

Universe Alpha 7: Pioneer



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Chapter 1 - Commencement

A grandmotherly looking woman slowly walked up to the podium. It took a moment for people to quiet as they realized that the woman was wearing an admiral's formal dress uniform.

"Thank you, everyone, for being here today. I am Admiral Sonja Hanson. For those of you who are unaware of the significance of this occasion, allow me to explain."

"Following some recent events, Starfleet was inundated with hundreds of inquiries about the Starfleet Mentoring Program. The existing program that Starfleet had in place would consider one or two candidates per year, so as you can imagine, they were ill equipped to evaluate so many."

"I, and some of my colleagues, suggested that rather than let so much enthusiasm and potential go to waste, we allow the candidates to undergo rigorous testing at the Starfleet Academy to evaluate their fitness."

"All those present who have completed testing, congratulations, regardless of your ages, you have been accepted to the Starfleet Academy as cadets. You may enroll in the standard or accelerated courses in the coming semesters, as best suits your situation."

After a moment for the excited murmurs to subside, the admiral continued, "However, there are some among your number that have been selected for a further honor. Will the following individuals come forward and stand by me."

"Cadet Ensign Korrigon."

"Cadet Ensign Gelt."

"Cadet Ensign Parker."

"Cadet Ensign Xon."

"Cadet Ensign Rock."

"Cadet Lieutenant Sturgill."

Everyone watched as four humans walked up beside the admiral, one was a preteen girl, one was a barely teenage boy, the remaining two were teenage boys in their mid-to-later teens. Joining them were a young teenage Vulcan boy and what appeared to be a moving pile of rocks of indeterminate age or gender.

"These six have been selected to participate in a pioneer program whereby they will be trained by experienced Starfleet Officers during actual missions. Depending on how they perform, this may be the next step in the evolution of the Starfleet Mentoring Program. We'll just have to wait and see." Admiral Hanson said seriously, then turned to the six cadets lined up at her side and said more quietly, "Cadets, report to TerraMain, dock four, in one hour. Dismissed."

* * * * *

"Daddy?"

"Lexi? How are you doing? Do you need for me to come and get you?"

"No, Daddy. I'm not done yet."

"Has it been really bad? Why haven't you called sooner?"

"I couldn't. We've all been testing and doing drills and working as hard as we can to prove that we're the best and that we can handle it."

"So, have they decided if you'll be going to the Starfleet Academy yet? And have they said if you're going to get a break to come home, first?"

"Over a hundred of us passed the first screening and came to the academy for testing. About sixty or seventy kids either quit the first week or were thrown out. Out of who's left, about fifteen were selected to enter the academy."

"Where does that leave you?"

"As one of the six candidates selected for the new Starfleet Mentoring Program that they're trying out. I'll be transporting to TerraMain in about half an hour. When I get there, I'll find out what ship I've been assigned to."

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know. As soon as I know what my mission will be, I'll tell you when we're expecting to be back at earth... If I'm allowed to, you know, if it's not top secret or something."

"Do you need anything?"

"No, Daddy. Everything's taken care of."

"I'm so proud of you. Remember to call me if you need anything at all."

"I will. I promise. I have to go now, I'll be leaving in a few minutes. I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Lexi. I'm so proud, I don't have words to tell you how much."

"Don't get too proud yet, Daddy. I'm just getting started."

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"Do you think we'll all be on the same ship?" One of the older teenage boys asked nervously as he stared at the closed door to dock number four.

"We might just be meeting here before we're split up." The other one said frankly, then glanced down at the preteen girl standing at his side.

"Did I miss anything?" A pile of rocks asked in a computerized voice as he seemed to undulate across the deck with a scraping sound.

"No one's said anything. We've still got a few minutes before we're supposed to be here." The preteen girl said confidently.

"Good. After what we went through at the academy, I didn't know if this was going to be another test." The pile of rocks said frankly, then added, *"My name is unpronounceable in your language, but you can call me Cadet Ensign Rock, or Rocky if you like."*

"I'm Lexi. It's nice to meet you, Rocky." The preteen girl said seriously.

"Before we get into *who* you are, I'd like to know *what* you are." One of the older boys said honestly.

"My species is known as the Horta. Although our government hasn't formally joined the Federation, our planet exists within Federation space. So when I applied for the Starfleet Academy, they allowed me to be considered." Rocky said simply.

"Thanks. I'm sorry if I sounded like a jerk. I've just never seen anyone like you before. It's nice to meet you, Rocky. I'm Tracey and this guy is RJ." Tracey said pleasantly.

"A pleasure to meet you as well." Rocky said in what sounded to be a happy computerized voice.

"Have they started, yet?" A young teenage boy asked as he hurried up to the gathering.

"No. We're just waiting for someone to show up and tell us what to do. I'm Tracey, this is RJ, Lexi and Rocky." Tracey said graciously.

"I'm Hart. I was trying to call home and subspace wasn't cooperating with me... planetary alignment or something." Hart said seriously.

"Yeah. I had trouble, too." Tracey confirmed.

"So you're not from Earth, either?" Hart asked with surprise.

"RJ's from Earth, I'm from Coffelt." Tracey said simply.

"Hey! I know where that is!" Hart said with surprise.

"Really? Not many people do." Tracey said honestly.

"What about you, Lexi? Where are you from?" Hart ask curiously.

"I'm from Earth, too... I guess someone has to be." Lexi finished with a grin, then asked, "What about you, Rocky?"

"I'm from Wisconsin." Rocky said seriously.

After a moment for the humans to puzzle over that, he continued, "*I'm just kidding. I'm from Janus VI.*"

Lexi glanced at her watch and whispered, "It's time."

Just as she did, the sixth member of their group, a Vulcan boy, walked calmly to join the gathering.

Before anyone could say anything, the large door they were standing in front of began to open.

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"Cadets, please follow me." A young man, a crewman, said before turning to walk away.

"They told me at the academy that my clothes and stuff were going to be transported aboard, do you know about that?" Lexi hurried to ask as they walked.

"No. But I can check on that for you while you're meeting with the admiral." The crewman said simply.

"We're meeting with Admiral Hanson?" RJ asked with a tremble of fear in his voice.

"Yes. I'm taking you to the conference room. This way." The man said, then indicated the entry to the turbolift.

The six cadets stepped aboard and waited as the crewman said, "Conference room one."

As the lift began to move, they all remained silent.

* * * * *

The cadets stood as a group, where the crewman had left them, outside the conference room door.

It took a minute, but Tracey finally summoned the courage to lead the way into the room.

"Welcome, Cadets. Please take your seats so we may begin." Admiral Hanson said pleasantly.

When Rocky didn't move from his place, just inside the door, Admiral Hanson continued, "Cadet Ensign Rock, why don't you come over here by me, so you can be included in the conversation?"

"Thank you, Admiral." Rocky said timidly as he glided across the floor.

"I suppose we should get right down to business. We have things to do." Admiral Hanson said as she pressed some keys on the small control pad built into the conference room table.

The viewscreen activated, showing the United Federation of Planets logo.

Everyone turned their attention to the screen and waited for whatever was about to happen.

When the viewscreen on the wall finally changed, everyone stared in surprise.

"Lehman?" Hart asked in disbelief.

"Nope. Lehman's my twin. Try again."

"Vincent! How are you doing? Where are you?" Tracey asked with a smile.

"Actually, I can't discuss where I am, but I'm fine. When Admiral Hanson realized that I knew most of you, she thought it'd be good if I was here to welcome you. How are you doing, Tracey?" Vincent asked cheerfully.

"I'm okay." Tracey said honestly.

"What about you, Lexi? Was I right about Starfleet?" Vincent asked with a grin.

"If you hadn't told me the stuff you did, I wouldn't have made it." Lexi said frankly.

"RJ, who would have thought that after the way we first met that you'd be here, now?" Vincent said with a warm smile.

"I don't think I ever really thanked you, Vincent. You changed my life." RJ said seriously.

"I just told you the truth, as I saw it. That's it. If you can do the same thing, maybe you can change some lives, too." Vincent said simply, then turned his attention downward and smiled before saying, *"I almost missed you down there, you must be Rocky."*

"Are you *'The Hero of Kimber'?*" Rocky asked slowly.

"That's what some people call me." Vincent answered frankly.

"Your story is what inspired me to apply for the Starfleet Mentoring Program. With all that you must have had to overcome, you were able to emerge triumphant." Rocky said in awe.

Vincent chuckled, then responded, *"Rocky, I'm just a regular guy who faced some things and made some choices. Things turned out so that my story was on the news, but that doesn't mean that I did anything that was more special than what other Starfleet people do every day. I just got noticed."*

There was a moment of silence that followed, then Vincent turned his attention to the last member of the Cadet group and formally said, *"Greetings, my brother. It satisfies me to see your accomplishment."*

Xon's Vulcan facade broke at the statement and a small smile crossed his lips before he responded, "Thank you, brother. I have missed our conversations whilst I have been at the Starfleet Academy."

"Yeah. Well, now that you've been accepted, I expect to see you in class." Vincent said frankly.

"I have only just arrived and am unaware of my schedule, but I will endeavour to attend." Xon responded seriously.

"Don't worry. Starfleet won't let anyone go without an education. I'll see you in our classroom." Vincent said with an air of certainty.

"I will look forward to that time with anticipation." Xon said seriously.

"I'm going to have to go, soon. But before I do, I want all you guys to know that if you're having problems, get in touch with me and I'll try to help you. Remember, I know what it feels like to be a kid in Starfleet. I've had to deal with a lot of different people and situations because of it." Vincent said firmly.

"Thanks, Vincent. I don't know about the others, but I'm going to call you if I get stuck on something." Lexi said assertively.

Vincent smiled, then looked over the group before saying, *"Hart? I'm talking to you, too. Lehman, Benny and JonJon have been keeping me up to date on what's happening at New Hope, so I feel like I already know you. If you have any trouble, you call me and I'll help you figure it out. Is it a deal?"* Vincent asked seriously.

"Yes. Thank you." Hart said in astonishment.

"Good. Just so that's clear. I've got to go now. Just remember that I've been there and I know how it is. There's going to be things that seem too big and scary for you to deal with. It's alright to be scared, but do it anyway. Some people are going to look down on you as 'cute' or 'privileged'. Screw them. They don't matter. You're there to do a job. Do it." Vincent said as he looked over the group one last time.

"Thank you, Ensign Winters. So far as I am aware, you aren't officially being recognized as a 'sponsor' for this group, but I hope you won't mind if we think of you as such." Admiral Hanson said with a smile.

"Yes, of course, Admiral. I would be proud to sponsor any member of this group." Vincent said professionally, then added more quietly, *"Winters, out."*

Admiral Hanson turned off the viewscreen, then said to the group, "We have much to do, but I believe that was time well spent."

