they will take you away and question you.”

“Crashland. That I can do!” Sarge replied.

“The Captain and the Colonel promised a bottle of bourbon for every bruise inflicted by the Romulans.”

“We did?” Greg and Larry replied together. Then, they looked at each other a moment, “OK!”

Rich continued, “Commander Bratelshumer has perfected the implanted water thingys...” He looked at her, “What are they called?”

She smiled, and she and Dr. Piper said together, “The Water Thingy’s!”

Rich continued, “Good to know.” He shook his head and smiled. “Marines will be two teams, 2 Starfleet and 2 Marines in each group sent to the surface in a covert but semi-quiet mission. Your role is to create havoc, plant explosives, and get back to the ship alive. They are to plant explosives that will be used if and when we need a diversion. In the next day or so, you will get the thingy installed also. Hell, I may have a thingy installed too just because.”

Top stood, “Commander Steele, may I suggest 4 teams, a Marine and a Starfleet type in each. Two people are easier to hide than four.”

“Works for me. Pick the teams and get them trained up.” Greg said.

Sarge raised his hand.

Rich said, “Sarge?”

“Well, Commander, the Captain said I can pick anyone to accompany me on this one-way suicide mission. So I made my choice.”

Rich grinned, Larry and Greg already knew, but in the briefing with Sarge, he asked that he be able to inform him. “Who is the lucky co-pilot?”

Sarge stood, came to attention, “Sir. I select Lieutenant Commander Richard Steele.”

Rich froze and got an unbelievable grin on his face. Then, he came to attention and said, “Sarge, I accept the position of co-pilot on your one-way suicide mission.”

Sarge replied, “Cool!”

“He looked at Larry, “I need to redo my will. I also need to manufacture a few new weapons. Klingon, Romulan, and Andorian.” He looked at Greg, “Think we can find an iron-rich asteroid soon?” Greg nodded. “OK, That’s it for me, but Commander Ariel asked to

“speak about something.” Rich hopped off the table and walked back to his seat.

“Thank you, commander. I need for the following people to stand in front of this table.” She looked at Greg, who nodded.

“Lieutenant Commander Steele, Lieutenant Commander O’Roury, Lieutenant Commander T’Pell, First Lieutenant Bratelshumer.” She paused a moment, “Lieutenant Colonel Lanning, please join me.”

Larry walked to the front while speaking, “I have been sitting on this for a long time, and until today I am not permitted to speak of it.” Larry was talking to the crew. “Marines, it appears that our illustrious Captain, and his notorious First Officer, has had plans for me.... us actually, as in ALL of the Marines on this ship.” He walked over to the Shilo.

“The reason you have all been training with a Starfleet counterpart to learn the systems is not, as they said, to backfill positions, but rather because, as I was just informed by a vid from Marine 1 that upon our return, I am being promoted to full bird and given the command of a starship. The sister ship to this one and the Nightwing, actually.”

He paused a moment as everyone applauded, “And all of you are coming with me.” They all cheered. He waited a moment and put up a hand. “I was informed that I can pick my bridge crew and give them the rank they needed for the position if they deserved it. Since the next lower marine rank on the ship is that of a 1st lieutenant, and us marines would not want to confuse the Starfleet crew by making Rhonda here a Captain, I am authorized to promote her to Major and make her my second in command. In reality, Marine 1 picked her as my XO, my First Officer.” The room roared.

Once it quieted again, “Once we are home, in a year or so, she will be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and become my first officer on the ship.”

“I realize this is somewhat unconventional, but then this is an unconventional crew, on an unconventional ship, in the middle of an unconventional mission.”

Rich added, “With an unconventional Captain!” A standing ovation.

Shilo approached Larry and handed him a box. He opened it as Shilo returned to her seat.

“Rhonda, on this ship, it seems as though promotions happen a lot, but in reality, most of those on this ship fell through the proverbial cracks, got stuck in a dead job, passed over for promotion, or maybe even booted out of the academy for a stupid infraction. Nonetheless, we all fell through the cracks because we were not living up to our full potential. Most of this crew, with few exceptions, were labeled at one time or another as a misfit.” He looked at Rhonda, “You have been working with Commander Ariel in the past few months, learning what it means to be a First Officer. I have been stuck following the captain around for months... Uh, I mean, I have had the honor of working with and learning from a Great Captain.”

Greg said just loud enough for all to hear, “Nice save!”

“Thanks, Cap.” He turned to Rhonda, “First Lieutenant Rhonda Bratelshumer, it is my honor to promote you to the rank of Major.”

Rhonda’s sister joined Larry.

Larry picked up the gold oak leaf, a throwback to old Earth. They were not usually worn, except on the full dress uniform, but at promotions, they were used. “These gold oak leaves were mine. The Cap here removed them and gave me the silver ones when we started this little boat ride. Now, I’m giving them to you. Do not dishonor them. They were my fathers, and now they are yours.”

Colonel Lanning handed the insignia to Briana, who pinned it onto her collar. The gold oak leaf looked out of place but good at the same time. Then, taking half a step back, Larry rendered a perfect salute. She saluted back, and the room applauded. After he saluted her, Briana saluted her, then they hugged.

Rhonda, Briana, and Larry returned to their seats, and Shilo took the center.

“Commander Steele,” She looked at her Captain, “Are we sure this is a good idea?”

“NO, but we have no choice,” Greg said.

“OK. For some reason, Lieutenant Commander Richard Steele, the Captain, and I, and Starfleet feel you should be promoted to the rank of full Commander.” She drooped her head a bit, “May the gods help us.” Everyone laughed a little, and Rich nodded his head emphatically.

She pinned the pip on his collar. She did the same for T’Pell, but before she did, she looked at Greg.

“Excuse me, Captain, THIS promotion seems right.” She smiled, “Actually, this promotion seems logical!” T’Pell actually cracked a very slight smile at that little joke. Shilo saw it and smiled back at her.

With Rich and T’Pell back in their seats, only Shilo and Ramona were standing upfront.

“Lieutenant Commander Ramona O’Roury. Starfleet has seen fit to promote you, at my request, to the rank of full Commander.”

She pinned the pip in place and looked at Greg. “OK, who is she going to report to, me!” She grinned, “Her husband. I already have a gaggle of Commanders I need to wrangle.”

Greg stood, “Let’s see. You take Rich, T’Pell, Juan, and Ramona, and I’ll take Larry. Wait, I can take Rich too.”

“Still too much. It would be so much easier if there was another Captain on board. Then she can report to the new Captain.”

“How about if the new Captain reported to a Commodore along with a new Commander. Then she can report to you, and you can have T’Pell also.”

“Lieutenant Colonel Lanning, can you come up here please?” Greg said as he and Shilo stood next to each other.

Larry approached the group and snapped to attention, “Wow, I think he is ready for this?” Shilo said.

“So do I, but 8 months as a light bird, do you think he is ready for the weight of the full bird?”

Shilo smiled and said, “As long he does not give us the bird.” The room laughed.

Typically promotions are a solemn occasion, but they have always been a time of fun and banter on the Scorpion. Even the promoted Marines got into it during their promotions.

Greg walked up to Larry and removed the silver oak leaf. He looked at Shilo. “Do we really need to do this?”

Shilo raised her hand above her head and snapped her fingers, and Rich delivered a padd to her.

“Now that is one well-trained full Commander,” Greg said.

Shilo appeared as though she was reviewing a file, “Uh Greg, according to this, it already happened. Yesterday. So yes, I guess we gotta.”

“That means he was out of uniform for a whole day?” Sarge said from the back.

“Uh Sarge, you and Top come up here a moment.” They made their way to the front of the room. They stood next to the left of Commander Ariel and to the Captain’s right. Shilo and Greg were standing next to each other.

“Well, Marines, what punishment would he give one of his Marines who was out of uniform?”

Sarge and Top conferred a moment silently, “Polishing the brass on the ship.”

“We have no brass,” Greg said, then rubbed his chin in a devious-looking manner. “There are several rather dull metal structures on the top of the saucer section. How do you think he would do in an EVA at warp.”

“Be fun to find out!” Sarge said.

“Yaaaa, it would, but I think the inside of the suit would need a good cleaning after that.” Top added.

“Cap,” Top said, “What say we forget about it and just promote him?”

“If you insist.” Greg pulled a bird from a hidden pocket.

Shilo started, “ATTENTION TO ORDERS:” The entire room stood at attention.

“THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS, ACTING UPON THE RECOMMENDATION OF THE SECRETARY OF THE STARFLEET MARINES, HAS PLACED SPECIAL TRUST AND CONFIDENCE IN THE LOYALTY, INTEGRITY, AND ABILITIES OF LIEUTENANT COLONEL LAURENCE LANNING AND HAS WAVED THE THREE YEAR TIME IN GRADE REQUIREMENT FOR PROMOTION. THEREFORE, BECAUSE OF THESE SPECIAL QUALITIES AND HIS DEMONSTRATED POTENTIAL TO SERVE IN THE HIGHER GRADE, LIEUTENANT COLONEL LAURENCE LANNING IS PROMOTED TO THE GRADE OF COLONEL, STARFLEET MARINES, EFFECTIVE THIS DATE, BY ORDER OF THE SECRETARY OF THE STARFLEET MARINES.”

While she was reading the orders, Greg pinned the bird on Larry’s collar. Then, he turned to Sarge and winked.

Sarge yelled, “HAND SALUTE!” The entire room saluted the new Colonel. “TU.”

Greg said, “As you were.” And the room sat.

“Got anything you want to say?” He asked Larry.

He nodded, “Well, thank you all.” He looked at Sarge and Top, “Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Dumber, take your seats, please.”

Sarge looked at Top as they walked back to their seats, “Which of us is Dumb and which is Dumber.”

“Not sure. We may need to think about that a few minutes.”

“Those two, oh man.....” Larry started, and everyone else sat. This was his show.

“Not quite sure how this got through Fleet since there is a 3-year minimum Time in Grade at light bird before you can even be

considered for Colonel, but I suspect it has something to do with Commodore blank check over here.” He walked over and shook hands with Greg. “At the moment, it really doesn’t mean that much, but in a few months, it will.”

“Are you kidding me?” Greg said, “since you can now captain a starship, I can take a vacation!”

Everyone laughed.

“Besides, you have a new someone who is going to report to you,” Greg added.

“Ramona?” Larry asked.

Shilo said, “Not exactly.” She stood and joined them. “Since you are now reporting to the Commodore here, he has his hands full, so you get Commander Steele.”

Everyone laughed. Rich made his way to the group and hugged Larry, “DAD!”

Larry looked at Shilo, “Wanna trade?”

She shook her head. “OK, that leaves Juan. So who’s the lucky one to get Juan?” Shilo asked.

Juan added, “Hey, I’m right here!” They ignored him.

“Well, since someone has to, I’ll take him. That means you get Piper.”

Shilo rubbed her head a moment. “Uh Greg, do you realize we divided the command structure of this ship by gender.”

“We did not. Think it will work?”

“I do, actually. The women can out command the men easily. And since Rhonda is going to be my shadow, we got the marines behind us too.”

“Wait, I’m a Marine!” Larry said.

“No, you sir are a Colonel. Marines are the ones who do the work.” Rich said.

All of the Marines in the room stood and cheered for Rich. When it quieted down, “Commander Ariel, it sounds suspiciously like you are issuing a challenge?” Rich said.

Rhonda added, “Commander.” Then, she said to Shilo, “Are they actually willing to lose to us in games?”

“Sounds like it, Major.” She fake counted, “OK, four of us and four of you. What would you say to four games, one for each of us? We will pick two, and you can pick two.”

Without thinking, Rich responded, “Agreed.” Then, he looked at Larry and Greg, “Right?” The crew laughed.

Larry said, “OK by me.”

Juan and Piper joined them in the front. “Good, my handicap just arrived,” Greg said.

“Hey!” Juan said.

“We got one too,” Shilo said. Thumbing to Piper.

“Hang on there,” Piper said.

“I say they take the first game against each other,” Shilo said.

“I like that!” Greg replied.

The teams were set. Shilo, Ramona, T’Pell, and Rhonda versus Greg, Rich, Larry, and Juan.

“Tomorrow at breakfast, we will set up the events.”

“Larry, you may need to rethink that first officer thing,” Greg said.

“Yeah.....” Larry responded. “TOP, you keep score, be the referee.”

“Sir, Yes, Sir!” Top replied.

“Oh shit, this new rank sux,” Larry said.

“We can revert it?” Shilo said.

Larry just shook his head

Greg quieted the room, "There are a few more promotions, crewmembers mostly, no other officers. This is the last round of promotions till we get home. We dropped a buoy in the nebula, and it was timed to send this promotion list right now. So it makes it appear as though we are in that area of space."

A moment later, "Bridge to Captain."

"Go ahead."

"We just received the promotion list by subspace, sir."

"Excellent, thank you," Greg replied. "Well, even Starfleet Headquarters and the Marines know what we just did." Greg looked at Rhonda, "Do you think you can keep him in line?"

"Yes, sir, I can. I have learned well from Commander Ariel."

Greg pretended to be shocked and looked at Larry, "Did she mean...."

Larry responded, "I think she did."

"You sure you want her as a first officer?"

A few seconds went by, "I'm thinking." Then, a moment later, he said, "You know. I thought if Shilo can rein you in, and she taught Rhonda how that works, then I or rather we should be good to go!"

Greg was about to speak, but Rich interjected, "Hey! They think they are going to win."

Greg got into a sneaky demeanor, "SShhhh..... They think they got us pegged. We need to do something so out of the ordinary they would never guess it."

Larry looked at Greg, "You mean like acting our age or rank?"

"No, no, no, nothing so far off like that. We'll talk later."

"Gocha," Larry said. Juan nodded. Rich winked.

Greg turned to the ladies, "Very well. In the morning, we will plan the Scorpion games."

Everyone left and went about their business.

Later that evening, Shilo dropped by the Captain's quarters with Ramona before they all turned in for the night, and the conversation was more like a plan to unite the crew using the games. Greg and Ramona agreed with Shilo that the crew was like a family, but there needed to be competition to not let the crewmembers stagnate over the next few months. Several crew members have been known not to socialize, staying in their quarters alone when not at their duty station. This is never a good thing. The games are a way to get the crew to socialize and blow off pent-up energy and some steam.

They devised this 'games' match and decided on the games themselves. Shilo and Ramona will direct the games towards their two, and Greg will ensure they are tied. The guys will suggest phaser range and combat skills. The women will present fencing and chess. Finally, Sarge will recommend a zero-gravity relay for the rest of the crew, five teams of four with 5 heats, with the winning teams advancing and the ultimate victor receiving something special as a prize.

Now that all the games are determined, they need to make it appear that it was the idea of the others.

"Good night, Commander, Captain. Let's resume this in the morning after breakfast." Shilo left, and Ramona and Greg went into their bedroom. It will be a busy day tomorrow.

"WOW! I get to sleep with a full Commander tonight!" Greg said.

"Uh-huh," Ramona said as she and Greg walked hand in hand to the bedroom. Smiling.

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Breakfast finished. It was a typical meal for everyone. There was a difference though, Shilo had her own table right next to Greg's table. It gave the appearance of a division of the crew, male versus female. Shilo mentioned in her plan that the men should win the contests suggested by the women and vice versa.

Since the cargo bay can easily be made into a zero-gravity area, the relay will occur there. The course will be created by the twins to make it fair.

The contest was set for the day after tomorrow. The events were fencing, precision phaser, chess, and Commander Steele's exercise program, basically a battle simulator.

They drew names out of a hat, literally. Sarge and Top pulled the names, and then they drew out the event. Sarge and Top put it on a large board so no one could see what they were writing. When they turned it around, everyone was amazed.

Ramona is going against Colonel Lanning. The event is chess.

Shilo is going against Juan in the combat simulator.

Greg is going against Rhonda on the phaser range. 50 shots each, 20 using the rifle, 20 using the standard phaser, and 10 using the teeny tiny personal phaser.

Rich is going against T'Pell in fencing.

Crewmembers were making wagers of duty shifts and different things. No credits were permitted to be used.

Greg wagered with Shilo. One day of zero duty. Not a peep from the bridge.

## CHAPTER 4-6

The Scorpion games went well. Shilo and Juan tied in their scoring; both made it to level 11 before the simulator ended their time. Level 11 is where Commander Steele starts his exercise routine.

It is close-quarter combat with no weapons against 4 opponents. Juan and Shilo performed amazingly, and all of the displays on the ship carried their battles, which were completed separately. The computer kept score, and they tied.

The tiebreaker the computer decided upon was a punching contest against a stationary opponent. They were to approach, punch the bag in the middle, and the computer determines speed, force, and capability. Then, the values were calculated to a score.

Juan defeated Shilo in the battle simulator, tiebreaker. The score came to 301 for Juan and 300 for Shilo.

T’Pell defeated Rich in fencing. It seems that in her secondary education, she had fencing as a minor degree or something. She blew him away, but, in his defense, he held his own. She was simply better.

Ramona defeated Larry in 4 of seven matches over two days. The two are pretty evenly matched in chess, and Greg was impressed by his wife’s and friend's abilities.

Ramona admitted she simply found a flaw in his logic, exploited it during the last match, and won.

Greg defeated Rhonda at the phaser range. The total score was calculated, and Greg won by only 1 point. Rhonda is a perfect shot, and everyone was impressed at their Captain's speed, accuracy, and ability. The phaser, phaser rifle, and personal phaser scores were both tied, and both perfect. Neither of them missed a shot. The computer determined the tiebreaker to be an old Earth sniper rifle and 1 kilometer into a target. They needed to take wind, gravity into consideration when taking their shot. They had three attempts to practice and one shot to score. Greg hit the extreme out edge of the



10-ring, and Rhonda hit the extreme inner edge of the 9-ring. Their shots landed millimeters from each other.

Tomorrow the zero-G relay will take place. More people signed up for that than they thought, so it will take place over a few weeks. The Marines are in the games also. Top and Sarge will judge. They love this, watching and judging; that, and the fact 90% of the entrants crash into walls, obstacles, each other, and there seems to be no end to the laughter.

This is what Greg and Shilo intended. The cargo bay, which is now empty and unused, will remain a zero-G course for those playing and having fun after the games.

The overall winner was a team of 4, 2 Marines, and 2 Starfleet. All four enlisted, a man and a woman from each branch. They had the best time, the most minor deductions, and zero collisions.

The 8 ranking officers on the ship conferred and determined the best reward was to give them whatever they asked for. So, at the next 7-day briefing, they asked.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the Scorpion.” Rich began, “The Captain, I mean Captain-ish people on the ship have decided to see what the winners of the relay would like as a prize. So please stand and tell us what would suffice.”

The four winners were in the middle of the room, at the same table. They all stood.

“Commander, we discussed this at great length last night after we were informed of the decision. Unfortunately, we could not arrive at a single prize, but rather each had a reward in mind. Therefore, with the Captain and Colonel’s permission, we would each like our own individual prize.”

“Not exactly our intention for this, but please continue,” Greg said.

“Well, sir, over the past four months, the four of us have all become friends.” Chief Warrant Officer Rosetti was speaking. She

looked at her teammates, “My personal reward would be dinner for the four of us, 1800 hours a few days from now.”

Crewman Sarch spoke, “Captain, my reward is no duty for 24 hours for the four of us before the dinner.

Corporal Bessette went next, “Sir,” he said, “My reward is no duty for the four of us 24 hours after the dinner.”

Master Sergeant Bills spoke last. “Sir, my reward is that the senior staff cook and serve the dinner.”

The crew applauded, hooped, cheered.

Greg and Larry hopped up on the table together. Larry looked at Greg. “Can you cook?”

“Does burning water count?” Greg laughed. “Senior staff.” They all stood, “Do you agree?”

The 8 men and women all agreed.

Larry said, “Good, we have our waiters, busboys, and sous chefs. All we need is someone who can cook.”

Baker stood, “Captain, I mean Captains-ish people, I would be willing to guide you through cooking a fantastic meal for them, if for no other reason than to watch. I think it would be fun.” Donald looked towards the foursome, “Any food allergies or aversions?” They all said no.

“Good. I believe the Captain was holding the last of the Prime Rib, enough for four, for a special occasion. I believe this qualifies.” He looked at Greg, who nodded in agreement. “Don’t worry, sir, I can substitute an outstanding meatloaf for your donation.”

“I can hardly wait,” Greg said; Donald smiled. He knew Greg liked meatloaf a lot. He and the Captain had spoken a few days ago, and the Prime Rib was up for the right occasion. This was definitely the right occasion. “Make it meatloaf sandwiches, and I’ll be happy!”

“You got it, sir.”

“Donald, coordinate with Commander, uh.....” He grinned, “Make that Major Bratelsheimer on whatever you need to make this dinner party happen. It’s about time she does some first officer stuff.”

Larry added, “Fuckin A.” then he covered his mouth, realizing he said it aloud. Rich started laughing.

Shilo stood, “Attention!” Then, she waited for a heartbeat, “Dismissed.”

The room emptied, and Donald went to the four winners and started to figure out a menu. He was joined by Rhonda.

“Major, sorry to pull you into this.” Crewman Sarch said.

“Not to worry,” Rhonda said to him, “I have already learned a lot from those idiots at the front,” They all glanced at the collection in the front of the room, “If my penance is to be your hostess, so be it. Besides, I am interested in finding out if the Colonel can cook. If not, at least I ain’t gotta eat it!” She smiled at them all.

Donald spoke, “Major, never fear, Donald’s here!” He grinned at her, “Let’s see. You got the prime rib. What is a favorite side dish for each of you?”

“Great idea!” Rhonda said.

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The blizzard was raging as it always does when he entered the holodeck. He made his way to the cabin and entered. He walked to the kitchen and placed a small bag on the rustic table. As he passed the stove, he tapped the coffee pot, ensuring there was coffee in it and hot.

He stopped and looked at the one-room cabin. “I have no place for visitors.” He said out loud.

“Computer, expand the cabin, making 10 smaller rooms with period-specific beds, but very comfortable. Put a name on each door. For example, commander O’Roury and I are in one room, which is double the size of the other rooms. Make it a large bed. The other rooms should be labeled for Commander Ariel, Commander Steele, Commander Martinez, Commander Piper, Lieutenant Commander

Bratelshumer, Major Bratelshumer, and lastly, a room equal to mine for Colonel Lanning. Label the last 2 as Guest #1 and Guest #2.”

The cabin disappeared a moment and reset itself.

The rooms appeared. “Complete.”

“Duplicate this padd in each room, on the pillow.”

“Complete.”

“Computer. Save this configuration as modification 2.”

“Saved.”

“Allow only those mentioned a moment ago to run modification 2.”

“Complete. Those mentioned earlier, who has a door assigned, may run modification 2 of this program.”

“Also, allow Colonel Larrimore and Major Regis to run this program; they may have access to the guest rooms.”

“Complete.”

Greg sat on the chair and realized he wanted to sit outside.

“Computer, reset environment to early spring, add comfortable deck furniture. Also, add appropriate woodland animals, birds, etc.... But no bees or mosquitos.”

A moment later, “Complete.”

Greg grabbed the padd, a mug of coffee, and a pastry he brought with him. As he left the cabin, he expected the traditional blizzard. It was beautiful outside. About 22C with a beautiful sky, clear, and a lovely sunset about to happen.

He found the deck chair and sat. Very comfy. He sipped his coffee and ate the pastry. He watched a few minutes and saw a family of deer about 50 meters away. Then, on the other side of the small lake, he saw bears. “I did not realize there was a lake there.”

Since he had only been there in a blizzard, the lake was never seen. This program opened with a blizzard. You could not see the cabin easily but needed to walk 45 degrees to the right to get there.

He did not know that the first time he entered and walked around in the snow for more than an hour. He called for the exit and contacted the creator, who told him about the location. Once he knew that, he found it easily.

He was also informed other surprises may appear at random times.

His pastry eaten, he started reading the padd and sipped his coffee. As he sat there, he heard barking and looked up. A large dog, a Husky, walked towards him. The dog walked up to the cabin, up the few stairs, and laid down next to him on the porch.

“Well, hello there, fella.” Greg looked at his collar and saw his name, Vanya. “Vanya,” Greg said, and the dog looked up at him. “So, where did you come from?”

Sitting in the chair, he could pet Vanya, who was lying on the deck next to him. He was quite a large animal, and the chair was somewhat low. So they sat there for twenty minutes or so in peace, watching the animals, birds, critters.

Vanya raised his head and made a quiet bark. Greg looked in that direction and saw Rich walking towards the cabin.

“Hello!” He yelled.

Vanya looked at Greg, “Go say hello.”

Vanya stood and walked to Rich. Rich stopped and stooped down, giving Vanya a chance to get to know him.

The two of them made it to the porch, and Rich sat in the chair next to Greg.

“Never seen this place in anything but a blizzard.” He looked around, “Wow, a lake! How’s the fishing?”

“Hadn’t occurred to me yet, Computer, are there fish in that lake?”

“Affirmative. There are a wide variety of sea creatures in the lake.” There was a pause, and Rich was starting to ask about fishing rods, but the computer continued.

“The fishing protocol was activated when you requested the information. The dock and boats have been added, the fishing shack was added. To get there, follow the path in front of the structure to the lake.”

Rich asked, “Computer, are there any other hidden protocols or surprises in this program that have not been initiated.”

“Affirmative.”

“Please identify,” Rich said.

“Unable to comply. There is a programmatic lock in place.”

“Figures,” Rich said. “What’s up with the dog?”

“No clue. He appeared when I sat out here a while ago.”

“Odd name, Vanya. I wonder where that’s from?” Rich said into the air, “Computer, identify the origin of the dog’s name, Vanya.”

“Vanya. Originally from a play by Anton Chekov, Uncle Vanya. Anton Chekov was a Russian Playwright in the late 1800s, and the play Uncle Vanya was first published in 1898.”

“Interesting, I may look into the play someday. But for now, Vanya is my buddy.” Greg said, and Vanya hopped up and put his front paws on him. Greg rubbed and scratched, and Vanya loved it. He looked at Rich, “So, why have you invaded my serenity?”

Rich looked like he was shocked, “It seemed like the right thing to do.”

“I have something you need to read.”

Greg stood and walked into the cabin; Rich and Vanya followed.

“Coffee?”

Rich nodded. Vanya laid in front of the fire on the rug.

Greg grabbed a cup off the shelf and filled it with coffee, adding to his cup also. Rich was seated at the rather sizeable ten-seat table. Greg took a seat across from him, placing his coffee in front of him.

Greg handed him the padd. He began reading it.

Greg sat there for a few minutes and sipped his coffee quietly.

“Computer, add a bright blue cookie jar to the counter,” It appeared. “Place the words on the jar Vanya’s Treats.” The computer added the words. “Fill the jar with treats appropriate for a dog.”

Greg stood and walked to the jar; as he lifted the lid, the lid and the jar clinked, glass on glass sound. Vanya sat up straight.

Greg took a handful of what was in there, biscuits and jerky, and went to Vanya. Vanya did not budge. A well-trained dog, to say the least. So Greg gave him a biscuit, and he loved it.

He put a few in front of him, and they were quickly devoured. Greg looked around and did not see a water bowl, “Computer, put a water bowl in an out-of-the-way place for the dog.”

A moment later, the bowl appeared near the kitchen but in a place where people would not be walking.