One by one, the cadets turned their attention away from the viewscreen.

Admiral Hanson pressed one of the keys on the built in control panel, then said, "Captain, when you have a moment, I'd like to introduce you to your new crewmembers."

A moment later, the door to the conference room opened.

When Tracey saw the captain's uniform, he immediately stood and announced, "Captain on deck."

The other cadets stood as Rocky turned himself so he was facing the captain.

Since Rocky was incapable of making any facial expressions, mostly because he didn't have anything remotely resembling a face, no one could tell if he were surprised or not.

Likewise, years of attempting to master Vulcan emotional control allowed Xon to maintain a neutral expression.

The others weren't quite so lucky.

Although none of them behaved disrespectfully, their surprise could clearly be seen.

The unexpected sight of the stout, furry man with a snout clearly caught them off guard.

"I am Captain Gravf. Welcome aboard the *USS Copernicus*. You are here to be trained. I will see that you are. I will tell you now, so there is no misunderstanding, I have no patience for excuses. I give an order, you carry it out. Keep this in mind." The captain said firmly.

All the cadets were still and silent as the captain walked down the line, examining them with a critical eye.

"Which one are you?" The captain asked in an impatient tone.

"Cadet Lieutenant Sturgill, Sir." Tracey said formally.

"Sturgill, you say? Are you Cassandra's son?" The captain asked curiously.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said sharply.

"That bitch is hard as nails. If you've got even half her backbone, you'll do fine." The captain said with a chuckle, then walked to the next cadet in line and asked, "You are?"

"Cadet Ensign Parker, Sir." RJ said firmly, and luckily, he sounded far more self assured than he actually felt.

"Ah, yes. The arbiter. You'll be stationed at communications with Lieutenant Baz to learn your duties. Once you've mastered that, we have some more specialized training for you." The captain said with an evil grin, then walked to the next in line and asked, "What about you?"

"Cadet Ensign Gelt, Sir." Lexi said confidently as she looked up at the horrible, piggish being that was her captain.

"I never thought I would see a day when I would have a tiny little girl as my helmsman... but I've been assured that your reaction times and knowledge of the systems is second to none of the other candidates. Now, all that is left is for you to prove yourself in a real life setting." Captain Gravf said as he looked down into her eyes.

Lexi held his gaze without wavering.

"You'll be training with Lieutenant Fister. Pay close attention. He may have the social skills of a denebian slime devil, but there's no denying that the man is an outstanding pilot." Captain Gravf said before turning to the next person in line and asked, "And you?"

"Cadet Ensign Korrigon, Sir." Hart said in a perfectly professional and respectful voice.

"Ah, yes. The phantom." Captain Gravf chuckled to himself, then continued, "For many, judgments were made, factoring in their accumulated history... but you don't seem to have any... history, that is. You seem to have popped into existence rather recently. In fact, from the timing, I would estimate that it was about the time that you chose to submit your application to the Starfleet Academy."

Hart maintained a neutral expression and waited to be asked a question.

The captain noticed the lack of response, and from his smile, he approved. "According to the placement tests and psychological evaluations, you seem to be particularly well suited for security. So, you will be training with my chief of security, Lieutenant Okawa."

Hart betrayed the slightest hint of a smile at the announcement.

"And who do we have here?" The captain asked as he turned his attention to the young Vulcan teenager.

"Cadet Ensign Xon, Sir."

"Your duty station will be 'Sciences' and you'll be training with Commander Pell. With most of these... Cadets..." The captain said with a dismissive wave, "...I have some idea of what to expect. But you, young man... I'm interested to see what you're capable of."

Xon determined that the statement didn't require a response from him, so he maintained his impassive expression.

"I suppose, by process of elimination, that you would be Cadet Ensign 'Rock'." The captain said as he looked at what appeared to be a pile of rocks at his feet.

"Yes, *Sir*." Rocky responded quickly.

"The helm and navigation controls have been retrofitted so you'll be able to operate them. We plan on having the remaining bridge stations likewise fitted in due time. Also, I'm happy to tell you, that you're going to have the opportunity to be trained by a true prodigy in navigation, Ensign Lord." Captain Gravf said with obvious admiration.

"Captain, if you're done with the introductions, I believe the newest members of your crew could do with a few minutes to stow their belongings before we disembark." Admiral Hanson said pleasantly.

"Of course, Admiral. I'll see to it." Captain Gravf said simply, then left the room.

"Just so you're aware, I'm going to be accompanying you on this, your first voyage. I will leave your training to the captain and stay out of the way, for the most part. But don't be surprised if I poke my head out of my office from time to time, just to see how all of you are doing." Admiral Hansen finished with a smile.

The cadets remained standing in a line, wondering what they should do next.

"We should be leaving dock, soon. You had better stow your gear. Dismissed." Admiral Hanson said casually.

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As the cadets filed out of the conference room, they noticed the same crewman waiting for them that had conducted them from the TerraMain dock.

"If you'll follow me, I'll take you to your quarters." The crewman said professionally.

"Excuse me, what's your name?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"I'm Petty Officer August." The crewman said efficiently.

"No. I think what he means is, do you have a name like a real person?" RJ asked curiously.

"Alonzo." Crewman August reluctantly admitted.

"Your parents named you Alonzo August?" RJ asked as he slightly cringed.

"Yes. My parents, April and Alexander August, chose to name me Alonzo." He responded, as he stopped outside the turbolift, waiting for the car to arrive.

"Would you mind if we call you Alonzo?" Lexi asked curiously.

"That would be fine, as long as we're off duty." Crewman August answered with a smile as he ushered the group onto the waiting turbolift.

"Deck four." Crewman August said once Rocky was aboard. Then he turned his attention to Lexi and said, "I double checked and all your personal belongings have been transported up and should be waiting for you in your quarters."

"Thank you." Lexi said quietly, then explained, "I just wanted to be sure that I'd have more clothes than just what I'm wearing when we leave

Earth."

"The crew usually wear their uniforms at all times except when we're in dock and given leave. So even if your things were left behind for some reason, it wouldn't be a big problem." Crewman August said frankly.

When the lift doors opened, Crewman August led them down a hallway, then stopped. "Cadet Parker and Cadet Sturgill, this will be your room."

Tracey led the way inside and smiled when he saw the layout.

"This is nice. I actually expected it to be smaller." Tracey said frankly.

"The *Copernicus* is an old style Oberth class science vessel. I don't think the crew cabins have been updated since the ship was built. I guess they did things bigger back then." Crewman August said seriously.

"Who's next?" Tracey asked cheerfully as he walked toward the door.

"The cabin across the hall is for Cadet Gelt." Crewman August said simply.

"You get a cabin all to yourself." RJ said with a grin.

"It's a girl thing. Envy me." Lexi said teasingly.

"The next cabin is for Cadet Korrigon and Cadet Xon." Crewman August said as he motioned to the cabin next to Tracey and RJ's.

"And the one across the hall belongs to Cadet Rock."

"Why does Rocky get a cabin all to himself?" RJ asked curiously, then looked down at Rocky and quickly said, "I'm not mad or anything. I just want to know how they decided."

"As I understand it, Cadet Rock requires a specialized atmosphere that would not be accommodating to carbon based life forms." Crewman August said carefully.

"*Envy me.*" Rocky said playfully.

All the cadets laughed and Crewman August even revealed a smile at the statement.

"Do you know if they've done anything about my... medical concerns?" Rocky asked slowly.

"No. Not that they would talk to me about something like that. Do you need to see a doctor?"

"No. I'll be fine for a while, I just need regular treatments to counteract the effects of your oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere." Rocky said frankly.

"You should all probably get your gear stowed. The ship is scheduled to disembark soon and you'll probably be called to witness the departure." Crewman August said seriously.

"Okay. Thanks, Alonzo." RJ said gratefully.

Crewman August smiled at him and gave a nod before walking away.

"Rocky, are you going to need any help unpacking?" Tracey asked curiously.

"I don't believe so, but I'll let you know."

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"Cadet crew, report to the bridge." Sounded from the intercom.

Hart and Xon's door was the first to open.

They stepped into the hallway just as Lexi's door opened.

"Do you know how to get to the bridge from here?" Lexi asked the pair anxiously as the other cadets filed into the hallway.

"You get onto the lift, there..." Xon said as he pointed, "...then say 'bridge'."

Hart smiled, but didn't react otherwise.

Lexi rolled her eyes, but kept any comments to herself.

"Are we all ready?" Tracey asked as he checked to see that all the cadets were present and accounted for.

"Yes. I don't want to miss the departure." Rocky said honestly.

Without further discussion, Tracey led the group to the nearest turbolift.

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"Cadets, move to your assigned stations and observe the procedure for disembarkation." Captain Gravf said firmly.

Rocky and Lexi immediately oozed and walked, respectively, to the navigation and helm stations.

"Cadet Sturgill, over here by me." The captain prompted a moment later.

Tracey reluctantly walked across the bridge and to the captain's side.

"Cadet Xon." A woman called sternly from the science station. She was an older, human woman and was nearly the height and breadth of Captain Gravf.

"Cadet Korrigon." A woman in her mid thirties said from a seat at one of the stations around the periphery of the bridge. As Hart approached, he noticed a pair of crutches on the floor, under her console.

"Cadet Parker, over here." A man... or possibly a woman, said from the comm station.

When Tracey saw him, or her, his eyes went wide in recognition.

"It appears that everyone is in place. Communications, request departure trajectory from TerraMain." Captain Gravf said firmly.

"Aye, Captain." The man, or woman, at communications said efficiently. Tracey's expression became one of disgust as he continued to stare.

"Navigation, plot a course for Tellar." The captain said firmly.

"Aye, Captain." A soft, feminine voice said from the navigation station.

Tracey turned his attention in that direction and was stunned to find that the woman manning the navigation station was nothing short of breathtaking. While Tracey usually felt more attracted to men, he wasn't immune to the allure of a truly gorgeous woman.

"Course plotted." The woman said in a voice that was music to the ears.

Tracey's attention was drawn by the captain's movement and he followed.

After a moment to look over the plotted course, the captain said, "Very good."

"Course for departure received." Lieutenant Baz said professionally as RJ stood just behind him (or her), watching the console carefully.

"Lieutenant Fister, clear moorings and take us out." Captain Gravf said firmly.

"Aye, Captain." Lieutenant Fister said as he sprang into action.

Tracey was amazed that in only saying two innocuous words, Lieutenant Fister had sounded condescending and rude. For some inexplicable reason, Tracey had an overwhelming urge to punch him in the head.

The sound of the maneuvering thrusters drew Tracey's attention and he watched the reverse angle view on the main viewscreen as they slowly pulled away from TerraMain.

"One quarter impulse." Captain Gravf said firmly.