Rich looked up. “This is what you want me to do?”

“It is. You and Sarge.”

“I could be killed, you know.”

“I know, but I believe you and Sarge will be fine. We really need this to happen.”

Rich thought a moment. “Sure, what the hell. If nothing else, I should make it to Sto'Vo'Kor on the express barge of the dead.

“Does Sarge know he’ll have a co-pilot?”

“Actually, he picked you, remember! He told me the best chance of survival would be for the two of you to not act like you are friends, work like you are in a business arrangement, but really dislike each other. When questioned, tell lies and half-truths about the other. Just before they are about to kill you, speed up and get home after you each plant a few of those little computer blobs.”

“Sounds like fun. Glad I grabbed a few of the more interesting weapons from the space station you destroyed.” He

looked at Greg, who did not say a word just looked at him, “More or less anyway.”

“Let’s go check out the lake.” Greg said, “But first, Sarge, please join us on holodeck 1. We’ll be at the lake.”

“Affirmative. On my way, Cap.” Sarge said.

They stood, and Greg picked up the padd and stuffed it in a pocket. The three of them walked out of the cabin; Rich, Greg, and Vanya. “Commander Bratelshumer, please join us on Holodeck 1. We will be near the lake.”

“Understood, Captain, on my way.” She replied.

“OK, let’s fish!” Rich said, “Why Briana?”

“I need her to explain the water implant to both of you. Then, both of you will have it implanted and learn to use it. Practice makes perfect.”

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Shilo sat in the center seat since the Captain was taking a few days off. Colonel Lanning and her were alternating 12 on, 12 off as Commanding Officer.

Larry entered the bridge and walked up to Shilo.

“You need me to relieve you? I’m here!”

“Great. I need a snack, and my baby needs some attention.”

“I figured.” Larry handed her a piece of chocolate cake and a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

“That may not be appropriate for consumption on the bridge Colonel.”

“What. A little snack? No one sees anything.” She looked around, and no one was looking at her.

An ensign said, “Commander, seriously, is anything on this ship standard Starfleet?”

Larry laughed, “Nope!”

She accepted the snack, and it was terrific.



Larry walked over to her usual seat, but before he sat, “Colonel, let’s switch seats.”

Larry had the con. Shilo ate her snack, and they talked about the day.

Alarms went off.

Larry said over the alarms, “REPORT!”

“Four warbirds are heading towards us at high warp.”

“Slow to Warp one, veer port 45 degrees. Let’s see if they follow.”

They veered off to the left of their course, and the warbirds approached.

“They just passed us by. So we are in the clear again.”

Shilo looked at him, “Good maneuver. I guess you learned a lot from the Captain.”

“I had no choice.” He smiled at her.

“Thanks for the snack. I’ll head to my cabin. See you in 12 hours.

“Binotti to Ariel.”

“How may I serve you, Captain?”

“I realize you just came off shift, and that Marine is in command, but can you please join us in Holodeck 1. We will meet you near the lake.”

“Yes, sir, be right there, and that Marine just gave you a look.”

“Good, he’ll be here at the lake in 12 hours.” Greg paused, “Bring Juan and Johnston with you also. They have some work to do in the next couple of weeks.

“We will all be right there, Ariel out.”

She looked at Larry, “What lake?”

He shrugged and said, “No clue, at least no clue for the next 12 hours. Have fun.”

Shilo left the bridge and headed for the Holodeck. As the doors closed, “Commander Martinez and Lieutenant Johnston. Meet outside of holodeck 1.”

“On our way.” They both said.

Shilo arrived at the holodeck, and Johnston was already there; Juan arrived a moment later.

“What’s this about, Commander?” Juan asked.

“No idea. The Captain asked me to bring the two of you into the holodeck, and we are supposed to go to the lake?”

“What lake?” Juan asked.

“You will know when I do, shall we?” Shilo said and walked towards the door. As it opened, the scene was stupendous.

“Not what I expected,” Juan said.

“Same here.”

They entered the holodeck and made their way to the lake.

## CHAPTER 4-7

“Silent mode.” Captain Binotti said from his seat on the bridge. The lights dimmed a bit and blue lights illuminated throughout the ship to let all know they were in a time of minimized EM transmission.

Rich walked over to the Captain, “I’ll head down to the shuttle bay. If we play this right, the probe we sent should be here in a few hours. Meaning when we leave the shuttle bay and our cloak fails, it will appear we had a poor cloaking device. They installed one in the shuttle that was found on a Klingon Scout ship drifting empty in space. At least that’s their story.

“Captain, long-range sensors report a heavy Romulan presence in orbit of the target planet.”

“How heavy?” Shilo asked.

“Quite.” Commander T’Pell reported. “14 warbirds, 8 scouts, orbital defense platforms, and a variety of small fighter craft.”

Rich said, “That’s heavy.” Rich turned to leave the bridge, “Later.”

“Any indication they see us?”

“No, sir.”

“OK. Parking orbit over the southern pole. No engines, thrusters only. You remember how to do that.”

“Well, sir, been flying in a straight line for more than a year, but I think I remember.” The helm officer said.

The sound of the engines died out, and the bridge got strangely silent. No one spoke, just watched the screen.

The ship approached the planet and dipped into a parking orbit over the southern pole.

“Captain, there is a satellite at the pole. However, it appears to be dormant.” T’Pel added, “There is also a possibility the device activates sporadically to make it appear to be offline.”

“My thoughts also, Commander.” Greg thought a moment. Helm, find a parking spot a thousand kilometers off the satellite, straight off the planet. Maybe they will think it is an echo, or perhaps they will not see us.”

The ship approached and slowed, eventually stopping above the device. “Now we sit and do absolutely nothing for 24 hours. After that, if they see an echo, they may investigate. If they do nothing for a day, we should be in the clear, and since this is not on a normal approach vector, no one should run into us. So, passive monitors at full, keep an eye on that satellite.”

Larry entered the bridge as Greg stood, “Colonel Lanning, you have the con.”

Larry shook his head, “If I didn’t just appear, who would you have given it to?”

“Not certain; usually, it’s the first person I see as I stand up.” Greg winked, “Congratulations, First Person.”

“Passed Rich; he’s headed to the shuttle, as is Sarge. I hope all that goes well.”

“Me too. But they have as much training as they can. I hope the holodeck simulation of where they will be taken is accurate. That is a priority. They each have three blobs to place. As long as they get at minimum one placed, we should be fine. If they get it placed, Starfleet will know in mere minutes. They are monitoring that channel.” Greg turned to the lift, “Gotta run, want to bid the tourists a fond farewell.”

“Give them my regards,” Larry said.

Greg traveled in the lift, and a minute later, the doors opened, and he exited a few meters from the shuttle bay. As he approached the bay, the doors opened, and he walked to the shuttle.

Sarge was dressed in dirty khaki pants, very loose-fitting, with many pockets and the legs tucked into his boots. He had a pair of

boots that went halfway up his calf and were tan but lighter in color than the pants. His shirt, or rather shirts, were various tan or sand tones. He wore a floppy, wide-brimmed hat. The first couple layers were collarless, but the top was a tan plaid with a prominent collar. In each collar tab, there was a water capsule he can bite if need be. Implanted in his left side was the injector for the water. He and Rich have gotten used to its use over the past few months, and to inject himself with the water, it needed to be held for a second and a half. Left to leave.

In the exact location on the right is the return, and as the left, you need to hold it for a spell. Briana calculated that the amount of water necessary to transition in or out was less than one drop, meaning the small container implanted will provide about 250 transitions. They settled on that number because of the physical size of the water bladder.

Rich has the exact same water dispenser, but they needed to make a modification because of him. There needed to be two presses on either side of the ribcage to enter or leave the timeframe. Rich is a side sleeper, and sometimes during the night, he activated the left side. He was freaked out when his alarm did not go off, but it did not answer when he queried the computer. He ran into the hallway and saw everyone frozen, then realized what had happened.

It took the medical experts a day to find a solution, and once installed, Rich no longer slept twelve hours in a matter of moments.

Rich was wearing a ragged attire of assembled clothing. Klingon pants and boots, Romulan commander's tunic, Federation undershirt. He had a jacket that he found in a colony several years ago. It was unique, a one-off design. It was black and very comfortable in either hot or cold environments.

They were ready for the mission. To crashland, get arrested, get beat up, plant the blobs, and get home.

A month ago, they found a moon to test various things they were using on this mission, including a small bomb made by Michael and the twins. It was a small ball, the size of a marble. Perfect for a diversion, but not devastating.

Rich had it in his left heel. To plant it, he would speed up, go plant the device, return and take the antidote. Then, in the mayhem, they could disappear.

The shuttle departed, and as it did, they approached the planet from a different angle, ensuring the crash would leave them where they needed to be. The transporter on the shuttle was a jury-rigged Klingon version from several versions ago. It would alert the Romulans that a Klingon transporter has cycled, which is what they wanted.

About 3 hours later, the ship crashed into the planet, just outside the city in the desert. The transporter cycle dropped them about 100 meters from the entrance to the security area they needed to infiltrate. Everyone saw the ship crash.

As the transporter made them people again, they were arrested, and all of them, Human and Romulan, watched as the ship crash.

Sarge looked at Rich, "Good job, son."

"Thanks."

A Romulan Commander asked, "Good job, of what?"

"We were not able to slow down, and we were headed for the city. Bobby here managed to get the thrusters to fire just long enough to not crash into the houses. Sorry about burning all those little plants, though."

"Take them. Bring them to the security level for questioning."

"Yes, Commander." A centurion said.

They escorted them into the facility, and Rich found the perfect place for the mini bomb, lots of noise, no damage.

It took a few minutes to get there, and they were ushered to a cell, and the force field was activated. As the Romulan pressed the activation for the field, before he actually touched it, Rich accelerated. He left and planted the bomb, knowing it would detonate in about 15 minutes. He made his way back to the cell and stood where he was

next to Sarge. Sarge knew what he did since he was looking at Rich and noticed him shimmer.

They sat on the bunk next to each other. Ten minutes past and no one did anything with them. Rich was removed from the cell and brought to an interrogation room.

“Why are you here?” The Commander asked. She was quite pretty.

“To be honest, you brought us here.”

“No, why are you on this planet.”

“OH, sorry. We are being chased by Klingons. It seems they did not care for our style of consumerism all that much. They are a touch upset.”

“What did you steal from them, “ She asked.

Rich smiled, “This.” He held up a Klingon data module.

“And what is that?”

“The location, shield frequency, and mission of every Klingon ship in this area. Cloaked or uncloaked.”

Her eyes got wide. “May I see that?”

“In a moment, first, I need your promise we will be defended against the Klingon assault force trailing us. They should be here by now.”

She tapped a keypad, “We have nothing on sensors.”

“A cloaked ship that can enter the atmosphere undetected, with five combat warriors wearing personal cloaks. You will never see them coming.”

“Personal cloaks, no such thing.”

“Really. Just because you don’t have them does not mean they do not exist. If they get in this facility, we are dead. They will burn us to atoms and not think twice about it.”

“How can we defend against an invisible enemy?”

“That’s the problem, you can’t, and they know it.”

The Commander became agitated and tapped on the keypad. The place went into lockdown. A minute later, the tiny bomb went off. It shook the room they were in. Dust from the ceiling fell on them.

Rich looked at her, “They’re here.”

Her eyes looked scared but at the same time apprehensive at the story. She did not fully believe him, but at the same time, it was hard to dismiss the events that were transpiring.

Rich tapped his left side, and he left the timeframe. He walked into the hallway and killed a guard, taking his weapon and firing it at the door to his interrogation room with the commander and the Centurian still inside. He returned to the room, sat back in his seat, as he was a moment ago, and returned to the timeframe.

As he did, there was a commotion in the hall, the door was blown off its frame, and the Commander looked shocked.

Rich stood and yelled, “NOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

A moment later, he was gone. It appeared to the Romulans as if he was disintegrated, as was the data cube he showed the Commander. She was pretty upset.

Once he transitioned, he slashed the Commander on the arm with his Mek’leth, gave her a shove towards the wall, then stabbed the Centurian in the shoulder. He needed it to appear as if invisible enemies were attacking. This way, they would not be looking for them anywhere.

He casually walked to the cell with Sarge, opened the cell, and entered, pressing the toggle on his side to put the water in his system. A minute or so later, Sarge joined him, and they proceeded to plant all six of the blobs on primary computer interfaces, including one on the computer of the Commander, in her office.

Secure in the fact they completed their mission, they left the facility. They grabbed a few souvenirs and called for transport to the ship using the computer interface once they made it to the street.

When they materialized on the ship, they simply headed for the bridge where their Captain was waiting to hear from them. The



transporter operator was shocked the system was going back into standby. She did, however, report to the bridge.

They both took the antidote and appeared standing in front of the Captain and the Colonel.

“Bridge, transporter room. The Commander and Sarge have returned.”

“I can see that, thank you.” He looked at the new arrivals, “Well?” Greg asked.

“Complete success. Give it a try.”

Greg nodded to T’Pel, and she activated the link. “Fully operational. Starfleet will have the connection in a few minutes at this distance.

“Rich, Sarge. Go take a shower and relax. See you at breakfast.”

“Sure thing Cap.”

“That is a job well done.” But then, Greg thought a moment, “Any bruises?”

“Only one each. Happened as we were escaping.”

Larry said, “I thought cell damage causes death?”

“In those first transitioned, yes. We have been playing with this for almost a year. Our bodies are used to it, so no problems with little bruises.”

“Gocha!” Larry said.

Greg looked at Larry, “You pay yours, and I’ll pay mine.”

Larry nodded, “Sure thing Cap.” Sarge and Larry nodded to each other.

“Any requests?” Greg asked.

“Something unique would be nice,” Sarge said.