"One quarter. Aye, Captain." Lieutenant Fister confirmed.

Tracey looked around the bridge and found that his fellow cadets were all absorbed in watching their mentors.

"Is the interface working? Were you able to see all of that?" Ensign Lord asked quietly, in a melodic voice, as she looked down at Rocky, by her feet.

"*Yes. My interface is working perfectly. You have projected a very elegant course.*" Rocky said admiringly.

Tracey felt his heart flutter at the sight of Ensign Lord's smile. The warmth and satisfaction shown like a beacon.

A touch on his shoulder caused Tracey to jump.

"Once underway, we tour the bridge." Captain Gravf said quietly, then walked toward the science station.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said, then followed.

"Commander Pell, allow me to introduce my apprentice, Cadet Sturgill. You remember Cassandra, don't you? This is her son." Captain Gravf asked somewhat seriously.

"Yes. Of course. I see the family resemblance. You have your mother's forehead." Commander Pell said in such a flat tone that Tracey couldn't tell if she were being serious or playful.

"Commander, tell me, do you think you'll have any problem training Cadet Xon, here?" Captain Gravf asked casually.

"No, Sir. His academic transcripts show that he has the foundational knowledge required to perform adequately on the science station. His psychological profile from the academy indicates him to be sufficiently strong willed and even tempered to function as a first officer." Commander Pell said seriously.

"So, Cadet Xon, are you ready to start learning from one of the best first officers in all of Starfleet?" Captain Gravf asked with a smile.

"I am." Xon said without the slightest trace of emotion.

"I'll leave you to it, then." Captain Gravf said approvingly, then moved on to the next station around the periphery of the room.

"On this ship, we depend on the security chief to oversee the defensive shields and weapons as well as maintaining a small security force to keep order, usually among our passengers." The captain said frankly.

"If we're a science vessel, why do we have weapons?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"There are times when we're carrying valuable equipment, information or personnel. We need to be able to protect them. Then, there is always the threat of pirates. I doubt that a pirate ship would have reason to seek us

out, but if they were to stumble upon us, I'm sure they'd be more than happy to loot whatever we happened to be carrying... after killing us, of course." The captain added with a grin.

"Of course." Tracey parroted.

"Lieutenant Okawa, I'd like to introduce Cadet Sturgill, from the Coffelt colony. He's going to be serving as my apprentice for the foreseeable future." Captain Gravf said pleasantly.

Tracey very nearly gasped at the sight when Lieutenant Okawa turned. Her face was covered by a web of scars and not all her facial features seemed to be located in exactly the right place.

"Coffelt? I've heard good things about your security force. Capable people." Lieutenant Okawa said seriously.

"Yes, Ma'am. We're very proud of them." Tracey confirmed.

"So, Lieutenant, do you think you're up to the challenge of teaching Cadet Korrigon the ins and outs of security?" Captain Gravf asked with a smile.

Lieutenant Okawa gave Tracey a long appraising look before saying, "I've got the feeling that, when it comes down to it, Cadet Korrigon is going to prove that he has what it takes."

"Then I will leave him to your tutelage." The captain said approvingly, then started walking toward the communications station.

Tracey's expression became hard as he looked at the officer on duty.

"Lieutenant Baz, I would like to introduce you to my apprentice, Cadet Sturgill, that is, if you aren't already acquainted." The captain said somewhat inquisitively.

"I have seen Tracey at various times over the years, when I have been invited to formal functions at the Coffelt Base, however, I don't recall if I've ever spoken to him before."

"Did my mom send you to watch over me?" Tracey asked in a less than friendly tone.

"Your mother notified me of an open position for which I was qualified. However, she did not ask, nor did I volunteer, to watch over you." Lieutenant Baz said carefully.

Tracey didn't seem to be convinced, but restrained himself from questioning further.

"Lieutenant, how do you think Cadet Parker will do on communications?" Captain Gravf asked, in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

"His evaluation was promising. Having met him, I believe he may exceed expectations. I intend to do all in my power to help him realize his full potential." Lieutenant Baz said frankly.

RJ flashed Tracey a withering 'help me' look at the statement.

Tracey couldn't help but respond with a reassuring smile. When he and RJ met on the first day of testing at the academy, they had been amiable acquaintances, at best. But as more and more of their classmates dropped out or were asked to leave, they ended up becoming friends, somewhat by default.

The captain looked at the forward viewscreen, then said, "Helm, increase velocity to half impulse."

"Aye, Captain. Half impulse." The helmsman responded in, what seemed to Tracey, to be a mocking tone.

The captain led the way to the navigation station in the middle of the bridge, before saying, "Ensign Lord, may I introduce my apprentice, Cadet Sturgill."

The blond woman turned and Tracey was struck again by how attractive she was. Her large, blue eyes sparkled with delight as she looked at him before saying, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Cadet Sturgill."

Tracey found himself unable to speak as he stared at the gorgeous woman.

"Ensign Lord, do you think that you'll be able to train Cadet Rock, using the modified equipment that we have installed?" The captain asked curiously.

"Yes, Captain. I'm going to take his training nice and slow, so we're both one hundred percent sure that he completely understands. But I think we have all the tools that we're going to need." Ensign Lord said professionally.

"Very good. Let me know if you have any need of further accommodation for your pupil to achieve complete mastery of the navigation station." The captain said firmly.

"Yes, Sir. I will." Ensign Lord said confidently.

The captain walked to the other end of the combined helm and navigation station before saying, "Lieutenant Fister, I'd like to introduce my apprentice, Cadet Sturgill."

The man at the helm gave Tracey a quick, appraising look, then turned his attention back to the helm controls before saying, "Hi."

"Lieutenant, do you think that you're up to the challenge of teaching Cadet Gelt the operation of your station?" The captain asked in a voice that was a degree or two colder than he had used in speaking to any of the other officers.

"I suppose I have to be, that is, if I want to stay on the helm. That's the deal isn't it? I train her. I don't get demoted?" Lieutenant Fister asked belligerently.

"No. I believe you misunderstand." Captain Gravf said with a knowing and slightly evil smile. "The deal is, you have one last chance to prove that you want to remain in Starfleet. No one is denying your skills as a pilot. But your complete lack of other skills may yet disqualify you from further service. It is hoped that in helping Cadet Gelt learn the essential skills to become an officer, you might learn some yourself."

"Yes, Sir." Lieutenant Fister said past clenched teeth.

"When we're out of the Sol system, put us on the projected course at warp three point five." Captain Gravf said sternly.

"Aye, Captain." Lieutenant Fister said coldly.

"Cadets, you are free to return to your quarters or you may remain at your posts, as you like. Report for duty, to conference room one, at 07:30 tomorrow, for the morning briefing. Dismissed." Captain Gravf said as he walked toward the command chair.

When Tracey looked around, he wasn't surprised to see that none of the other cadets had left their posts. Each one was intently studying what their mentor was doing, or talking with them quietly.

"If you plan on staying, I'm going to put you to work." The captain said to Tracey firmly.

"That's what I'm here for, Sir." Tracey said seriously.

The captain smiled at the response, then said, "Go to one of the auxiliary stations and sign in. Before this day is over, you're going to be familiar with every piece of cargo and every living being that has been entrusted to our care."

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said with a smile, then walked to the auxiliary station to begin.

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When the 'second shift' officers arrived for duty, the cadets looked from station to station at each other before silently agreeing to leave as a group. When the others started moving toward the lift, Rocky fell into line with them.

"Mess hall." Tracey said to the ceiling of the lift, then quietly asked, "So, how was it?"

"I learned much." Xon said simply.

"I think we all did. I was just wondering if anyone's decided that it's too much and wants to go home." Tracey explained.

"No. I believe that this is within my abilities." Xon said thoughtfully.

"I still don't know if my mentor is a man or a woman." RJ said without warning.

Lexi and Hart couldn't restrain a laugh, as much from RJ's words as his flummoxed expression.

When the lift doors opened, Tracey stepped out, then said, "Lieutenant Baz is a Knorran. Their people have four different genders. I'm not sure which one he is, but it's customary at Coffelt to call anyone of unknown gender a 'he' until they correct you... which they usually don't. They understand that our language doesn't have an easy way to refer to them, and as far as I can tell, they don't take it personally."

"Oh, okay. That'll make talking to 'him', a lot easier. I spent the entire afternoon trying not to talk because I didn't know whether to say 'Yes, Sir' or 'Yes, Ma'am'." RJ said honestly.

"Just so you know, there is one thing that you should never ever do." Tracey said seriously as he stopped, just outside the mess hall door.

RJ looked at him with immediate concern.

"Whatever you do, don't call him 'it'. Even though it sort of makes sense to us because it's a gender neutral pronoun, to Knorrans it's like you're calling them a thing." Tracey said seriously.

"That's good to know." Lexi said thoughtfully, then added, "I can't believe we have a Tellarite captain. When I saw him, I thought I was going to pass out."

Tracey smiled at her, then motioned for the group to enter the mess hall with him.

"Tellarites can be mean and nasty." Hart said seriously as the group took their places in the serving line.

After a moment, Hart continued, "They can also be reasonable and nice. They're people, just like anyone else."

"I guess so, but the captain's just really scary to look at." Lexi said anxiously.

"From what I've heard, Tellarites don't like the way we look, either. To them, humans look like they're unfinished. You know, all weird and pink and squishy and too thin." Hart said frankly.

"Speaking of looks, what happened to Lieutenant Okawa? She looks like she was torn to pieces." Tracey asked Hart seriously.

"I don't know." Hart said simply, then calmly added, "And I'll never ask."

Conversation stopped as they made their way to the front of the serving line and started making their food selections.

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When the cadets made their way to a table, Lexi thought to ask, "What do you eat, Rocky?"

"From what I've been told, telling you as you're about to eat is not a good idea." Rocky said frankly, then continued, *"I will eat when I've returned to my cabin."*

"Okay. Well, I'm glad you came to the mess hall with us, anyway, even if you're not eating." Lexi said with a smile.

"Yeah. What do you think of your mentor, Rocky?" Tracey asked curiously.

"Ensign Lord is very knowledgeable. I think I'm going to learn a lot from her." Rocky said honestly.

"Did you even notice how incredibly hot she is?" Tracey asked curiously.

"According to my sensors, her body temperature was consistent with human norms." Rocky said cautiously.

"That's not what I meant. She's probably one of the prettiest women I've ever seen in person. Didn't you even notice?" Tracey asked in disbelief.

"Come down here and look me in the eyes and I'll tell you." Rocky said quietly.

Tracey scooted off his chair, then looked at Rocky from one angle, then another, before asking, "Where are your eyes?"

"Oh, that's right, I don't have any! Now, what was your question?" Rocky asked playfully.

"You're blind?" Lexi asked with concern.