“I have a bottle of Blood Wine, 2309, given to me by the wife of the Chancellor herself, and told to only give it to you if you did something truly remarkable. So both of you drop by medical and visit

with both doctors, take a shower, change into something comfortable and meet us in my cabin.” Greg looked at Larry, “And what are you giving to Sarge.”

“Actually, I know for a fact that Sarge here is partial to tequila. I have a bottle of Casa Dragones Joven I have been holding since we left Earth.”

Sarge said, “Had that once. You’re right. It’s pretty good.”

Sarge and Rich turned to leave. Sarge stopped, “Oh, Colonel, please remember the limes and salt.” He winked at his CO, who just smiled back.

Larry and Greg looked at each other. Then, finally, Greg said, “Let’s head to my cabin.”

They headed to the turbolift, “My quarters.” Greg said, and the doors closed. When they reopened, Larry went left, and Greg went straight ahead. He walked over to a large cabinet and removed a bottle. Larry buzzed the door, “Enter.”

“The chancellor’s wife told me it must be served at exactly 2 degrees.” He walked over to the replicator, “Computer, how can I make the liquid in this bottle 2 degrees Celcius quickly?”

A box appeared in the replicator, “Place the bottle in the cooling unit for 5 minutes.”

He opened it, and the cold escaped. He laid the bottle in the box, then carried the box to the coffee table near the couches.

Larry sat his bottle next to the box, “Computer, one ice bucket.” It appeared, and Larry picked it up, carried it to the coffee table, and shoved the bottle into the bucket of ice.

Greg asked, “What kind of music do you like?”

“Well, soft jazz mostly, but I do enjoy some of the harder rock stuff. Oh, I found a favorite group when I was researching the archives for a paper in the Academy. They were called the Police. I thought it was a unique name for a nice band.”

Greg smiled at him, “Let’s see. De Do Do Do De Da Da Da Is all I want to say to you.”

“Nice! I see you know them too?”

“Actually, I came across them during a night shift when I was monitoring the sensors that were watching the neutral zone. I have a wide variety of musical tastes, but soft jazz is my go-to. It relaxes me.” He paused, “Computer, play some soft jazz.” The room was filled with quiet music.

Ramona walked in, “I’m not really here. Changing and going to some 20<sup>th</sup>-century concert with Briana and Piper.”

“Who?” Greg asked.

“What?” She said.

“What musical group are you going to listen to?”

“No clue. We’ll be in Madison Square Garden in June of 2008, I think. The last concert in their tour, Piper said.”

Larry and Greg looked at each other; Larry said, “The Police?”

“Greg added, “The B-52’s are the opening act!”

Ramona said, “The Who?”

“No,” Greg said, “Not the Who, the Police. That’s the musical group you are going to see. One of my favorites, actually.”

“Oh, great. If I like it, we can go see it together sometime.”

Larry said, “Roxanne.”

Greg said, “Every Breath You Take.”

“What?” Ramona said.

“Just a few of their songs. You said this is Pipers program.”

“Yep. Bought it just before we left, she said. She’s run it several times and loves it. Got Briana into it also.” She disappeared into the back to change.

“Binotti to bridge.”

“Bratelshumer here, sir.”

“Who left you in command?”

“Commander Ariel, sir. Something about an adult in the center seat, I really did not understand what she said.”

“Colonel, she needs some form of action taken against her.”

“I agree, Captain. At the first opportunity, I will put a commendation in her record for her honesty.”

She started laughing, “You called sir?”

“Yes. Yes, I did. Any movement out there?”

“No, sir. I would say it was all quiet, but it is actually exactly the same as the day we arrived. They are sifting through the wreckage of the ship and focusing on the northern pole.”

“Klingons prefer to use the northern pole to hide. Tradition or something.” The chime rang. “Enter.” Sarge and Rich walked in and sat on the chairs.

“Major, set all sensors to maximum, passive only. No active sensors. Monitor all channels for any inkling they found or think they found us.”

“Yes, sir. I mentioned that to the bridge crew when the commander left.”

“Damn Larry, she may turn out to be a good First Officer for you. All she needs to do now is learn how to make you do what she needs for you to do.”

“I have been trained in that form of art, sir.”

Larry busted out laughing, “She told you.”

“No, she told us. Carry on, Major. Binotti out.”

Rich asked, “So, what’s first. Blood Wine or Tequila?”

Ramona walked out of the room changed into civilian clothing from a few centuries ago. Rich handed them all for a couple of fingers of Tequila. Ramona walked past them and took hold of Greg’s glass, and downed it in one gulp.

“Holy crap, that is good!”

Larry added, “That, Commander big gulp, was about 50 credits of the most expensive tequila on Earth.”

She handed Rich the glass, who refilled it and gave it to Greg. “Worth every credit!” She headed out the door.

Rich held up his glass, “To alcohol.”

The toast was made.

## CHAPTER 4-8

Piper and Briana were waiting outside the holodeck as Ramona approached.

“Commander, I have never heard your first name,” Ramona asked.

“Piper, that’s it. Hated my first name as a kid, so when I got old enough, I had it removed. Now, just plain Piper.”

“OK, gotta hear that story. What on Earth was your name?” Ramona asked. Briana looked intently interested also.

“Not sure if there is enough alcohol on this ship to make me divulge that classified information, ladies. Now, shall we head to the greatest concert in history?”

They stepped towards the door, and it opened. The sounds, the smells, the smoke made them all look like kids experiencing something brand new.

The holodeck sound, the massive number of people, the crowds, the music playing spilled over into the hall where they were standing. As they entered the holodeck, the doors closed behind them, immersing them entirely into the experience. Then, as the doors closed, it went completely silent in the hall.

~~~~~

Greg was in his quarters with Larry. Sarge and Rich left 30-minutes ago. Greg poured the last of the tequila into their glasses, then stood and put the bottle into the replicator to recycle, where it joined the bottle of 2309 blood wine they emptied early in the evening.

They sat there for about 3 hours and talked about many things, including where they want to go and what they want to do in their future.

Rich has the aspiration to be the commanding officer of a starship. Not like the Scorpion, but something smaller, faster, and with teeth.

On the other hand, Sarge mentioned he would like to be an officer, so tomorrow, or more accurately later today, Larry will look into that possibility.

They sipped on the remainder of the tequila as Ramona returned to the room. As she entered, she was singing a song by the B-52s, Love Shack. Larry and Greg smiled at the amount of fun and entertainment she had at the concert.

As she passed Greg, she grabbed his glass and finished the tequila. Larry offered her his last bit of tequila, and she did the same. Then, without saying a word to them, she walked to her bedroom, still singing.

Larry said as she disappeared in the hall, "Well, I guess I can leave now."

"I guess I need to make sure she is OK and be certain she is tucked in. She looks as though she needs to get some needed rest."

"Uh-huh..." Larry said, "Talk to you in the morning, Cap. Breakfast?"

"Sure thing. Make it 0530, no, 0545. We can call it sleeping in. We can talk about Sarge. Consider him a promotion to Warrant Officer or butter bar or something. It could be a good first step but talk to Top and Rhonda about it before doing anything. Two unique points of view is a good thing."

"Like Rich and Shilo?"

"Exactly."

"Good night." And he walked out the door. As he went into the hall, he tapped his communicator, "Top, Rhonda, you still awake?"

"Yes, sir," They both replied.

"Can you please meet me in my cabin? Need to bend your ear."

“Sure thing Colonel. Be there shortly.” Both said.

Greg turned the lights off and headed to the bedroom. It was past midnight, and he was actually tired.

He entered the bedroom, and Ramona was still singing. Then, finally, she stopped singing and looked at him, “Welcome to my Love Shack Baby!”

Greg grinned.

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“This has been the most boring week of my Starfleet career,” Greg said, sitting in the center seat on the bridge of a well-armed and powerful starship.

“You? How do you think I feel?” Rich said, referring to his adopted Klingon culture.

“OK, I think we are about ready for phase 2 of the mission.” Captain Binotti said. He touched a button on his chair, “Colonel Larrimore, please join us on the bridge.”

After a couple of minutes, Larrimore, Regis, and the other guy, as Greg calls him, entered the bridge.

“What’s up, Greg?” Colonel Larrimore asked.

“You three have some super-secret mission you wanted to do; now is a great time to do it.”

“We do,” Regis said.

“Can you tell me what it is?”

“No.” Regis smiled at it, “With it being a super-secret thing and all.” Lieutenant J’Kael chuckled, then cleared his throat.

“Is there anything you need?” Greg asked.

“Nope. We have our shuttle in your bay. So, we will just take that.”

“In the bay?” Rich asked.

“Attached to the ceiling, out of the way.” The other guy said, “It’s a super-secret thing, remember.”



Shilo added, "You three are very unique. But we expect you to be on the return trip home. No stupid stunts, please."

Regis looked at her, "What are you referring to, Commander."

"Oh, nothing. Just that you do not need to sacrifice yourselves as we have nearly all bases covered. So, today may not be a good day to die."

They all looked at Greg, who stared back at them completely emotionless. They know that they know, but they need to be back on the ship before it leaves.

"Affirmative, Commodore. We will return in 24 hours or less. If something goes wrong, we have the water available to us."

"Good. Safe travels."

They left the bridge. Rich looked at Shilo, then at Greg, "Those three bug me!"

Every single person on the bridge nodded in agreement.

"See if we can see their ship," Greg said.

Rich said, "I scanned the bay when they mentioned it, nothing."

T'Pell added, "Captain, I scan the bay twice each shift. With the addition of the grenades in the bay, I felt it prudent to monitor activity. I have not discovered any point of interest to date."

"And if she can't find anything, does it really exist?" Rich said. He winked at T'Pell.

T'Pell made no outward sign she noticed.

"Captain," Shilo said, "A Romulan transporter beam just activated in the shuttle bay." Then, she paused, "Motion, but no ship is visible."

"I suspect they transported onto their shuttle and just departed. Is there any way we can follow them?" Greg said.

"Nope."

“Oh well. Good luck to them,” Greg said to no one in particular. He paused a moment to look at the viewscreen, “Show me tactically, the entire planet, view from the southern pole.”

The viewscreen changed to the birds-eye view used during a battle. The Scorpion was in the center of the planet on the screen. The southern pole was below the Scorpion. At various points around the planet, there were minor blips that moved at multiple speeds.

“Define those small blips,” Greg asked.

“Well, Cap, those are a series of 100 microsensors, about the size of a ping pong ball, so little baby satellites essentially. But, nevertheless, they are maintaining communication with each other and with the ground. So I would guess they are more focused on major cities and facilities than on the south pole where there is nothing, except for the listening post and us.”

“So, a sensor net.” He thought a moment, “How can we disable them all and make it look natural?”

There was talk on the bridge about this, and J’Kael spoke up over the base discussions.

“Captain, I may have a suggestion,” J’Kael said.

Greg turned his chair towards him, “Shoot!”

He stood and walked closer to the Captain, “Disabling all of those buggers may be possible, but why should we even think about it. Perhaps we infect them with a program that does not take them offline, but rather makes each and every one of them send an alert.”

“Damn boy, you’re devious!” Rich said.

“Thank you, Commander!” He smiled at Rich.

“Is that possible?” Shilo asked.

T’Pel added to the conversation, “We see that when an object approaches the device, it transmits an unencrypted alert on a specific frequency, and the surrounding devices then focus their scanners on that area of space. So if we were to transmit a massive alert message and it hit all of the devices simultaneously, telling them to focus at the

northern pole, the Romulans would not be searching the Southern Polar region of the planet for anything.”

“I take that as a yes,” Greg said, smiling at T’Pel.

“Affirmative, sir.” She said.

“Set it up and make it ready at the press of a button. Shilo, you have the bridge. I need to check on something.”

He stood and left the bridge. The doors to the lift closed, and he said, “Engineering.” It moved down.

When the doors opened again, he was in a corridor outside of engineering. As he approached, the doors opened, and he walked in. Walked past Juan and directly up to Johnston.

“Your little toys,” he said. “How small can you make them?”

Johnston thought for a minute, “Well, sir, I think I can make it about the size of a data cube. Not a lot of power, but it will work. Call it a mini-boom.”

“OK,” Greg grinned at him. “I need 100 of them ready, and they need to ‘A’ be detonated remotely and ‘B’ able to be deployed simultaneously through the transporter to 100 points in the orbit of this planet.”

“Wow, sir, play fair.” Johnston grinned, Greg looked at him.

“What?” His CO asked.

“Well. I was just speculating. The listening post on the southern pole has the fanciest transporter I have ever scanned. It can easily transport 50 of these mini’s, and the Scorpion can do the other 50 easily. Since the transporters operate on different frequencies, there is no need to sync the beams.” He smiled, “If only we had a covert Marine detachment who trains for this kind of thing daily.”

“Son, you’ve been hanging around Commander Steele too much. Great idea.” Greg tapped his communications badge, “Binotti to Lanning. I got a great idea for the Marines.”

“What that Cap?” Larry said.

“What say we attack and take over a Romulan listening post?”

Larry was silent for a minute, then he heard Top, "I had no idea he drank when on duty."

Larry said, "Uh Cap, you know that's against the rules, right."

"Not if you are all dressed like Romulans. It will create confusion, disorder, chaos, completely destroy trust and faith. Talk about fun!" He tapped his comm again, "Binotti to T'Pel."

"Yes, Captain."

"As passively as possible, scan the southern listening post and find out everything about it you can. There is a briefing in the Galley in 60 minutes." He tapped his comm, "Binotti out."

Looking at Johnston, "How long will you need? What do you need? Who can operate the Romulan and the Scorpion's transporters to ensure this happens completely covertly."

"Let's see, Me, the twins, Major Bratelshumer, Chief Wills."

"Why the major?"

"She is a wiz with radio. And I had a thought, use a remote detonator in the megahertz range. But, of course, no one uses that frequency anymore. The Chief is a transporter genius."

"Who's better between the two of you?" Greg asked, expecting him to say he was.

"Our skills and abilities are equal, sir."

"Nice. See to it." Greg turned and left engineering. He smacked Juan on the back as he passed him.

"Hi Greg, what are you doing down here?"

Without stopping, "Slumming."

Out the door, in the corridor, "Computer, time?"

"The time is 17:12."

"Good, 5:12, time to get this show on the road." Greg headed for the bridge.

As he exited the turbolift on the bridge level, "REPORT!"

“We are in a stable parking orbit centered above the southern pole.”

“100 mini-satellites are orbiting the planet waiting to alert the Romulans to our presence.”

“Lieutenant Johnston reports that he and his team completed 150 mini bombs as you requested. The extra 50 are to create confusion by transporting them into buildings, onto streets, and into the atmosphere at 200 meters.”

“Marines are ready to deploy at your command. When transport begins, they will bite down on a water capsule. When they arrive, the Romulans on the planet will recognize them as Romulan warriors from a faction that opposes the current government.”

“The ship systems are all operating at full capacity.”

“Binotti to Johnston.”

“Sir?”

“Who’s heading to the planet, and who’s staying here?”

“Well, sir, I am heading to the planet, always wanted to play with a Romulan transporter. The chief will be here. The major has her finger on the button. Once pressed, because of the frequency of the detonation signal and the distance of the receivers, they will begin taking them out closest to us first and spread out around the planet. It will appear to be a virus in their system because the minis are not detectable. They are magnetic, and once transported, they will attach to their targets. Once attached they will transmit the alert.”

“Commander Steele was right about you; you are devious!”

“Thank you, sir.”

Greg looked at Shilo, “Commander Ariel, this is your show, and of course your protégé. You may begin when ready.” He stood, Commander Ariel, you have the con.”

Shilo walked to the seat and sat. Greg took her seat.

Shilo and Rhonda grinned, devilish. She nodded to Rhonda, who spoke into the air.

“The sequence is as follows. First, the marines will bite down on the water capsules, and less than one second later, the transport cycle will begin. Lieutenant Johnston is with Marine unit 3 and is tasked with the deployment of the minis. Next, they will heavy stun all opponents they encounter while accelerated, no deaths to any opponent, please. This needs to look like a Romulan infiltration from a force that does not want to injure their countrymen. All ground personnel has been outfitted with non-Starfleet weaponry.”

Shilo took over, “Once they return to the ship, they will take the antidote and give the all-clear signal to the bridge. From there, the Major will detonate the minis and create havoc on the planet. The SSD operatives will then be signaled to return to the ship. Once aboard, they will let us know they are safe, and the Scorpion will depart at max impulse toward Romulus, with the cloak at a minimum so they can see it leaving the area. The warp core will be tuned to sorta appear to be of Romulan design. But, of course, this will create disorder, and we will be under pursuit, hopefully.”

Rhonda took over, “At 1.1 lightyear, there is a system with a blue dwarf and 3 planets, all uninhabited. The Scorpion will duck behind the star, reinforce the cloak and shield to the max, and with our fingers crossed, hope they bypass us. We will then head to Federation space at maximum warp. Ignoring the sensor net at the neutral zone in the hopes they believe the Romulan ship is now in Federation space.”

Greg added, “9 days later, we will all be home. Crew of the Scorpion, please offer a quick prayer to whatever god you subscribe to.” Greg smiled, “Because thou hast made the LORD, which is my refuge, even the most High, thy habitation; There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.” He paused and looked around the bridge. “Psalm 91, verse 9 and 10 if I remember correctly. The Psalm is known as the Soldiers Psalm.”

Greg sat quiet a moment, “Commander Ariel, Major Bratelshumer, the show is yours!”

It went off without a hitch. Transport was complete, and they left some of the weapons they found on the space station to put that on these rebels. The minis did their job, the miniature explosions

took out their sensor net, and it appeared as though a virus did the actual damage.

They minimized the cloak and were under pursuit. Greg tapped the toggle that minimized the shield over the data safe. A minute later, the data safe disappeared, and the ship it transported to exploded. The other vessels slowed enough to give the Scorpion a chance to duck into the star and maximize cloak and shield.

They determined they headed out of the system, and the Scorpion was alone. So they headed home at maximum warp.

“Helm, remember that nebula we were in a long time ago. Head there.”

“Aye, sir!” She said, “We are heading home at warp 8.”

“Captain, Commander Martinez said we can step up slowly to warp 9.9 if we want.”

“Do it! At your convenience Ensign.”

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Captain’s Log, Ship Date 0629.85

After getting away from the 5 ships pursuing us from R1 and heading home at max speed, we have crossed the imaginary boundary of the Romulan Star Empire and once again are in Federation space. The mission was a complete success. We departed with 137 souls, returned with 140 souls. The SSD team retrieved the operative who has been passing information for the last decade or so. He brought his wife and daughter along to start a new life in the Federation. Lovely family, please find them an excellent job and home somewhere.

We had a slight cloak issue just before leaving Romulan space. We became visible, and that was the issue. A pair of warbirds started catching up to us at warp 9.6, and rather than increasing speed and eventually getting caught, we deployed the Johnston weapon system. The pursuing ships were firing on us and managed to hit a nacelle, slowing us by a warp factor for a time. The weapon performed flawlessly. Five of the tiny explosives hit across their port nacelle, obliterating it completely. Hell, it severed it off and allowed

it to hit the other ship, taking it out as well; Commander Steele called it a twofer.

We have been under cloak and max speed since making repairs, and that was nearly three weeks ago. We will arrive at the nebula near Starbase Cochrane in a few days, contacting the Federation once again.

All crew members deserve a vacation, a commendation, and respect for a job well done. But not necessarily in that order.

End Log

Greg entered the bridge. Quietly. He looked at his chair, and there was a new face in it. He looked over at Shilo, who shrugged.

“Well, I see my chair is rented out again?” Greg said.

The Ensign, a nurse, looked shocked. “Sorry, sir.”

“You were not relieved of that post, Ensign. But may I ask why you are here. No one is injured or sick.”

She got sheepish, then confident, “Sir, I was curious. I hear how this chair, just sitting in it, creates anxiety and several other interesting physical reactions. So I asked the Commander about it, and she allowed me to sit in this seat for a few hours.”

“Well, your findings?” Greg asked.

“Inconclusive. I have just been sitting here for an hour, and nothing has happened, so I have no frame of reference.”

“Look at those stars, Jasmine.” She looked at the viewscreen, and when she did, Greg nodded to Shilo, who converted the bridge to simulation mode. “Anxiety is the pucker factor of the simple action of sitting in that seat, knowing the life and well-being of the entire crew, 137 souls plus our 3 passengers, are in your hands.”

“Sir, I am feeling the anxiety level increase.”

Alarms went off. “You have the con Ensign. I’ll be here if you need me. What are your orders?” Greg said to her.

She froze a moment, then she said, “REPORT!”

“Sir, a Romulan Scoutcraft is bearing on us, in weapons range in 15-seconds.”

She looked at Greg. You can see it in her face. She was dead scared and had no idea what to do. Then, suddenly, “Helm, change course 42 degrees port, increase to warp 9. Weapons, charge, and ready. Comm, listen carefully for any inkling they are attempting to contact us. Are their weapons charged? Are we being targeted?”

“No, sir. The ship is heading straight for us, even on the new course. Their weapons are not active.”

“All stop.” She said.

The Romulan ship stopped directly in front of the Scorpion and hailed.