"No. My people have a vibratory sense that operates somewhere between your sense of hearing and feeling. It allows us to use a sort of sonar to visualize our surroundings in a 3D model. Beyond that, the translator that I use to speak has other functions, including sensors, so that I can gather other information. If one of my people were to lose their vibratory sense and become sighted, we would go insane from the overwhelming feeling of isolation." Rocky said carefully.

"How could you possibly know that?" Tracey asked curiously.

"Some of my people have mind melded with your people and have experienced 'sight' for a brief time. From what they said, it was horrible." Rocky said seriously.

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"Xon, when we were talking to Vincent, he called you his brother, but when he was at my house, I met his brother Lawrence..." RJ trailed off, not knowing how to word his question.

"And you're a Vulcan." Lexi interjected.

RJ looked at her, then nodded his agreement.

"Vincent is married to 'she who is my sister'. Therefore, I am officially his brother-in-law. He has chosen to call me 'brother'." Xon said simply.

"You're T'Lani's brother?" RJ asked with surprise.

"Do you know 'she who is my sister'?" Xon asked curiously.

"I've never met her, but Vincent showed us a picture of her. She's really beautiful." RJ said frankly.

"I've met her. She is." Tracey said seriously.

"To me, T'Lani is simply 'she who is my sister'." Xon said honestly.

"Wow, you're Vincent's brother." Lexi said as she looked at Xon, then turned to RJ and said, "And he's been to your house. I just met him at a cookout..."

"Excuse me." A man interrupted as he stopped at their table.

"Did you need something?" RJ asked cautiously.

"I am Mr. Whipple, from the Federation's tutoring center. I've stopped by to discuss the arrangements that have been made for your education." The man said with an insincere smile.

"I am enrolled at the Vulcan Academy of Science. I have been assured that I can continue my studies with them and that I may submit completed assignments as I am able." Xon said seriously.

"Well, that may be well and good for a Vulcan child, but the *human* students might need a more structured learning environment." Mr. Whipple said condescendingly.

"*Where does that leave me?*" Rocky asked curiously.

"My superiors have promised that we would make any accommodations necessary." Mr. Whipple said with a distasteful look at Rocky.

"*Don't go to any trouble on my account.*" Rocky said in a computerized voice that accurately conveyed his level of irritation, then he turned himself toward Xon and asked, "*Xon, do you think you could help me get enrolled at your school?*"

"It would be my pleasure to do so." Xon said calmly, then turned his attention to the others at the table and carefully continued, "You may be interested to know that my brother also attends classes at the Vulcan Academy of Science. We have a common class that we attend in a virtual classroom where we are often able to converse."

"That's nice." Mr. Whipple said flatly, then continued, "Now, I need to go over these schedules with you. Everything's already been cleared with the captain..."

"Xon, do you think there'd be room for one more in your class?" Tracey asked simply.

"Two!" Lexi immediately interjected.

"Three." Hart said in a cold voice as he looked directly at Mr. Whipple.

"Four." RJ said with a smile.

"You can't do that! I came all the way out here to facilitate your tutoring." Mr. Whipple whined.

"Sucks to be you." RJ chuckled.

"I'm going to talk to the captain about this!" Mr. Whipple shouted, then stormed away from the table.

"Do you think we're going to get in trouble?" Lexi asked cautiously.

"Not if we all do what we said we were going to do and get enrolled." Tracey said thoughtfully.

"Xon, do you know who we need to talk to?" Hart asked curiously.

"Yes. I made arrangements for my education before leaving Vulcan. With the information available in your personnel files, it should be a simple matter." Xon said seriously.

"Let's do it, before that buttwipe can talk the captain into making us take his classes." Lexi said firmly.

Everyone picked up their trays and headed for the dropoff window.

* * * * *

"Cadets, please report to conference room one." The captain's voice sounded over the intercom.

"I wonder how bad this is going to be." RJ said nervously as he walked out of the cabin with the rest of the cadets.

After a moment to consider, Tracey said, "It may not be that bad. Just remember what the captain told you when we were welcomed aboard."

"What's that?" RJ asked in panic.

"He hates excuses. If he wants to know something, he'll ask you. If he doesn't ask, don't volunteer it." Tracey said firmly.

"Yeah. He seems like he's really fair." Lexi said thoughtfully.

"Conference room one." Tracey said to the ceiling of the lift, then asked, "Did everyone complete their enrollment?"

"Yeah. Thanks to Xon, I did." Lexi said with a smile at him.

"*Yes. I doubt that we would have known who to talk to or understood what they were asking if Xon weren't helping us.*" Rocky confirmed.

"Hart, you good?" Tracey asked with concern.

With a smile, Hart quietly said, "Yeah. Really good."

When the lift doors opened, the cadets walked as a group the few feet to the conference room door.

* * * * *

The cadets filed into the conference room and formed a line before Tracey said, "Cadets, reporting as ordered, Sir."

The captain glanced at Mr. Whipple at his side, then proceeded, "The representative from the Federation Tutoring Center tells me that you have chosen not to conform to the lesson plans that have been made for you."

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said simply.

"Although you have been given the honor of being chosen to participate in this pioneer program, that does not negate the need for a proper education." Captain Gravf said seriously.

All the cadets remained at attention and held their expressions as though they were seasoned Starfleet officers.

"How do you propose that we deal with this situation?" The captain asked carefully.

"We have all enrolled at the Vulcan Academy of Science." Tracey said calmly.

The captain thought about that for a moment, then said, "Problem solved. Dismissed."

"But! But!" Mr. Whipple began to sputter.

"That means you may leave, Mr. Whipple." The captain said to him slowly, as if speaking to a small, and not altogether bright, child.

The cadets filed out of the room, maintaining their military posture, with their heads held high.

* * * * *

"Barracks?" Tracey asked as they approached the lift.

"Mess hall." Lexi said firmly.

At Tracey's inquiring look, she explained, "We didn't get to finish dinner and I'm still hungry."

After a moment to consider, Tracey admitted, "I am, too."

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The cadets stayed together and spoke little until they had all made their food selections and, once again, settled in around a table.

"Rocky, I'm just curious. What was it that made you want to be in Starfleet?" Lexi asked, before taking a bite of food.

"Most of my people are miners which, considering the geological makeup of Janus VI, is a good thing. But occasionally one of us notices that there are other planets supporting life in the universe, and we begin to dream about what life must be like elsewhere. When that happens, we're encouraged to reach for the stars and follow our dreams. I probably would be on Janus VI right now, reaching and dreaming, except for one thing.

When we received the Federation News report about 'The Hero of Kimber', I realized that the only thing limiting me was myself. It was shortly thereafter that I made my first inquiry about the Starfleet Mentoring Program."

"Reaching and dreaming... I like that." Lexi said with a smile, then asked, "What about you, Hart?"

"What about me?" Hart asked cautiously.

"What happened to make you want to sign up for the mentoring program?" Lexi asked curiously.

"Why do you want to know?" Hart asked suspiciously.

"Because I just do. Okay?" Lexi said frankly.

After a moment to consider the validity of her question, Hart finally said, "I'm from New Hope. One of my friends... Actually, my best friend, Lehman, kept going on and on about his twin brother, Vincent, and what an incredible life he has. I just soaked that in for a while, but then, at some point, I got to thinking about what kind of life I had and where it looked like it was going. This was a little bit after the Federation News report, but Lehman had it recorded and I got to see it a few times... Okay, maybe more than a few times. He's *really* proud of his brother. But I didn't mind. Anyway, I figured that I'd go ahead and put my name in for the Starfleet Mentoring Program so that maybe they'd send me back a thing saying why I *wouldn't* be considered, so I'd know what things I have to work on. I never thought that they would do the whole mass testing thing and I never would have imagined that at the end of it all that they'd pick me. I guess it's just lucky for me that all the other cadets were whiney little bitches."

Everyone looked at Hart with surprise as Rocky said, "*Excuse me?*"

Hart realized what he had said and quickly amended, "I mean the ones who didn't make it. You guys are good enough or you wouldn't be here."

After a moment for everyone to accept Hart's explanation, Tracey said, "It looks like everyone's finished. Do you guys want to go up to my cabin?"

"Yeah. I want RJ to tell us why he signed up for the mentoring program." Lexi finished with a giggle.

RJ smiled at her as he picked up his tray to follow the others.

* * * * *

As soon as everyone was aboard the turbolift, Tracey looked upward and said, "Deck four."

"There's no real story for me to tell. I live in a trailer park in Georgia with my dad and my brother, Willy. For a long time I've been thinking that my only real shot at doing anything decent with my life was to get into Starfleet, but I always figured that that was years and years away."

RJ was interrupted by the doors of the lift opening.

All the cadets automatically followed Tracey to his cabin to continue their conversation.

As soon as everyone was inside, RJ continued, "Vincent's cousins, Loi and Malcolm live in the same trailer park that I do. After some stuff, Vincent talked to me about what it takes to be in Starfleet and... well, to be honest, I think the thing that did it for me is that he acted like I was good enough. He introduced me to some of the members of his Clan and he got me hooked up on the Starfleet Sim and even fixed it so I could take Vulcan language lessons. I guess, after all that, I decided that if Vincent saw something in me that might be good enough, that I'd go ahead and try. I almost talked myself out of it. But my dad and my brother and my... Loi all told me to go for it."

"Your Loi?" Lexi asked knowingly.

"My boyfriend, sort of... maybe." RJ finished regretfully.

"Whoa! Sort of? Maybe? How does *that* work?" Hart asked challengingly.

"I don't know. I mean, when I left, we were boyfriends, for sure. But now that I got accepted and I'm here... What if he finds someone else to love, you know, someone who'll be there when he needs him?" RJ asked

miserably.

"Maybe it'll be *you* who finds someone else." Hart said simply.

"No. No way." RJ said firmly.

"RJ. Just like with getting into the academy, things aren't going to work out just because you want them to. You have to work for them." Tracey said seriously.

"Like how?" RJ asked uncertainly.

"You'll have to figure it out. But I bet a good place to start would be to write him a long LONG email and tell him just how much you love him and miss him. You can't expect him to just sit there and wait without hearing from you." Tracey said frankly.

"Yeah." RJ muttered, then looked around the room and asked, "Who's next?"

When his gaze stopped on Xon, he was answered with a raised eyebrow.

It took a minute, but finally everyone was looking at Xon expectantly.

"He who is my brother has accomplished many worthy goals and brought honor to his family and his house. To follow the example of such a person is logical. Therefore, I sent an inquiry regarding the qualifications to be considered for the Starfleet Mentoring Program." Xon said very precisely.