“Answer the hail.” She looked at the Captain, who gestured to the screen. She got the idea. “This is the USS Scorpion. How may we be of assistance?”

The Romulan commander appeared on the screen. “Our ship is ready to explode, Scorpion. Please transport us to safety. Unfortunately, our senior officers were all killed in the initial explosion, and it took the junior engineers quite a while to stop the runaway engine core.”

From behind her, “Sublieutenant Vasli, a breach is imminent. We have minutes.”

“Confirmed, Sir.” From behind the Captain somewhere. “Their core will breach in 58 seconds.”

“Transporter room, get them all to safety. Helm, when they are all here, raise shields as high as they will allow and get us the hell away.”

“Transport complete.”

“Shields up, warp 1.” A pause. “We’re clear.”

Ensign Carter was perspiring. “Stand down from alert status, resume our previous course.”

Greg and Shilo applauded, “Excellent, Ensign. You did better than Commander Steele his first time. He fired a phaser at them, and the ship exploded without even asking if his ship was being targeted.”

“Sir, it was a test?” She asked.

“A simulation,” Shilo said.

Greg asked her, “I noticed you had the idea it was not real, but I also noticed you were perspiring. Did the exercise build up a level of anxiety?”

“Ensign,” Shilo said, “Consider this a debriefing. During a debriefing, do not hold back; honesty is the way to learn from the training session. If anyone in the simulation has the knowledge to offer you, they will. But I suspect you are on your way to being a bridge officer if it suits you. I appreciate the fact you asked questions, got answers, then made a decision.”

“Yes, Commander.” She said, “Captain, I must admit just sitting in that seat does absolutely nothing. Not until the weight of that seat hits you. I have never been on the bridge during an incident, hostile or otherwise. Therefore, I had no frame of reference. Allowing me to experience the events in real-time was an amazing opportunity, and I cannot comprehend how the two of you can casually perform the role.”

“Jasmine, we have been trained, drilled, instructed, guided, and retrained for the task. I have been doing this for a long time, and so has Commander Ariel. I have put her and Commander Steele through this and many other tests to see if there are any holes we need to fill and crack in the armor that must be mended.”

“What have you found, sir?”

“That all of us has quirks that need to be smoothed. Commander Ariel is literally the most competent officer I have had the pleasure to work with.”

“Thank you, sir.” She said to him.

“Commander Steele, very rough around the edges but a means to an end. The two of them are 100% different people, different attitudes, different skills. Working with the two of them for the past

couple of years, I hope I have rubbed off on them as much as they have rubbed off on me.” He grinned at Shilo, “Commander Ariel is the most organized, level-headed, quiet, did I say organized already. Well, she has taught me to be more organized, and it has helped me grow as a person and as a Captain.”

“and Rich?” Shilo asked.

“Ah! Commander Steele. The enigma wrapped up in a mysterious package. To him, left means right. But if you ever need him, EVER, he will be there for you. As such, when he sits in that chair, his first thought has to be, what would Shilo do?” The entire bridge busted out laughing, relieving the tension in the room.

“Allow me to relieve you, Ensign, and if you would like to take a stint in that chair, please contact your first officer. On larger ships, that privilege is reserved for lieutenant commanders and above, but on the Scorpion, I allow any officer with proper training to sit in that chair.”

“Thank you, sir. I just may take you up on that offer.”

“If there is nothing else, you are dismissed, Ensign. I hope you learned something about that chair, about command, and about yourself.”

“Yes, sir, I did. Thank you again.” She nodded to Shilo and the rest of the crew on the bridge as she entered the turbolift. The doors closed, and she was gone.

“Commander Piper.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Ensign Carter just sat a watch in my chair.”

“Oh really. I was wondering where she went off to?”

“Something about needing to experiencing anxiety to help relieve anxiety.”

“How did she do?”

“She saved an entire ship filled with Romulan junior officers after all the senior officers were killed; before their ship exploded.”

“NICE!”

“My recommendation and Commander Ariel is here with me, are we exploit that trait and help her understand herself, and one day she will command a medical ship. I can see it in her. She thinks before she acts. That is a rare and special gift.”

“Understood, Captain. She and I will have a talk.”

“That’s all I can ask. Binotti out.”

“Shilo, let’s get a hot fudge Sunday. Who has not sat in that chair in a while.”

“I believe Lieutenant JG Marx has not had the opportunity to have command for some time.”

“Really, Marx, I am very sorry to tell you, but, Lieutenant JG Peoter Marx, you have the con!”

“Yes, sir. Thank you.” He nodded to Shilo and Greg as he took his new seat, “REPORT!”

As the bridge stations reported to Marx, Shilo and Greg entered the turbolift and headed to the holodeck 2.

“I wanted to show you something. Remember that Sunday I made with the bourbon? I understand how alcohol tastes to you, but I wanted to offer you a glimpse into what I experience when I sip on bourbon. I managed to create a near-exact replacement for bourbon, but completely free of alcohol.”

“Interesting. What made you consider this?”

“You are experience drive. Your upbringing, your culture, you. There is an experience you are missing, and that is the peace I get sipping on bourbon. It is not about what alcohol does to human physiology, but it is about the moment. Friends you are with, discussions, locations, in general, it is the total experience, and the taste only adds to that experience.”

“I am intrigued, Greg.”

Greg tapped his communicator twice. Shilo noticed and wondered who he was signaling. They exited the lift and entered the

holodeck, the same new one designed for the combat simulation for the Klingon passengers.

As they entered and the doors closed and vanished, it was night, very dark, and there was no moon in the sky. However, they saw a fire burning a short walk away and headed there. The air was a little chilly and damp since they were on a beach, next to a large body of water.

Shilo stopped dead as she looked up, “This is my homeworld.”

“It is.” He said. “I needed someplace peaceful, quiet, and beautiful. This hit all three.”

As they approached the fire, they saw the entire staff of Lieutenant and above sitting around a large fire. Two open seats were remaining. One next to Ramona to her left and one to the left of that seat. Greg sat next to Ramona, and Shilo sat next to her friend and Captain.

“Shilo, this bourbon is free of alcohol, and I am interested to know how the unique flavors play out on the tastebuds of a person from this beautiful planet.” He handed her the glass.

She took a sip and looked quite shocked. “This is what it tastes like to you?” Everyone nodded. “All of you are drinking this version?” They all nodded.

“Well, let’s see. First off, I have to tell you that it tastes delicious for an Earth beverage. Most from Earth are too sweet for our palette. I reference your soda pop. But this is just sweet enough, and the mix of flavors, let’s see, chocolate, fire like charred wood, cherry, vanilla. This is very interesting, and I rather like it. Thank you for this.”

“Wonderful. I wanted to gather you all here on the last day. Tomorrow we will be home. Some of us will be leaving the ship. Some will stay, have new roles, new jobs. But we will always be family. I know, Shilo told me!!”

Everyone laughed. Johnston stood, “Cap, if I may.”

“You have the floor or rather the beach.”

The fire burned out after an hour and a half. They stayed that much longer and talked as friends. No one wanted to leave, but they all knew they needed rest. The coming days will require mental discipline for the debriefing.

Greg and Ramona stood and walked down the beach, leaving the dozen or so sitting around the fire. When they could no longer see the flame actually the glow of the ember bed, “Computer, exit.” The door opened in front of them, and they entered the future once again.

“Time to rest and prepare for the future,” Ramona said, and the doors closed behind them.

CHAPTER 4-9

“Entering the nebula, Captain.” Came from Colonel Lanning through the comm system. He was currently in command of the ship.

“Great, you know what to do, Colonel.”

“Understood. Lanning out.”

“OK, take us in. Once in the nebula, kill the cloak, activate all beacons and running lights. Establish a connection to Starfleet data. Contact General Fowler, Admiral Ramon, and Admiral Maddox at the same time. Secure mode. Main viewer.”

“We have entered the nebula, essentially invisible..”

“Cloak is deactivated.”

“Links to Starfleet reestablished. Holy shit!”

“What?” Larry asked.

“We just received a terraquad of data, mail, messages, and all kinds of things. Pretty much everyone on the ship got mail!”

“Excellent!” Greg said as he walked off the turbolift.

“Conference mode, active.”

The three Admirals, or rather two Admirals and a General, appeared on the main screen.

Admiral Ramon smiled, “A Marine in command of the Scorpion?”

Larry said, “No sir, just keeping his seat warm. He went to get all gussied up for this call.”

“Mission success,” is all Greg said.

“We all know. Daily reports and all.” General Fowler said.

“So, what’s next?”

Admiral Ramon spoke, "Get the ship here, and we can talk. As a matter of fact, all three of us are here on Cochrane. Where's my babies?"

Larry punched a button, "Twins to the bridge."

A minute later, "Hi Dad!! Sorry, Admiral Dad!" Ricardo said. Yvonne just waved and blew him a kiss.

"How was it?" He asked his kids.

"Brutal Dad, this guy is nuts, and that Colonel, not much better," Yvonne said.

"So you had fun?"

They both nodded. Ricardo spoke, "We got to use creativity, technology...."

"....and we really learned a lot on this mission. I am so glad Captain Binotti took pity on us."

Shilo started speaking, "Captain Binotti, it is my pleasure to do something I wanted to do since we met the twins on the Academy grounds." Shilo walked over and handed Greg a box. "The Admiral and I worked it out before departure, and this little box contains the lieutenant pips first worn by both of your parents."

"Twins, Attention!" Shilo said.

Greg spoke, "It is my pleasure to pin on your Lieutenant pips. You see, in your specialty, since there are really so few of you, rank is a little faster than most." Greg pinned the pip on Ricardo, and Shilo pinned the pip on Yvonne.

Admiral Ramon started to speak, but Greg beat him to it. His wife was standing next to him now. Greg looked at the viewscreen and said, "Hey, look, it's Colonel Mom!" The twins waved.

The Admiral managed to get a word in, "I also want you to know the two of you have new assignments." They both looked horrified, "Before I tell you what they are, how do you feel about being split up?"

Yvonne started, "I speak for both of us, sir. We have talked about it at length over this mission, sir, and I can tell you for a fact that a year ago, it would not have been a good move for us. But, we have been together for our entire lives and lived in the same room for one assignment. Attended all the same schools, classes, teachers, instructors, professors, even pretty much the same hobbies. At the Academy, we lived apart but took all but 3 classes together, and that was the beginning of our individuality, and on the Scorpion, the senior staff allowed us, at our own pace, to become who we wanted to become. I think we are ready to head separate ways."

"Perfect! Both of you are being assigned as the third officer on a starship. Security officer, actually. Ricardo, you are assigned to Captain Ariel of the USS Roxjon. Yvonne, your new assignment is the third officer of the USS Scorpion. God help me, but Commander Steele, you need to teach her."

"Yes, sir." He looked at Yvonne, "We can start with Blood Wine, Gagh, and...."

"Commander?" Admiral Ramon said, "Just don't make her weird like you."

"No promises, sir!" Rich said.

Yvonne started laughing. "Commander, can I minor in Pithias Claw?"

"Good Gravy!! Greg, what kind of ship are you running?"

"Well, sir, it's kind of a little 3-ring circus, a cross between a cruise ship and a taxi service. Rich here is the head flight attendant, and Yvonne, well, we keep her around to blow things up."

The Admiral and his wife opened their mouths to speak, and nothing came out and then closed them, not saying a word.

General Fowler cleared his throat, "Colonel, it seems that you have become a rather good starship captain. When you arrive at Cochrane Station, there is a ship waiting for you. As Commanding officer of the new Charger Class ship, Capum, NCC-1225. Do you know what that name means?"

“Yes, sir, the Starship Whiskey. I love it, sir!” Larry held up a finger, “Wait, NCC-1225, December 25.” He looked at Greg, who gave him a 2-finger salute. Larry saluted him back.

“I hear you have a pretty good First Officer?”

“Yes, sir, MAJOR Bratelsheimer.”

“Major is not correct...” They received orders to promote the twins and the Major. “There, fixed. Major, are you on the bridge?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“Well, Major just will not do. Consider your promotion to Lieutenant Colonel done. Now you have to babysit Colonel Lanning.” Larry walked over to her and pinned on the silver oak leaves.

“No problem, sir, I spent that last year or so learning how to babysit from Shilo; I mean Commander Ariel.”

“Well, according to the roster, there is no Commander Ariel.” Shilo looked curious. “But, wait, we have a Captain Ariel. She is the Captain of the new Charger Class Science Ship, the Raxjon.”

Shilo spoke, “Really? Wait, Roxjon, that my native language, it means Educate.”

“I’m left without a First Officer?” Greg said.

“Not exactly. We posted a new Commander to that position. Where is that dumb ass? I mean that Commander?”

“HERE, SIR!” Rich said, “I figured you meant me by that highly accurate description.”

“I have a new job for Baker too.”

“One second, sir.” Greg tapped a button, “Ensign Donald Baker to the bridge.”

“The bridge, really” I mean, on my way, sir.”

The Admin said, “He’s gonna hate it!”

Baker walked onto the bridge.

“Ensign Baker. You have been reassigned. It seems that the Captain, or rather a several of Captain types and a gaggle of Commanders, have sung your praises in reports and commendations. Starfleet has reviewed ALL of these reports and made a decision.”

“Yes, sir?” Baker said pensively.

“Starfleet has always needed better food, better storage methods, better emergency rations, and a wider variety for all of its members. As such, we have been required to put someone special, with vision, into a position that can develop all of these things. There is a team of two leading this crusade of our taste buds. The two of you are co-directors and have a free hand to do what you need to do. Congratulations Ensign, there is a promotion for you in the works, but it needs to go through channels. You and Lieutenant Dixon, formerly of the USS Nightwing, have, literally, a tall order to fill. This is a new department. We named it Culinary Development.”

“Thank you, sir, for that actually sounds like fun!”

Greg added, “Sounds like you will be at a stove a lot Donald.” Greg paused a heartbeat, “Dixon, that’s Cherryl’s cousin if I remember right.”

The Admiral replied, “Yes, it is. Smart lady. Great organization and creating events and ideas for recipes, whereas Donald is a wiz in the kitchen. Between the two of them, I think this will be a good thing.”

“Yes sir, the stove; a place I rather enjoy. Thank you again, sir.”

“OK, where’s that Johnston character?”

“Here, sir!” Michael Johnston yelled from the engineering seat.

“Johnston, since Commander Martinez is being reassigned, you will be the new Chief Engineer of the Scorpion.”

“I will?” He looked scared.

“I received a lot of recommendations from a lot of people for you in the last few hours. It seems you impressed them. Believe it or not, Captain Ariel even thinks you are a good officer.”

The Admiral smiled, “Michael, as a Lieutenant Commander, I suggest you go visit your former supervisors. They kept you down, made you appear to be a screw-up. As a matter of fact, I was amazed Captain Binotti asked to have you reassigned to the Scorpion.”

“Best decision the Captain ever made, sir!” He looked at Greg and winked. Greg winked back.

“When you get to Earth, please be nice, mention to them that you have a new job, and then tell them what it is; I’m sure they will be blown away. By the way, I checked for you. You now outrank all of those supervisors. I only wish I can see their faces when you transport there. Last time they saw you, you were not even an officer.”

“Yes, sir. But, my first stop will be to see my sister.”

“Actually, sir, before we land at Cochrane, I would like to take the crew to Earth. Johnston’s sister runs the Mexican Cantina outside of HQ, and I want to close the place down and have a private party.”

Larry looked at Greg, “Wha Cha Think. Should we invite the brass?”

“Why not. All of you are invited too. Our Treat. The first round is on the Colonel, the next round is on the twins, and the third round is on Johnston. After that, we can run a tab.”

“Navigator, how long to Earth and nominal speed?” Larry asked.

“25 hours, sir.”

“How long to Cochrane?”

“2 hours, sir, if we fly slow.”

“Tell you what,” Greg said, “we’ll pick you up and head to Earth. Johnston, call your sister, tell her she is hosting a private party two nights from now. Arrange for a buffet and an open bar.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Helm, get us to Cochrane Station, best speed.”

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“Captain, Maria said they have been doing some remodeling, and they will need a couple extra days to complete. So, to make you feel better about waiting,” He smiled at his Captain, Captain Ariel, and the Colonel, the two Admirals, and the General on the bridge as they flew past Jupiter. “Maria is giving us a special menu.”