"Logical, huh? I'll have to try that someday." Lexi said with a grin at Xon, then continued, "Me, I've been interested in Starfleet for as long as I can remember. As soon as I learned about the Starfleet Sim, I bugged my dad until he finally caved and got it for me. My mom hated it, but between me and my dad, we kept her from taking it away from me. I maxed the score on every station and kept learning everything I could about Starfleet. The funny thing is, it turns out that I barely knew anything at all. If I hadn't met Vincent, I never would have made it here."

"There's a lot of that going around." RJ said with a grin at her.

She nodded, then said, "When I told Vincent that I wanted to be in Starfleet, he didn't act like 'Oh, she's so cute!', he sat me down and told me

exactly what I would have to do to even be considered. He told me how I'd have to work and how hard I'd have to study, and then, he took me down to the stable and we started riding horses with Commander Dodds from the *Enterprise*! Then Vincent and Commander Dodds told me about how hard it is to qualify for the helm and how you have to prove that you're the absolute best to even be considered."

"Vincent *and* Commander Dodds? No wonder you made it!" Tracey said frankly.

"If I never met them, I wouldn't be here. But what got me here was listening to what they said and putting in the work. I worked my guts out to get here, and now I bet I'm going to have to keep working my guts out just to keep up with everyone else being older than me." Lexi said seriously.

"Chronologically, I believe that I am younger than you are." Rocky said seriously.

"How old are you?" Lexi asked curiously.

"Well, it depends on how you measure the passage of time. On Janus VI, I'm five years old. According to the Federation, I'm three. But, fortunately, the Starfleet Academy only considered how old I am developmentally, which is sixteen." Rocky said seriously.

"Can I still say that you're younger than me? It'll make me feel a lot better to not be the youngest." Lexi asked hopefully.

"If anyone asks, I'm three years old and the youngest." Rocky said warmly.

"I guess that just leaves me." Tracey said quietly.

"Your mom's a Federation base commander. I just figured that that's why you're here." RJ said honestly.

"I never wanted to be in Starfleet." Tracey said frankly.

"Then it looks like you took a wrong turn somewhere." Hart said with a grin.

"A *right* turn, maybe." Tracey gently corrected, then continued, "Last year, I had one of the worst ideas of all time. Me and some of my friends wanted

to do something exciting..."

From the tone of Tracey's voice, everyone knew better than to make a playful comment.

"The six of us decided to fix up this old decommissioned ship from my mom's base and try to find someplace no one had ever been before... I know how it sounds. It's like we were a bunch of six year olds, not sixteen year olds." Tracey said with a self deprecating chuckle.

"We crashed." Tracey added bleakly.

No one spoke, it was possible that no one was even breathing, at this point.

"When I woke up in the wreckage, the first thing I did was check on my friends. I thought that three of them were dead, it turned out that only two of them were. I did what I could, trying my best to help my friends survive, but I knew... we were in the middle of nowhere. No one in the universe knew where we were. And the planet that we crashed on couldn't support human life. In just a matter of hours, we would all be dead from radiation exposure." Tracey said as his voice took on a flat, emotionless tone.

Lexi discreetly reached up and wiped a tear off her cheek.

"After I'd done everything that I could for my friends, I stopped. I knew, without a doubt, that I was going to die... and I was okay with it. Deep inside, I felt like I deserved it, for killing my friends."

"I was standing there, waiting for the end to come... hoping, wishing, *praying* that somehow, in death, that I wouldn't continue to feel guilt."

Tracey paused for a moment, but didn't seem to even see the others in the room with him.

"Then I heard a voice." Tracey said with a peaceful smile.

A few incredulous looks flitted around the room.

"The voice said, 'Hello? Do you need some help?'" Tracey said with a grin that threatened to break into hysterical laughter.

"I turned around so fast that... I think I fell down. All I know is that when I looked up, there was Vincent, standing over me, offering to help me." Tracey said with a smile.

"So, it wasn't a vision or some crap like that?" Hart asked to confirm.

Tracey laughed aloud at the question, then hurried to say, "No. It was real. I didn't find out until later, but Vincent was given command for the very first time that day, and within, like, a few minutes, he spotted our warp trail and followed it to where we'd crashed. Then he took an away team down to the planet and rescued us."

"I never heard about that." Lexi whispered in awe.

"That's *one* story that the Federation News didn't pick up on. Which makes me wonder about how many other incredible things Vincent might have done that no one's ever heard about." Tracey said honestly.

"Are you okay now?" RJ asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I had to go through a lot of treatment for prolonged exposure to radiation. But Vincent was there the whole time... he visited us in sickbay before and after his shifts every day and he'd tell us about what was going on on the bridge." Tracey said with a smile, then added more softly, "He'd even sneak cakes and cookies in to us, sometimes."

Tracey looked around the room and saw that everyone seemed to be picturing that in their minds.

"I guess all of you heard about the thing with Vincent and the pirates, right?" Tracey asked as he looked around again.

Everyone either nodded or gave a brief answer in the affirmative.

"That happened while I was in sickbay. Vincent told us all about it, later." Tracey said quietly.

"You were *there* for *that*?" RJ asked in amazement.

"Yeah. But I'm getting off the subject. Like I said, I never wanted to be in Starfleet. But... I can't really tell you what did it. While I was on the

Yorktown, Vincent talked to me every day, several times a day. Then, after I was back at Coffelt and the *Yorktown* had left, I got to thinking about what kind of future I really wanted to create for myself. I guess, since I'm here, you can guess what I came up with." Tracey finished with a smile.

"You wanted to be like Vincent." Lexi stated simply.

"I don't think I could ever be like him. But I think that doing this, walking the path that he walked, maybe I'll be able to do some good things and help some people. I won't be like Vincent, I'll be like me, but I think I'll be a better me than I would have been if I'd never met him." Tracey said thoughtfully.

"I think we can all say that." RJ said honestly.

"I can't. I never *did* meet him." Hart said, obviously feeling like the odd man out.

"No. You met, and became best friends, with his twin brother. I think that's probably close enough." RJ said with a smile at him.

Lexi glanced at the terminal on Tracy and RJ's desk, then quickly said, "I've got to write an email to my dad before it gets too late!"

"I think all of us probably need to be doing something like that. We have to meet in conference room one at 07:30. Do we want to meet at 06:30 for breakfast in the mess hall, so we all have a chance to wake up and eat before our shift?" Tracey asked as he looked around the room.

"Yeah. Meet here or in the mess hall?" Lexi asked curiously.

"The mess hall. And just so you know, anyone who isn't in the mess hall by 06:45, the rest of us are going to come up here and drag you out of bed." Tracey said seriously as he looked around the room to be sure that the message was received.

"Got it." Lexi said easily, then she looked down and asked, "Are you ready to go, Rocky?"

"Yes and no. Being around you, included with you. It's a new experience for me. I don't want it to end." Rocky said honestly.

"Don't worry. This is just the beginning."

Chapter 2 - On Display

"Time to get up." Tracey said as he shut off his alarm.

"Five more minutes." RJ muttered into his pillow.

"I'm going to get ready for breakfast, then I'm going to leave. If you don't get up... well, I guess I'll see you again when everyone comes up here together to get you out of bed instead of sitting down in the mess hall and eating breakfast." Tracey said as he gathered what he would need in the bathroom.

"So this must be what it's like to have a mother." RJ grumped as he sat up in his bunk.

Tracey looked at him strangely, then softly asked, "You don't have a mother?"

RJ realized what he'd said, but the words were already out.

"She took off, then divorced my dad. That's really all there is to it." RJ said in resignation.

Tracey seemed to be disturbed by the statement, but didn't question further.

Instead, Tracey carried his things to the bathroom to prepare for his day.

* * * * *

Tracey and RJ arrived in the mess hall together and found that all the others were already present.

They went through the serving line and filled their plates before sitting down with the rest of the cadets.

"How is everyone doing this morning?" Tracey asked casually, before taking a bite of his food.

"My bed was really nice, a lot better than my bed at the academy." Lexi said cheerfully.

"I rested well." Rocky added.

Tracey smiled at the pair, then looked to his other side and asked, "How are you guys?"

Xon and Hart exchanged a look, but didn't immediately answer.

At Tracey's expectant gaze, Hart grudgingly said, "Fine."

"Is something wrong?" Tracey asked with concern.

"I am curious to know, what definition of the word 'Fine' do you employ to reach the conclusion that we are unwell?" Xon asked seriously.

"You're just so quiet..." Tracey began to say when he was interrupted.

"There's Admiral Hanson. Let's ask her to join us." Lexi said quickly.

Tracey looked around the table for any visual cues that anyone might be bothered by the suggestion before responding, "Sure. If you want."

Lexi hopped up out of her chair and hurried to the serving line.

"I am Vulcan." Xon said, drawing Tracey's attention back to him, then continued, "We are not chatty people."

Hart smiled at the statement, then added, "Which suits me just fine."

"Fair enough." Tracey said simply.

"We have an extra seat because Rocky doesn't need a chair." Lexi explained as she led the admiral to their table.

As the admiral approached, Tracey stood, as his mother had always told him was proper.

The others around the table followed his example and watched as Tracey walked behind the admiral and ceremoniously helped her with her chair.

"I don't usually hold with such formalities, but it pleases me to know that you're aware of how to behave in a formal situation." Admiral Hanson said as she got herself settled.

"Growing up at Coffelt, I had to learn about the etiquette of several different species. Of course, that's probably not going to be of much use, out here." Tracey said as he went back to his seat.

"Believe me, you'll be using those lessons more than you'd think. There are some missions where you behave more as diplomats than crew." Admiral Hanson said frankly.

"Do you know what our mission is?" Lexi asked curiously, seemingly not intimidated at all by sitting next to a Starfleet admiral.

"I'll leave it to the captain to brief you on your mission. But what I *will* tell you is that it's a great honor to be trusted to represent the Federation." Admiral Hanson said soberly.

Tracey didn't want to do anything that would displease the admiral, but he was fairly certain that what she was describing was something that was going to suck.

"While I have you all here, there was something that I was wanting to ask you." Admiral Hanson said as she looked around the table, then down at Rocky, to be sure that he knew that he was included.

"Some of us were thinking that since there's been such an interest in the Starfleet Mentoring Program, of late, that it might be nice if you were to make log entries about your experiences. You could tell about how your expectations compared to the realities that you've discovered. These log entries could then be made available to the other candidates who applied to the program, whether they made it or not, so that they can sort of follow along and share in the experience vicariously, if they like." Admiral Hanson explained.

"So, when we're done with our shifts each day, you want for us to sit down and tell everyone about what we did?" RJ asked cautiously.

"Not every detail, of course. And certainly not anything of a sensitive nature. But I believe that simply making regular log entries will allow those who did not make it, to at least get a taste of what it's like to be out here, actually doing the job." Admiral Hanson said passionately.

"There was something I was wanting to ask you about and this is something like that." Lexi said excitedly.

"What was that, Alexandra?" Admiral Hanson asked curiously.

Lexi paused for a moment at the shock of being called by her true name, then continued, "Well, you know what it's like to be a girl in Starfleet. And I was thinking that if I did like you said and showed people what it's really like, that maybe they'd get it in their heads that girls *can* be in Starfleet."

"Yes. And I suppose, with this group, that you could also get out the idea that people from colony worlds *can* be in Starfleet. And that non-humans *can* be in Starfleet." Admiral Hanson said with a nod.

"That is, if we're good enough to handle it." RJ said anxiously.

"You are." Admiral Hanson said seriously, then added, "None of you would be here right now if you weren't both physically and psychologically capable of doing the job."

RJ reluctantly nodded that he had heard.

"While it's natural to have occasional bouts of insecurity, I believe that none of you have the luxury of being able to revel in such counterproductive, self-indulgent things. You're here because you're good enough. Accept it. Move on." Admiral Hanson said with a spark of the intensity that came with her rank.

Tracey glanced at RJ and was happy to see that he seemed to be accepting Admiral Hanson's words.

"It is nearing time for the morning briefing." Xon said seriously.

Tracey checked his watch and found that they weren't anywhere close to being late, but he agreed that it was a perfectly reasonable time for them

to leave.

"Please excuse us, Admiral. The captain ordered us to be at the morning briefing at 07:30." Tracey said as he began to gather his breakfast dishes.

Admiral Hanson looked at Xon, then back at Tracey, before saying, "You have all the makings of a fine team... or staff... or crew. Whatever you're calling it, I see it here. But it's going to be up to you to pull it together... all of you. If you can do that, you will have exceeded the expectations we have of you."

"Thank you, Admiral. We'll do our best." Tracey said formally. Then began to walk away.

Lexi moved close to Admiral Hanson's side and quietly said, "Thanks for having breakfast with us."

"It was my pleasure, Alexandra. Now, go on. You wouldn't want to be late for your briefing."

* * * * *

When Tracey led the group into Conference Room One, he was surprised to find several people already in attendance. He had been working under the assumption that the mission briefing was going to be the captain sitting down with them and filling them in on what their mission was going to be and what was expected of them.

"There's some seats over there. Fill in wherever. You wanna sit, you get here early. You snooze, you lose." Commander Pell said firmly from her seat at the end of the table, beside the captain's empty chair.

Xon walked to the first available chair and sat down, not waiting to see what anyone else was going to do.

A moment later, Hart took the next chair in line.

The rest of the cadets remained standing.

Ensign Lord walked into the room next and took the last available seat.

Tracey had to fight his natural inclination to focus on her and instead, maintained a professional demeanor.

When the conference room door opened again, Tracey turned and saw Lieutenant Okawa walking into the room on crutches.

Since all the seats were filled, Tracey stepped forward and quietly said, "Hart, move."

Hart looked up at Tracey with a classic 'who the hell do you think you are' glare, then he spotted Lieutenant Okawa approaching.

"Lieutenant Okawa, would you be more comfortable sitting down?" Hart asked courteously.

"No. I sit all day. Thank you for asking." Lieutenant Okawa said in an emotionless tone worthy of any Vulcan.

Hart flashed Tracey a slight eye-roll before turning his attention forward.

The door opened again and the captain walked in, looking displeased. Of course, from what the cadets had seen of him so far, he didn't look a whole lot different when things were going well.

Captain Gravf looked around the room, then turned to Commander Pell and asked, "How long before he's late?"

"One minute." Commander Pell said simply, obviously expecting the question.

Captain Gravf turned to look at the door and everyone else in the room automatically followed his lead.

A few long silent seconds passed as everyone waited.

The conference room door finally opened to reveal Lieutenant Fister.

"What?!" Lieutenant Fister asked as he stalked into the room.

Captain Gravf glanced toward Commander Pell to receive a regretful shake of her head in response.

"Pity." Captain Gravf sighed, then looked over the assembled group and said, "I suppose we should get this started."

"Lieutenant Fister, you may have my seat, if you like." Xon said as he started to stand.

"Yeah... thanks." Lieutenant Fister said suspiciously then slid into the chair.

The captain noticed, but continued without comment, "The *Copernicus* has been dispatched to Tellar to transport a group of doctors and scientists to the Vega colony to corroborate the veracity of some sort of medical breakthrough. If it turns out to be all that they say it is, then we will be returning them to Tellar, and then we will conduct the medical pioneers to Earth to demonstrate their discovery for the Federation."

"And if they don't, we'll be returning to Earth empty?" Commander Pell asked curiously.

"In that event, I'm sure that we'll be asked to ferry personnel or supplies. But our primary mission is to act as honor guard escorts for a bunch of doctors." Captain Gravf said disgustedly.

Tracey and the other cadets remained silent, but their expressions were enough to prompt Captain Gravf to explain, "I don't know how many of you have been to Tellar before, but allow me to assure you that they *do* have ships there. And it would be nothing for the doctors to take one of those ships to the Vega colony. However, just to prove that they're so important to the Federation, Starfleet dispatched us, from Earth, to ferry them to the next populated star system and back."

"I take it that we'll all need to be on our best behavior during this... experience." Commander Pell said coldly.

"Yes, but thankfully, Admiral Hanson is travelling with us and she has graciously volunteered to entertain our guests. The most we should have to do is host a formal dinner or two." The captain said with a bit of distaste at the last bit.

Then he turned his attention to the cadets and continued, "Of course, our guests will be interested to meet and speak with the Mentoring Program

cadets."

There was a long moment of silence, then Tracey calmly said, "We will do our best to represent Starfleet, the Federation and *The Copernicus* as favorably as we are able."

Captain Gravf laughed aloud with delight, then said, "When I was briefed about the cadets that I would be receiving, I was told that every one of you have the potential to assume the role of leader of this group. Of course, since Cadet Sturgill had the initiative to apply for the lieutenant courses at the academy and had the willpower to follow through on his commitments, I suppose it's no surprise that he would stand forward."

Not only the cadets, but also their mentor officers were considering the captain's words.

"When I feel it is right to do so, it is within my authority to grant field promotions. Cadet Lieutenant Sturgill, henceforth you shall be addressed as Acting Lieutenant Sturgill. What that means is, that you will bear all the rights and responsibilities of any other lieutenant on this ship with the exception that you are not being offered a commission. What that means is that your rank may be rescinded at my discretion. There will be no review or board of inquiry." Captain Gravf said seriously.

"Thank you, Sir." Tracey said as he fought to maintain his professional demeanor.

"Don't thank me yet, Lieutenant Sturgill. Because I'm about to saddle you with a burden of responsibility. I'm officially making you responsible for the cadet crew. If they have a problem, they go to you and you handle it. If I tell you something needs to happen in regards to your cadets, I tell you, and you make it happen." Captain Gravf said firmly.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said smartly.

"Lieutenant Sturgill, we've still got a couple days before we reach Tellar. I'd like it very much if we could get these cadets trained enough to take the reigns for a while on our journey from Tellar to the Vega Colony. Let me know when they're ready." Captain Gravf said to Tracey. Before Tracey

could respond, the captain continued, "Meeting adjourned. Let's take our stations."

* * * * *

The surge of confidence and pride that Tracey felt lasted only for as long as it took him to step onto the bridge.

"Excuse me, Captain, but how am I supposed to get the cadets trained in time?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"How am I supposed to get them trained in time? Do you imagine that I have some miraculous resource that I am withholding from you?" Captain Gravf asked frankly.

After a moment of thought, Tracey quietly said, "I understand, Sir. I'll see to it."

The captain seemed to be satisfied with the response as he took his seat in the command chair and began reviewing reports from the previous shifts.

* * * * *

"Commander Pell, may I speak with you for a moment?" Tracey asked nervously.

"What do you need?" Commander Pell asked shortly.

"Actually, that was my question for you." Tracey said honestly. He could see that his statement had caught the Commander's interest, so he continued, "I need to know if there's anything I can do to help you in getting Cadet Ensign Xon ready to man the science station."

Commander Pell looked at Tracey appraisingly for a moment, then seemed to come to a decision.

"Cadet Ensign Xon has a reasonable foundation of knowledge, but is lacking the supplemental knowledge to do the job properly. Most notably, he lacks specific knowledge regarding the Oberth class of starship. I will address that lack of practical knowledge today. He may choose to augment my instruction with diligent study, in his own time." Commander Pell said in a

firm and controlled voice.

"Thank you, Commander. Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help." Tracey said respectfully.

Commander Pell gave him a single nod of acknowledgment, then turned her attention back to the science station.

Xon, who had been standing with them throughout the entire conversation, arched an eyebrow in question.

"The captain made it my responsibility to see that you're ready to man the station." Tracey felt compelled to explain.

"I understand that the captain has made you responsible for my performance. And I believe that you are within your authority to consult my mentor. But please, in future, allow me the dignity of being able to attempt to resolve the matter in my own way before you intervene." Xon asked seriously.

Tracey considered his words, then quietly said, "This all hit me out of nowhere and I'm doing my best to figure out what I'm supposed to do."

"Would you like for me to speak to *your* mentor in an attempt to resolve the situation without your input?" Xon asked calmly.

Tracey winced at the words and said, "Ouch. I'm sorry, alright?"

"Apology accepted." Xon said calmly, then took a step closer and quietly continued, "My training is not only to be a science officer, but also a first officer, more specifically, 'your' first officer. If you are overwhelmed or uncertain, perhaps I may be able to provide alternatives that you had not yet considered. Or, should the need arise, I could simply listen while you vent your frustrations."

Tracey looked at Xon with surprise, then cautiously asked, "You have experience being around humans, don't you?"

"Yes. Perhaps we will speak more of this in a less public venue." Xon said as he looked around the bridge.

"I'll look forward to it." Tracey said with a smile, then walked to the security station.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Okawa, is there anything I can do to help you and Hart with his training?" Tracey asked curiously.

"I believe that we have matters well in hand." Lieutenant Okawa said reasonably.

"I could run the station right now, if I needed to." Hart said simply.

Tracey was surprised by the response. After a moment, he turned to Lieutenant Okawa and asked, "Do you agree?"

"May I speak freely?" Lieutenant Okawa asked as she turned her intense gaze on Tracey.

"Yes. Of course." Tracey stammered as he was once again struck by the level of damage done to her face.

"I believe that Cadet Ensign Korrignon is capable of performing his duties as well as any Chief of Security. However, the greatest test for any security officer is to carry out the orders that we are given. I suppose the real question is, when *you* are embroiled in a situation, will *you* be capable of giving orders that can realistically be carried out?" Lieutenant Okawa asked firmly.

After a moment to consider, Tracey quietly said, "I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

Lieutenant Okawa seemed to accept the answer as she turned her attention back to the console in front of her.