“Is she still on the comm?”

“Yes, sir, she is, but it is voice only.”

He looked over at Shilo, who understood. She connected the call, video to the main viewer. She appeared on the screen and was shocked. This is the first time she has ever seen the bridge of any starship. The rest of the restaurant hovered around the screen on her side. Again, this is a rare event to see the bridge of a Starship.

“Captain! I did not expect that.”

“When dealing with the USS Scorpion, always expect the unexpected Maria. Now, can you please prepare a menu, buffet style, of your choice? Do not be concerned about the cost. Just make it amazing.” He looked at Rich, “Have you ever considered a Mexican-Klingon fusion of some special dish?”

“I have not.” She said.

“I have Captain.” It was the owner of the restaurant. “I take it this is for that officer who likes my hot sauce?”

Rich spoke up, “You would be correct, sir!”

Carlos thought for a minute, “I once had Gagh and felt a little seasoning, guac, crema on a corn tortilla may be interesting.”

“Holy targ droppings, that sounds great!”

“I will work on it for you. Where can I find fresh Gagh?”

Rich tapped a few buttons on his panel, “I just sent you a name on a subchannel. Tell them you know me. They can fix you up.”

“This may be fun!” The guy said and walked off.

“OK, Maria, back to the party. As I said, plan it with the best of everything, I have several Captains, a Colonel, two Admirals, and a General who will be paying the tab. Trust me, they will add a nice tip also.”

Admiral Ramon said, “We will?”

Greg just nodded to him. General Fowler said, “OK. Sounds like fun.”

They talked for a bit longer, but ultimately Maria is going to plan the event for them. Michael stood and walked closer to the vid pickup, “Mike, are you an officer?”

Greg spoke, “He is. He is a Lieutenant.”

Admiral Maddox added, “Next week, he is being promoted and will become the Chief Engineer of this boat.” Maria’s eyes became damp.

“Mike, it looks like you found your cubby?”

“I did, sis, the chief engineer of the USS Misfit, and I love it!”

“What’s that?”

“We’ll explain it when we see you. Michael, wave goodbye to your sister.” Greg paused a moment, and Michael waved at the viewscreen, “Scorpion out.” He turned to Michael, “Now get back to work!” They smiled at each other.

“First things first, Captain. We scheduled a couple of days for debriefing in your old area.” Admiral Maddox said. “Lieutenant Commander and above in the conference room, the rest in the auditorium. You will meet there daily for maybe a day or two. So that should be perfect timing for the party in a few days.”

“Sir!” Shilo exclaimed, “A ship is decloaking off our port.”

“Captain, we’re being hailed.”

“I know that ship.” Greg said, “Open a channel.”

“Channel open, sir.”

“Marcus, you ain’t dead!”

“So happy you noticed, Captain.”

“We had you as exploding in a gas cloud. What happened?”

“So glad you made it home too. Well, you see, after I left you, I stopped at a friend's moon and traded a few things for a potent torpedo core. I wrapped it all in dilithium resin, put it into a small chamber, and pushed it out the back door of my little ship. Just as it detonated, I hit the cloak and went to warp. They thought I blew up and stopped chasing me. Because of my max speed, it took me a little longer to get home.”

“Excellent!” Greg smiled at the screen, “That means you are invited to our welcome home party.”

“I would be honored, Captain.”

“You can get the details from Commander Steele. It is in a few days.”

“Oh, I see Admiral Maddox. Can I trouble you for a little repair?”

The Admiral answered, “No, actually. But I bet the Chief Engineer of this ship can assist you more efficiently?”

“Captain, spacedock is hailing. They have a slip for us.”

“Commander Steele, please park us.”

“Aye, sir!”

“Brass, if you will come with me to the transporter room, we can bean down,” Greg said.

They all headed to the transporter room, then to the security section of the Academy, where they spent the first year or so of this mission.

As the transporter beam took hold, Greg Binotti said, “We’ve come full circle.” Then he disappeared into nothingness.

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“One minute, Captain, there is one more order of business we need to tend to.” Admiral Maddox said.

Admiral Ramon spoke, “It seems Captain Binotti that the Federation, Starfleet, and several other organizations in the United Federation of Planets have petitioned Starfleet regarding you. In addition, members of your crew appear to speak to their families who in turn discuss the comments with their Federation representatives, who in turn bring those comments to us.”

Admiral Maddox took over the conversation, “The Federation council has reviewed your record, and I believe an accurate assessment of your Starfleet career is that you are a misfit; but at the same time, you are loyal to your crew first, to Starfleet second, and to the Federation third. As such, your tenure as a Starfleet Captain is closing. However, you are being retained as a teacher, a leader, and a mentor to those newly appointed to the posting of the Captain of a ship.” She paused, allowing the moments, the heartbeats, to add just a little anxiety. “You were a topic of the Admiralty board recently, and what to do with you was the biggest question.”

Admiral Ramon spoke again, “Greg, you are a misfit. You command a ship filled with misfits, except for Commander Ariel.”

Greg added quickly, “Now that I agree with. So where is this road heading, Admiral....Admirals?”

Admiral Maddox said, “The convening board of Admirals put forth a recommendation to the Federation Council, and it was, believe it or not, unanimously voted on; you, Captain Gregory T. Binotti, are the subject of that vote. For the first time in Federation history, actually the second time, you have been given a new job, a position, a calling where they feel you would be the most beneficial. The Federation has seen fit to promote you to Admiral.”

Greg was stunned. Ramona, who was standing on the bridge, was tearing up. The crew applauded.

Admiral Ramon spoke, “Admiral Binotti, your new position is to lead, direct, mentor, and assist in any way you are able all-new Captains and Commanding Officers of all Starships for the first two years of their command, some longer and some shorter. During that

time, you shall instruct, teach, and train them in the nonobvious skills in which you so greatly excel.”

The crew whooped!

Finally, General Fowler spoke, “The first Captains enrolled into this new program will be Captain, I mean Colonel, Lanning, and Captain Ariel. Although you may request passage on their ship, it is their ship. YOU are simply a passenger and an advisor.”

Admiral Maddox said, “Commander O’Roury. Since you are married to the Admiral, we have decided you need a change of pace. Therefore, effective immediately, you will be attached to the Captain of Starfleet Logistics. Over the past few years, we heard from several people that you have ‘ideas,’ and as such, those ideas may increase the efficiency of Starfleet Cargo and, ultimately, all members of the service. Your new boss was appointed about eight months ago and is very familiar with your work.”

Ramona asked, “Who are you speaking of?”

“Captain Marsha O’Hannen.”

“She was my supervisor, my trainer when I was an ensign. Everything I know I learned from her.”

“Then it should be an enjoyable, productive assignment.”

Admiral Maddox looked around the bridge. “Crew of the Scorpion, stand down. You are home. Your mission was a success. 137 crew members started the mission, and 137 returned. That, in and of itself, is a job well done.” She turned to Larry. “Colonel, you and your Marines can take a few hours and visit your new ship. Then, the rest of you, get packed up and prepare for the debriefing.”

“Admiral, if I am promoted, it seems as though that means there is no Captain for the Scorpion.”

General Fowler said, “Wow, we never thought of that.” He said, grinning like the proverbial cat, “Now, who can we get on short notice to be the Captain of this ship?” He smiled a toothy smile, “Can a Commander command a starship?”

“Not a big ship, maybe a small dinky little ship.” Admiral Ramon said.

“Like this one?”

“Yes, exactly.” The Admiral said, and Rich started grinning from behind his ear to behind his ear.

“Good lord,” Admiral Ramon said, “Certainly, you do not think that Commander Steele can captain this starship?”

Greg heard about this a few days ago when they arrived back in Federation space. When they picked up the Admirals gang on Cochrane, Greg and the three had a meeting, mainly pre-debriefing, on the station. They asked if Rich could command the ship. Greg said he would be a good fit. His attitude is right, and his trigger finger no longer presses the button before saying hello.

Admiral Maddox continued, “Commander Steele!”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Do you think you can lead the crew of the USS Scorpion?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Without causing a war.”

“I see, restrictions Well, yes. But I can do it without causing an incident. Seeing as how I learned from the best.”

“Then consider yourself the new CO of the Scorpion.” Admiral Maddox shook his hand. “Your new XO has not been chosen yet. When they are, you will be informed.

Greg stood, “Computer, transfer all command codes to Commander Richard Steele. I am ready to be relieved.”

Rich approached Greg, standing directly in front of him. “Sir, I relieve you.”

“I stand relieved,” Greg said.

The computer beeped, “Command codes transferred from Admiral Gregory T. Binotti to Commander Richard H. Steele, Commanding Officer, USS Scorpion, NCC-4017.

Greg turned to the three admirals, “Brass, I think that just about covers everything. Shall we head to the debriefings, then to the party?”

They all nodded; Greg turned to Johnston, who was standing next to Juan. “Lots of brass at the party. Tell your sister she has a free hand, whatever she thinks to make this the greatest party ever! Tell her not to consider cost, just awesomeness.”

“Yes, sir Cap, I mean Admiral.” Greg walked over to him and whispered in his ear.

“I hope to get some of your hooch every once in a while. I find I like it better than some of the more expensive stuff.”

They laughed, “Yes, sir. I will see to it. I believe my new CO will be open to that discussion.”

Greg asked Admiral Maddox, “Any clue what the next assignment for the Scorpion will be?”

“Actually, yes. The cloak is the highest classified item in Starfleet, and there are only 4 ships that currently have them installed. The Scorpion, the Calum, then Nightwing, and the Wasp.”

Larry interrupted, “We got a cloak!” He sounded excited.

The Admiral continued as if she did not hear him, “All four are Charger class. All four have new captains that will be under your tutelage.”

Greg questions, “The Nightwing?”

“Yes. Captain Marlan was promoted to Admiral and assigned to fleet development. She oversees the Utopia Planitia Shipyard, new ideas, and designs. Commander, I mean Captain Martinez, is actually going to be working for her.” She looked at Rich, “By the way, Commander Steele, your assignment once the ship is given the once over is to patrol near the Romulan border. You and your crew will be assigned to the convenience of Admiral Ramon, and its base of operations will be Starbase Cochrane.”

Rich smiled, “I can live with that!” Admiral Ramon just shook his head.

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Greg walked into his apartment. This time, it is in the area he referred to as Rank Road. Again, their 3 bedroom apartment is essentially set up like his quarters on the ship, but each room is larger, and he and Ramona have a separate office. They entertain and meet all hours of the day and night because of their jobs.

He liked being here and wished he had a personal holodeck he could use. He considered setting up one of the storage rooms as a holodeck and needs to talk to Ramona about it. Then, he needs to pack for a trip to the Scorpion; actually, he is meeting the four ships under his tutelage, at Cochrane Station, in about a week.

He managed to get Ramona to come with him, and he is using a small ship, the smallest ship in the fleet, to be warp-capable. Max speed is warp 5; if you push it and that makes Cochrane about 8 days away.

He plans to catch a ride back to Earth from one of the ships, and that will give him the chance to spend a few days in the cabin and visit his dog.

He went into the shed and grabbed the duffels, and tossed them on the bed. Then, pulling out clothing, he decided what he wanted to wear on the trip. Mostly his uniform, but he needed something casual, and of course, his buckskins.

“Greg?” He heard Ramona walk into the apartment.

“Back here!” He replied.

She walked into the bedroom and stopped.

“What?” He asked.

“It just occurred to me, we have not been to Cochrane in a year. I can’t believe how I am looking forward to this trip. How long will we be gone?”

“Minimum 8 days each way, a week maybe at Cochrane. So, about three weeks.”

“Good, I took a month off.”

They finished packing and changed into a comfortable set of clothing for the trip. Then, attaching their communicator to their shirt, Greg tapped it, “Binotti to Operations.”

“Operations here, sir. How may I assist you?”

Greg squinted a little, “Your voice sounds familiar.”

“Yes sir, I was a crewman on your ship, sir, Sarch. I am an Ensign now, and one day I hope to be under your guidance.”

“When that happens, Ensign, we’ll sit and have a drink to old times as I teach you about command.”

“Looking forward to it, Admiral. Now, how may I assist you, sir?”

“Well, we have a warp shuttle prepped and ready for a trip to Cochrane, Commander O’Roury and I and I bags need to be on that shuttle.”

“Understood, sir. If it is not too much of an inconvenience, can I pass you through this transporter room then to the shuttle?”

“I would appreciate the opportunity to shake your hand.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Energize when ready.”

Greg and ramona disappeared and reappeared in the transporter room with Ensign Sarch and another woman standing at the console. She called the room to attention.

Sarch said, “This is Admiral Binotti. He is not much for pomp or circumstance. Admiral, allow me to introduce my fiance, Ensign Wei.”

Greg grabbed his hand, then hugged him in a masculine way. Ramona was not so, she just grabbed him, and he finally hugged her back. Greg walked over to his fiance, “So, what is your name?” He asked.

“Ensign Wei, sir.”

“Wow, he has to call you Ensign?” He laughed. Ramona looked at him, and Sarch chuckled a little.

“Sorry, sir, my name is Jing.”

“Beautiful, I believe it means tranquil.”

“Yes, sir, you speak Chinese?”

Sarch spoke before Greg had a chance, “Jing, if ever you want to learn the more colorful words of the Klingon language, meet the Admiral in a Jeffries tube, and he will provide a great education.”

“Huh,” Greg said in his best Klingon.

Sarch replied, “Ha’DlbaH.”

Greg smiled, “Hu'tegh, ylpegh.”

Sarch grinned, “ach jIH.”

They laughed together. Ramona and Jing stood there looking at them like they were idiots.

Ramona looked at Jing, “Nánhái jiāng shì nánhái”

Jing and Ramona laughed out loud, and Sarch and Greg got really quiet.

“Sir,” Sarch asked, “Do you know what she said?”

“Not exactly, but let’s just say you send us on our way. You ask yours, and I’ll ask mine.”

“Yes, sir. Great thought.”

“Really nice meeting you, Jing, Sarch. When we return in three weeks, let’s all meet for dinner somewhere. You two pick the place, and Ramona will pay. Energize.”

“Yes, sir. Energizing before the Commander can say no.”

Jing started laughing, and Ramona started to speak, but the transporter froze her in mid-word.

Sarch looked at Jing, who was smiling. “He really was a friend, mentor, Commanding Officer to you.”

“Yes, he was. Now, where do we want to eat?”

"I heard of a fascinating cajun place in New Orleans. Let's find out about it." She paused, "What did you say in Klingon?"

"Let's see. Huh translates to Slime and Ha'DibaH means Animal, not in a nice way either; Hu'tegh means Damn! Then ylpegh means you have been practicing, and finally 'ach jIH means Yes Sir Admiral."

"You called him an animal! He's an Admiral."

"More than that, he is my former Captain." He stopped and powered down the console, "What did the Commander say to you?"

"Boys will be boys."

They both laughed.

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Ramona laughed, "You and he really said that to each other."

"Sarch and I had some fun. He is most likely telling her what we said. By the way, what was it you said?"

"Boys will be boys," Ramona said to him, and they both laughed.

Greg sat in the pilot's seat, prepped for launch. The crew had already gone through preflight before they arrived.

Ramona tapped the console. "Departure control, Admiral Binotti's shuttle is ready to launch. The destination is Cochrane Station."

"Commander O'Roury, you have clearance, and your shuttle has been designated as Shuttle Stinger."

Greg spoke, "Control, this is Shuttle Stinger. Ready for launch, and thanks for the great designation."

"Our pleasure Admiral. You are cleared to depart at 223 mark 270. Maintain sublight until past Luna, then you are

cleared for warp. Max warp is warp 4.5, not much in your way, but in a couple days, you may be near a cargo ship or three."

"Thanks, control, Shuttle Stinger departing and thanks." They disconnected the comm, "Well, we are on our way." Greg said to Ramona.

"Great, when you go to warp, let's eat. I'm hungry."

"Sounds good to me."

About the Author



Chris Cancilla was born in Cleveland, Ohio, the East Side, in an Italian neighborhood known as Collinwood, near East 158th and St. Clair. He really liked growing up there and would not trade it for anything. The friendships made in Elementary School at Holy Redeemer and in High School at St. Joseph (now called Villa Angela – St. Joseph's) are