* * * * *

Tracey smiled as he approached RJ and Lieutenant Baz at communications.

"I'm making the rounds to see if there's anything I can do to help the mentors train their cadets. Is there anything I can do to help either of you?"

Tracey asked seriously.

"I think Cadet Parker has a reasonable grasp of the function of the equipment. Perhaps in his off-duty hours, he could run through a few of the training scenarios for communications officers." Lieutenant Baz said thoughtfully.

"Do you need any help with that?" Tracey asked RJ curiously.

"Yeah. I mean, I can go through the scenarios on my own, but I think it'd help if there was someone there watching, so that they can give me suggestions. Sometimes when I'm in the middle of it, I get so caught up that I don't think about what else I could have done." RJ said honestly.

"Just let me know when you need help. Either I can do it with you or I'll find someone who has the spare time." Tracey promised.

RJ flashed him a smile of gratitude before turning his attention back to the console before him.

* * * * *

"Ensign Lord, the captain has asked me to see that all of the cadets are ready to man their stations, once we leave Tellar. Is there anything I can do to help you and Cadet Rock?" Tracey asked, trying to remain professional in the presence of such a remarkably beautiful woman.

"Rocky has an amazing natural talent for navigation. I think that he would have been capable of manning the navigation station when he first walked onto the bridge. The only thing that concerns me is that he only has access to the helm and navigation stations. Every bridge officer should be proficient in all stations. In a crisis situation, Rocky would be limited in his ability to fill-in where he's needed, which could potentially endanger the ship." Ensign Lord said seriously.

"Let me look into it and I'll see what I can do." Tracey said thoughtfully.

"Thank you, Sir." Ensign Lord said respectfully.

Tracey was jolted out of his thoughts by her response.

It hadn't occurred to him that, due to his field promotion, he now outranked Ensign Lord.

* * * * *

Tracey's last stop was the one he was least looking forward to. If he had thought it through, he might have started at the helm, just to get it out of the way.

"Lieutenant Fister, the captain..." Tracey began to say when he was interrupted.

"I heard him. Don't worry about Lexi. I'll see to it that she's ready when she's needed." Lieutenant Fister said firmly.

Tracey was immediately offended by Lieutenant Fister's abrasive attitude. As he was about to say something, he flashed on Lieutenant Fister's expression when Xon had given up his chair at the morning briefing.

Completely abandoning what he was originally going to say, Tracey instead calmly said, "Thank you, Lieutenant. I'm sure that Lexi appreciates your help, and so do I. But, if there's anything I can do to help you with her training, please let me know. I'll be sure to make it a priority."

Lieutenant Fister looked away from the helm console with surprise, then said, "Yeah. I'll do that."

Tracey nodded, then looked to Lexi and quietly said, "You, too. If you need anything, I've got your back."

"Thanks, Tracey." Lexi said with a sincere smile.

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When Tracey returned to the command chair, he quietly asked Captain Gravf, "Who would I talk to about getting the rest of the bridge stations retrofitted for Cadet Rock?"

"Each department is responsible for their own equipment. Pick one and let them know what you expect of them. But, be aware, to make such a modification to a bridge system will most likely require that station to be

taken offline and manned from another location. Therefore it will be necessary to schedule and coordinate the outfitting of the stations." Captain Gravf warned.

"Is there anything else that I need to be doing before I work on that?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"Do you know what our course and speed are?" Captain Gravf asked seriously.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey responded immediately.

"Are you aware of the status of each of the bridge stations?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Are you fully cognizant of our mission?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Then, I believe, that you are at a point where you can attend to other projects." Captain Gravf said simply.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said respectfully, before walking to the Science station.

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"Cadet Ensign Xon, it will be necessary for the Science station to be modified so that Cadet Ensign Rock will be able to access and control it." Tracey said formally.

"I understand." Xon said simply.

"Let me know when you have determined at what time the modification will be complete." Tracey said seriously.

"Yes, Sir." Xon responded without a hint of emotion.

Tracey nodded once, then walked back toward the command chair.

* * * * *

"Captain, I have an incoming transmission directed to you, coded as private." Lieutenant Baz called out.

"In my off... conference room one." The captain corrected himself.

As he stood, he looked around the bridge before his gaze stopped on Tracey.

"Next time." The captain said to him, then turned his attention toward the Science station and said, "Commander Pell, you have the bridge."

"Yes, Sir." Commander Pell said efficiently, then got up from the Science station.

Tracey noticed that as soon as Commander Pell stood, Xon took her seat and took over whatever she had been doing.

As the captain left the bridge, Tracey suddenly realized what he had meant.

The next time the captain was called away from the bridge, he was going to ask Tracey to take command.

* * * * *

When the captain returned to the bridge, he was smiling.

As he approached the command chair, Commander Pell went back to the Science station, but rather than move Xon out of the way, she stood over his shoulder and watched what he was doing.

The captain motioned for Tracey to lean in close, then quietly said, "I've just received approval for my wife and my youngest son to join us when we reach Tellar. They will accompany us to the Vega colony and back."

"Oh? How old is your son?" Tracey asked with a smile.

"Tobar is twelve. If you have no objection, I would like to include him in with the cadets while he travels with us."

"It sounds like he's close to Hart and Xon's age, maybe he'll get along with them." Tracey said speculatively.

"Getting along isn't really one of Tobar's strong suits. Let's just say that while I attempt to fight against the commonly held Tellarite stereotype, Tobar seems to embrace it." Captain Gravf said regretfully.

Tracey thought for a moment, then fought not to smile, to no avail.

"What amuses you, Lieutenant?" The captain asked with interest.

"I was just imagining how Tobar will get along with Hart and Xon. I think it might end up being good for all of them." Tracey said with a grin.

"I'm interested to find out." The captain agreed.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Sturgill." The captain said, drawing Tracey's attention from the ship's manifest.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said as he approached the command chair.

"I believe that I would like to take a moment to have a quiet cup of tea. I am going to leave you in command during that time. Remember that you have Commander Pell at your disposal, should you need her advice." The captain said seriously.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir." Tracey said respectfully.

"I'll be back in a few minutes." Captain Gravf chuckled before walking away.

Although Tracey intellectually knew that he wasn't expected to *do* anything, he still felt the weight of responsibility fall on him.

His mind went back to the captain's words from the day before and he thought about all the cargo and personnel that had been entrusted to their care. He was now directly responsible for the life of every person on the ship.

As Tracey tried to set his nervousness aside, he walked to the Science station and asked, "Any progress on the interface for Rocky?"

"We have located all the equipment that will need to be installed. I am currently estimating the timetable for installation.

"Will you need to set up sciences on one of the auxiliary stations?" Tracey asked curiously.

"Yes. Commander Pell has stated that she will oversee the operations of Sciences while I install the interface." Xon said seriously.

"Do you know what you're doing with the installation?" Tracey asked cautiously.

Rather than give a verbal response, Xon quirked an eyebrow in his direction.

Tracey smiled at the reaction, then muttered, "Yeah. Silly question."

"Commander Pell has suggested that she and I each take a break. Upon our return, we should have a significant amount of unstructured time that will allow me to complete the installation." Xon said seriously.

"Let me know when you're going to do the instal. I'd like to see that." Tracey said with a smile.

Xon considered for a moment, then said, "I will factor additional time into my estimate to compensate for your... assistance."

"Right." Tracey said, his smile now less pronounced.

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When the captain returned to the bridge, he took his seat in the command chair, then asked, "Any space battles while I was gone?"

"None worth mentioning." Tracey said with a contented smile as he felt the weight of the awesome responsibility being lifted from his shoulders.

"Normally, during routine operations, the first officer would go to break when the commanding officer returns. All the while, a backup crewmember would begin manning the stations so that the other members of the bridge crew can take their breaks, in order of their seniority." The captain said

seriously.

Tracey nodded his understanding.

"However, since we have the cadets on the bridge, I believe that we can allow each of the mentors to go, in turn, and allow the cadets to man the stations while they're away... that is, if the mentors believe that their pupils are ready for that responsibility.

"Would you like for me to see to that, Sir?" Tracey asked cautiously. He had the feeling that that was what the captain was leading up to.

"Yes." Captain Gravf said simply.

Tracey nodded once, then walked to the Science station.

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"Commander Pell, would you be comfortable with Xon watching the Science station while you take your break?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"Of course." Commander Pell said immediately, then suited actions to words by standing and calmly walking off the bridge.

"How are you doing?" Tracey asked Xon with concern.

Xon considered for a moment, then quietly responded, "I was not sufficiently prepared for the tasks that I have volunteered to undertake. I believe that I will be able to complete the required tasks, but the margin for error is far greater than I would like."

"You've got the captain, Commander Pell and me here, if anything goes wrong." Tracey said seriously.

"Thank you, Tracey. It pleases me that you were the first of us to be given a field promotion." Xon said honestly.

"Thanks." Tracey said with a blush, then schooled his expression and continued, "I'll leave you to watch your Science station."

Xon let slip the slightest hint of a smile before turning his full attention toward his console.

* * * * *

When Commander Pell returned, Xon went to take his break. At that time, Tracey walked to the Security station and said, "Lieutenant Okawa, if you're comfortable leaving Cadet Korrigon in charge of security for a few minutes, he can cover your break."

Lieutenant Okawa glanced at Tracey uncertainly for a moment, then turned to Hart and quietly said, "My breaks can sometimes take a while. Are you in urgent need of a break?"

"No, Ma'am. Take all the time you need. I'll be fine." Hart said seriously, then went down on one knee to retrieve Lieutenant Okawa's crutches.

Tracey stood out of the way as Lieutenant Okawa slowly made her way to standing, then across the bridge toward the turbolift.

"How are you doing, Hart?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"Don't worry about me. I got this." Hart said confidently.

"I believe you." Tracey assured him, then quietly added, "But remember if you *do* have any problems, I'm here."

"Got it." Hart said shortly.

As Tracey walked away from the Security station, he found that he actually believed Hart. If some situation were to arise that involved security, he honestly believed, deep in his bones, that Hart would be able to handle it.

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"Lieutenant Baz, before Lieutenant Okawa gets back, I was just wondering if you think that Cadet Parker is to the point where he'd be able to cover your break?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"What if I say 'no'?" Lieutenant Baz asked curiously.

"I'd call a backup crewmember to take your position while you're on break." Tracey said simply, then smiled as he added, "And then I'd have to tell my mother that the Lieutenant she sent to watch me isn't a very good trainer."

"Spies don't necessarily have to be good at the jobs they're pretending to do." Lieutenant Baz said with a grin.

"True." Tracey said, then waited expectantly.

"Right here, right now, I would feel comfortable allowing Cadet Parker to man the station. In another circumstance, such as travelling with other ships or in close proximity to inhabited worlds, I would be reluctant to do so." Lieutenant Baz said frankly.