priceless, and some of them are still in force. For most of his youth, he worked in the family business, DiLillo Brothers Dry Cleaners, for his grandfather Carmen DiLillo; and at DiLillo Brothers Men's Wear for his uncle Tony (everyone called him the Czar). He also "apprenticed" with his Uncle Duke, a smack-dab radio and TV repair shop between the men's wear store and the dry cleaners. But he enjoyed working in the dry cleaners for his Grandfather the most. Two of the employees, Bertha and Evelyn, were like second mothers to him.

In his youth, he really enjoyed Scouting. Spending a significant portion of it in multiple Cub Scout Packs and Boy Scout Troops and Explorer Posts. Scouting influenced his life positively, and the training, knowledge, and education he gained during his youth in the troop are still influencing his decisions as an adult. The ideals of Scouting, especially the Oath and Law, serve him today as a moral compass, guiding his actions to be a man his family can be proud of in all aspects of his life.

After high school, Chris spent 14 years in the U.S. Air Force, where he managed to see a large chunk of this 3rd stone from our star, but his only regret was that he never made it below the equator, so he never got to see the toilet swirl the other way. His favorite assignment was to Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, Colorado, where he could ride motorcycles and camp in the Rocky Mountains during his Air Force career. This is a close second to the 2 years he was assigned to and lived in Keflavik, Iceland, where he and his wife Tammy became the best of friends and experienced some really odd and unique landscapes and adventures. One of which was Chris starting and being the Founding President of the SCUBA Diving Club on Naval Air Station Keflavik, the name of the club was:

“vörn kafara á Íslandi“

He and his wife Tammy live in the Raleigh, North Carolina area, close to Wake Forest. He really misses his little buddy and writing partner, his cat, Snip. Snip followed Chris around from room to room, you may or may not see him all the time, but he is always close by. Unfortunately, snip crossed the rainbow bridge a couple of years ago; he went fast, which is the only consolation. When Chris writes, though, he still is close by. They made a paw print before he was cremated, and that paw print sits on the desk, near the computer at all times.

The Boy Scouts of America is still a considerable part of his life, especially teaching new adults the skills needed to survive the outdoors and reinforce how these outdoor skills and habits need to be introduced to the leaders of tomorrow. Leave No Trace camping is a significant part of his instruction and is a philosophy in the conservative style of camping Chris enjoys, if not the only way to ensure an excellent time for you and future campers. Wilderness camping is a great way to decompress and gain insight into what is hidden in the inner recesses of your mind. Sitting around a campfire on a cool or cold night, watching the flames dance and watching the wood that has given its all to the beauty of the moment, allowing you to reflect inside your own

thoughts and be honest with yourself. The one person you cannot lie to is you, so honesty in your own head allows nature a way of bringing all things into clarity; even when you spend all night arguing with a 50-pound raccoon about the cobbler residue in the Dutch Oven on the picnic table; the same Dutch Oven you said you would clean up in the morning. Sometimes, the raccoon wins!

Chris also has a passion for cooking, and the creation of several cookbooks allows him to experience new cuisines and cooking methods from around the globe, but it also provides him with the means to share and teach cooking to those who are less experienced or knowledgeable. By no means does he consider himself a chef, but he does consider himself a somewhat OK cook, both in the home and in the woods.

Cooking in the wilderness is a skill that not too many people have or have even considered, and it is one skill that Chris enjoys teaching to Scout Leaders, both old and new, in the classes that he teaches for Scouters (Adult Boy Scout Leaders) and also to the Scouts themselves during the COOKING Merit Badge course. Chris was happy that the BSA finally made cooking a required merit badge for the Eagle Scout rank. It is a skill that will be valuable for the rest of your life. Especially if you want to prepare a romantic meal for a date or simply provide a meal for yourself that you actually enjoy.

Whenever Chris develops or finishes a new story or cookbook, he permits a couple of people to read his book and offer ideas to improve the storyline or the text in general. Who knows, he may allow you to be the next editor, for which he will definitely give you kudos at the beginning of the book. Thus, immortalizing you in the story for all eternity.

His last hobby is Amateur Radio. In the Raleigh, NC area, you can find him in the mornings on K4ITL and in the evenings on AA4RV; he pops in occasionally to AK4H.

I hoped you enjoyed reading this book. Please read the others available on his website – <http://AuthorCancilla.com> – if you are interested in cooking, reading science fiction, or possibly EDI programming.

If you work with an EDI team and have little to no understanding about Electronic Data Interchange, pick up that briefing booklet. It is well worth your time to read. Let Chris know what you think of the books you read and whether you liked the stories, the briefing, or the recipes.

Chris's day job is as an EDI B2B Integration Specialist or an EDI Developer; take your pick; they both mean the same thing. He calls himself a digital mailman. He moves the data and information files from one place to another, but he does not own, nor is he responsible for, the data in any way other than delivering it. So, a mailman! That's a fancy way to tell someone that you work with computers to translate data from one format to another. After all, the mailman doesn't write the letters and only moves them from point A to B.

Additional Works by Christopher E. Cancilla

All of these are available at: <http://AuthorCancilla.com>

The Archives, a 7-Part Series of Novels

The ARCHIVES: Education

Book One in the Archives Series.

Benjamin Jensen is a temporal researcher, a good one. His career started out rough when he nearly destroyed all of history or lost the love of his life in a tragic accident that could have been prevented by him later in his career, but things have a way of working out. His favorite flight home is on the dropship from low Earth orbit, and he tries as hard as he can to get anyone to join him. His close friends run the Flight Dome on Lunar Base, where flapping and flying like a bird is commonplace and a fun pastime, but his real passion is for historical events.... or, more precisely, the circumstances surrounding and leading up to the actual event in focus. Join Benjamin Jensen and his classmates as they discover what it means to be a Temporal Researcher. Find out the dangers and rewards this life could offer in an adventure with historical importance.

The ARCHIVES: Fixing Time

Book Two in the Archives Series.

Benjamin Jensen's best friend in all of time is Brad Jorgen. When Brad returns from a long-term research project with important news. Someone is traveling in time, disrupting the time stream. Benjamin and Brad are tasked to repair and ensure it does not happen again. Afterward, the Archive Academy requests that the two teach a class to remain inconspicuous when performing research and improvise when things do not go as planned. The course is a hit, but there are a lot of bumps during the learning process. Including a covert trip to Pluto to reclaim a ship they left on the once and former planet several thousands of years earlier, one they will need to use to revive a civilization that has been dead and forgotten to the passage of time for several millennia.

The ARCHIVES: Salvation

Book Three in the Archives Series.

In several places on the Earth, the orbital facilities, the Lunar Colonies, and the far-reaching corners of the human-populated universe, Christianity is beginning to grow and spread. The world government is concerned it may overshadow their power or lead the people to envision what the future needs to look like. Benjamin is tasked to determine the threat level of this new group, and he and his team are sent back to a place where the movement begins. Is this movement mind-altering or simple brainwashing? Do Christians want to control everything? Is there a reason to fear Christians or all religions in general? This is what he is tasked to learn, and fix, if necessary. On the way, he discovers a unique reality and brings that information back to his boss at Archive Island in a fascinating, honest and convincing report. Enveloped within this decision are his new wife and his best friend all of the time. Come and be with him as he explores his heart and his mind. The scientist needs to understand the definition of faith, and faith can be elusive.

The ARCHIVES: Family

Book Four in the Archives Series.

Benjamin Jensen is selected to take over as the Director of the entire Archive Island complex, including all operations and locations. His rise means that each of his compatriots is promoted to fill in the void as he and Brad Jorgen are propelled into intrigue and mystery. With that promotion comes tremendous responsibility in the guise of becoming one of the most powerful men in history and danger so terrifying it has never before surfaced. The big question on everyone's lips is, will Benjamin measure up to match the job? Can Brad avert a disaster that could mean an end to the Jensen lineage? Why a reporter is permitted free run of the Archive Island complex is baffling to some but allowed to happen by all? Come and take this journey with us to explore the dark areas of space, the human condition, and our family's soft spots.

The ARCHIVES: Fresh Start

Book Five in the Archives Series.

Benjamin Jensen is the Director of the Island Complex for nearly two decades now, and his best friend Brad Jorgen is his second-in-command. Their sons are students in the Academy and are already well on their way to becoming influential and experienced Archive Island Complex Temporal Research team members. But, is there danger? Can they trust a non-TR with the secrets of temporal research? Will they need to correct time, so history can flow as it is intended? So, join the journey.... join the excitement.

The ARCHIVES: Continuum

Book Six in the Archives Series.

Benjamin Jensen is still the Director of the Island Complex. It has been a bit more than 30 years. With the unexpected death of someone close, the Island is turned on its ear. Recalling several people close, the memorial service is brief, but the grieving is deep.

This is the sixth and final book in the series that traverses the TR lifetime of Benjamin Jensen, his family, and his friends.

The ARCHIVES: Temporal Logs

Book Seven in the Archives Series.

This closes out the Archive Series with flash. Not a continuation of the story, but rather levels between what happens in the six previous installments of the Archive Series.

Each character we have come to love and adore has a tribute in this book, each of them has a story that revolves around them that occurs between the accounts you are familiar with. So read and learn about the favorite saga in the life of your favorite characters.

Discover something no one knew before.

Business books by Christopher E. Cancilla

E*D*I: A Simple Introduction

[A briefing on what EDI is and how it works](#)

EDI can be and is complicated for the uninitiated to read. It is a "digital" representation of a human-readable document, like a purchase order. By reading this short introduction into the world of EDI, you will understand how it is structured, why it is necessary, what a standard is and what the individual pieces of data mean, and how they interrelate.

Welcome to EDI-101

E*D*I: A Deeper Dive

[A briefing on the Purchase Order](#)

EDI may be a mystery, but then again, so is magic until you know how the illusion is done. Take the 850-document set, the purchase order. What is it, what are the moving parts, and what do all those parts mean? Take a ride with me through the PO. Let's explore how the 850 is put together and learn in the process. Remember, EDI is FUN!!

E*D*I: Getting Paid

[A briefing on the Invoice](#)

The act of selling and buying is called commerce, and when using EDI, you are involved in Electronic Commerce. So, read about how to simplify your invoicing, cut costs by not having to create, print, address envelopes, and mail invoices to your customers.

Learn how an electronic invoice can get you paid faster.

E*D*I: Shipping and the Notice

[A briefing on the Advanced Ship Notice](#)

The ASN, or 856, is seriously one of the most misunderstood documents in EDI. People try to avoid them like the plague. Why? They don't understand them.

If you understood the ASN, the 856, you would be comfortable reading and mapping the 856 into your repertoire of documents.

Learn how easy it is to create an electronic ASN.

E*D*I: The Complete Series

A complete briefing and education on EDI

Having so many people ask me for a rolled-up version of the EDI Education Series, I decided to put all 4 books into a single volume. This is an updated rendition of the 4 books in the EDI Education Series, and by reading and understanding the information between these covers, you will have an excellent basis to be an asset to any EDI Department.

Other Novels by Christopher E. Cancilla

Bus Route 40-A

A Short Story

The life of a planetary bus driver can be mundane, repetitious, sedate, and of course, unique, interesting, exciting, and spontaneous. Driving your whale around the planet, picking people up, and dropping them off is a lot of fun, sure. But at the same time, it is good to get a break in the monotonous time you call your day. So, when Walt was asked to take a charter trip for a few days, he jumped all over it, and knowing he had a good friend to ride shotgun, he felt like it would be a good thing for him and Biff. Plus, you get double pay and less work time, so he could be home more after the trip was over. No one could ever imagine what was about to happen; Walt met up with new influential people and became friends. He did mention the time he saved the lives of everyone on the bus.

Stories from Time and Space

[A collection: short stories, essays, & ideas.](#)

Chris Cancilla enjoys...no, he LOVES to write. And to that end, he has an opinion on just about everything. As a result, you can enjoy an eclectic sampling of a small collection of some of the pros he has penned throughout his life.

Lost Earth

[The Survival of Humanity.](#)

With the destruction of Earth, humanity learns to survive through cooperation, fellowship, and mutual caring. General Alexandria Rochenko leads by example and shows the remaining humans in the universe how to get along and help one another.

Other books available by Christopher E. Cancilla

Life as an Amateur

Welcome to Amateur Radio!

Obviously, you are interested, but you need to know more about it before diving in; here's your chance. Between these covers is information that can help you decide if this is a hobby you can enjoy.

- Can you have fun with amateur radio? **YES!**
- Can you learn new things? **YES!**
- Can you help during a disaster? **YES!**

The answers to your questions await; let's go over them together.

Getting Published!

A guide to getting published on Kindle

Getting published can be a new world for some. Here are a few tips and tricks I have learned over the years.

The world of publishing is a tough one to break into if you are looking for a publisher in the traditional sense; but if you plan to "self-publish," there is an array of things you need to know in advance, or better yet, my experiences may just avoid the processes costing you money to learn a hard lesson.

→ I paid my dues, and you get the benefit! ←

Toasting Marshmallows on my Dumpster Fire

Random thoughts as you dance through my mind!

Have you had random thoughts after reading social media? Most people do and never talk about those thoughts. They simply have those thoughts, agree that they are correct, and move on, never having brought those thoughts into the public consciousness.

Well, here is your opportunity to listen to my mind!

Walk with me as I have various individual thoughts on unique or possibly opposing topics, and rationalize my way through them.

Is it weird? Not really.

Is it interesting? Definitely!!

Meet you in my head!

Cookbooks Available by Christopher E. Cancilla

Camp Menu Planning

[An Indoor / Outdoor Cookbook](#)

Designed essentially for Boy Scouts to learn the art - if not the technique - of cooking. Contains many recipes, but more importantly, the recipes are more a method or style than a road map to a meal. Borrowing one recipe and using the technique and possibly ingredients of a third is what actual cooking is all about, and this book instills that knowledge in whoever reads and uses it to learn or learn something new. The additional information contained in the book is highly useful in the troop cooking experience. This book will give your Scouts the arrows in their culinary quiver to make friends and family happy. Gaining the knowledge and experience to impress his fellow patrol members with each meal in the woods and provide the Scout with the ammunition to cook a fantastic meal.

Personal Menu Planning

[A Backpackers Guide to eating well](#)

In the woods, on a trail, you need to adapt to your surroundings. For example, it is not practical on the Appalachian Trail to drag a cooler behind you. So, how can you make good food and save weight? It is pretty easy if you know a few secrets. So, read and learn and enjoy the tasty ideas.

Planning Meals & Eating Well

Your guide to assist in planning, cooking, and eating well

In the woods, at a campground, you need to impress the other campers. However, on the trails in the backcountry, you only need to impress yourself.

Learn the secrets of meal planning. The location makes no difference. You can be at home, at a flop-N-drop, or backpacking the mountains. Once you understand the mix & match, or M² system, you can do it all with style and grace. Impress your fellow campers with a fine meal, impress yourself after a 30-mile day.

But, in record time, with minimal clean-up.

Here are 75 of the best recipes for cooking a meal at home, at a campsite, or in the backcountry.