"I'll keep that in mind..." Tracey began to say, then noticed Lieutenant Okawa stepping off the turbolift. "She's back if you're ready for a break."

"Thank you, Tracey." Lieutenant Baz said as he stood, then quietly added, "I'm really not reporting back to your mother."

"Neither am I." Tracey said with a smile.

Lieutenant Baz laughed as he began to walk away.

"How are you doing, RJ?" Tracey asked with concern.

"There's an insane crazy lot of stuff to learn over here. I've got the 'big picture' view of it without a problem, but the deeper you dig, the more there is. I could study this isolar circuitry for the rest of my life and never figure it all out." RJ said seriously.

"I know. I covered your training courses when I was going for my lieutenant rank. It's pointless to memorize specifications past a certain point of precision, that's why you have computers, so that *they* can remember all those little details for you." Tracey said honestly.

"Lieutenant Baz has memorized it all." RJ said frankly.

"Yeah, well, that doesn't count. He's a spy." Tracey said simply, then walked away.

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When Lieutenant Baz returned from his break, Tracey waited for RJ to leave before walking to the helm and asking, "Lieutenant Fister, do you

think Cadet Gelt is at a point where she's able to watch the helm while you're on break?"

"Yeah." Lieutenant Fister said shortly, then turned to Lexi and said, "Don't run us into anything."

"You're no fun." Lexi said with a mock pout, then took his place at the helm.

As soon as Lieutenant Fister had left the bridge, Tracey quietly asked, "How are you doing, Lexi?"

"We've only had to do two drift corrections. That's it for the whole day, so far." Lexi said frankly.

"No. I mean, what's it like working with Lieutenant Fister?" Tracey asked seriously.

Lexi thought about the question for a moment, then carefully answered, "It's like he's one of those... I don't know what you call them. One of those really stupid people who has an incredible gift to do just one thing."

"A savant?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"I guess so. I get the feeling that he doesn't really mean to be such a jerk, but he doesn't know how not to be." Lexi said as she glanced back at Tracey with concern.

"Do you remember all that stuff they told us about 'proper conduct' when we were testing at the academy?" Tracey asked thoughtfully.

"Yeah."

"I think Lieutenant Fister needs help with that. When we're done on the bridge, I'm going to talk to everyone about how we might be able to help him." Tracey said seriously.

"What can we do?" Lexi asked curiously.

"When he does something wrong, we tell him the right way and ask him to do it again. If he goes along with it, maybe we can show him the stuff that

he hasn't been able to figure out on his own."

"I can see him getting really crabby about something like that. I mean, it's not like he's *nice*, even when he doesn't have people telling him that he's doing stuff wrong." Lexi said frankly.

"If he gets that way, we'll just need to remind him that we're not doing this to put him down. We're doing it so that he can keep his rank." Tracey explained carefully.

"He's probably still going to be a whiney little titty baby about it." Lexi grumbled.

"Sorry about that. But I seriously think that this is the right thing to do." Tracey said honestly.

"I guess it won't hurt to try." Lexi finally conceded.

"Actually, it probably will." Tracey said regretfully.

* * * * *

When Lieutenant Fister returned to the helm, Tracey went to the Navigation station and quietly asked, "Can Cadet Rock watch Navigation long enough for you to take a break?"

"Actually, he's been running the Navigation station for the past hour. I've just been watching and making suggestions." Ensign Lord said seriously.

"Good. Then you're free to take your break whenever you're ready." Tracey said professionally.

"Thank you, Sir." Ensign Lord said, then stood.

Tracey watched her go.

"I noticed a change in your physiology." Rocky said seriously.

"What's that?" Tracey asked as he focused downward.

"Previously, when interacting with Ensign Lord, your pulse rate would increase, as would your body temperature. Now those physiological

responses seem to be absent. What's changed?" Rocky asked curiously.

Tracey thought about it for a moment, then carefully said, "When she called me 'Sir', I think it snapped me out of... something. All of a sudden, she wasn't the most beautiful woman that I'd ever seen, she was an officer under my command. I realized that I was responsible for her and that any of those... feelings that I was having were inappropriate. That kind of stuff doesn't belong on the bridge."

"While we've been working together, Ensign Lord has told me a little about herself. Due to her appearance, she's often had problems with unwanted advances and inappropriate behavior directed at her. She requested duty on this ship, so that she could work under Captain Gravf, knowing that he would not find her appearance distracting." Rocky said frankly.

"Well, she won't have anything to worry about from me. And if I see anyone else treating her disrespectfully, I'll do my best to stop it." Tracey said seriously.

"Thank you, Tracey. I was worried when I noticed your physiological reactions, before. I wanted very much to respect you." Rocky said honestly.

"I'll do my best not to disappoint you." Tracey said with a smile, then walked back toward the command chair.

* * * * *

"If I've counted correctly, nearly everyone has had their break, have they not?" Captain Gravf asked seriously.

"Yes, Sir. Ensign Lord will be back soon, then Cadet Rock will go." Tracey said professionally.

"What about you?" Captain Gravf asked curiously.

"Um, no, Sir. I haven't gone, yet. I forgot." Tracey said sheepishly.

"Go on. When you return, I have an entire manifest to go over with you; all the equipment and personnel we will be taking on at Tellar." Captain Gravf

said firmly.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said smartly.

As he was turning to leave, the captain said, "While you're out, be sure to stop by quartermaster-supply. You should be wearing the proper uniform as befits your rank."

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said with a smile, then left the bridge.

* * * * *

When Tracey returned to the bridge, he was wearing a new Starfleet issued command officer's uniform with a lieutenant's rank insignia prominently displayed on the shoulder strap.

As much as he felt the stares of the others, cadets and officers alike, what he felt more was the depth of the commitment that he was making.

"A captain needs to be aware of every aspect of the mission he embarks upon. I cannot stress this enough. I have sent you the mission briefing along with the manifest of what we will be carrying. Study these. You may be called upon to know any or all of these facts at a moment's notice." Captain Gravf said firmly as he led Tracey to the auxiliary console he had been using earlier.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said firmly.

"You'd better get to it, then. It won't be long before it will be time for everyone to start taking lunches." Captain Gravf said as he walked back to the command chair.

"I am beginning the installation, if you wish to witness the procedure." Xon said from the Science station.

"No. Go ahead. I've got a lot to study. But, thanks." Tracey said before turning his attention to his viewscreen.

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When the installation was complete, Xon went to the Navigation station and asked Rocky to check to be sure that the interface gave him all the access that he might need.

Xon watched the console curiously as Rocky went through a rigorous series of tests, confirming that he had access to every conceivable control.

When it was done, Xon remained silent.

From what he had just witnessed, he suspected that Rocky's level of intelligence was far greater than he was letting on.

* * * * *

"So, how was everyone's day, today?" Tracey asked as the group walked off the bridge together.

"Compared to yours, pretty shabby." RJ said with a teasing smile.

"Yeah. Congrats. You did it." Hart said sincerely.

"How does it feel?" Lexi asked curiously.

"Mess hall." Tracey said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Lexi and answered, "It feels like I'm being tested, every minute of the day."

"So, much like the rest of us." Xon speculated.

Tracey laughed, then said, "Maybe. But I feel like the test that I'm taking is one where if you get one wrong answer, at any time, that's it. It's done. It's over."

"Do you think the captain is going to make you a cadet again?" RJ asked with concern.

When the lift door opened, Tracey led the way out and toward the mess hall as he said, "I think the captain is giving me a chance. And, I think that if I screw up that chance, I might not get another one."

"We will endeavor to see that you do not 'screw up'." Xon said reasonably.

"Yeah. Just let us know what we have to do and we'll help you." Lexi volunteered.

"Thanks." Tracey said sincerely as they got into the serving line, then he thought to say, "There is one thing all of you can do that might help. It's not exactly what we were talking about, but Lexi and I talked about it earlier..."

"What?" Hart barked.

Tracey looked at him with surprise.

"What do you want us to do?" Hart asked seriously, obviously impatient with Tracey's rambling.

"Treat Lieutenant Fister with respect and if he's disrespectful to you, tell him the right way to say whatever he's saying and ask him to do it again." Tracey said in a rush.

"Tracey thinks that Lieutenant Fister just needs to be shown how to behave the right way." Lexi said simply.

"Yeah. Some people don't learn things well by reading about them. I don't know if that's his problem, but it's possible that, no matter how hard he tries, he can't get all the stuff about 'proper conduct' to translate into real life situations. So, I was thinking that if we showed him the right way, maybe we could help him keep his rank." Tracey explained.

"When are we doing this?" RJ asked carefully.

"Whenever we get the chance." Tracey said seriously.

"But only when there's no one else around. It'd be wrong to embarrass him." Lexi said thoughtfully.

"I don't see how someone with any sense of shame could behave the way he does in public." Hart said frankly.

"I think he doesn't know any better. He knows that he's doing something wrong, but he can't seem to figure out how to do it right." Lexi said seriously.

There was a momentary pause as everyone filled their plates, then carried them to a table.

"Okay. We'll try." RJ said, once they were all seated.

"Good. Now, everyone, don't forget about the log entries for the admiral. She hasn't really asked us to do anything else for her and she's been good to us." Tracey said firmly.

"I forgot about that. I should probably do that as soon as we're done eating." Lexi said, obviously thinking aloud.

"Who has studying to do for their mentor?" Tracey asked as he looked around the table.

Xon, Hart and RJ all raised their hands.

"Me, too. But we've also got stuff to do for the Vulcan Academy of Science." Tracey said seriously.

"But that stuff can wait. It doesn't have a deadline." RJ said cautiously.

"Vincent told me about that!" Lexi interjected. "Part of being here, doing this, is us having to motivate ourselves. We can't let things slide. No one's going to follow behind us and see that we're doing what we're supposed to. We're all we've got."

"Right." Tracey agreed, then looked around the table before continuing, "If we start off doing things wrong, then we're going to keep on doing them wrong. That's just how it works. So, we need to figure out the best way that we can all get all our log entries, school work and mentor assignments done without totally stressing out."

"The log entries should only take a short time. However, the mentor assignments and school work could conceivably expand to fill the entire evening." Xon said thoughtfully.

"We can do our log entries, then all of us start on our school work, since all of us have that to do. After a certain amount of time, those of us with mentor assignments can break away and work on those." Rocky said

reasonably.

"Yeah. And maybe we can get, like, a snack or something in between." RJ said speculatively.

"Yeah. We should probably take breaks." Tracey agreed.

"If we do it like this, we're not going to have any free time to do anything else." Lexi said with concern.

"Like what?" Hart asked curiously.

Lexi looked at him with confusion.

"If you didn't have any school or mentor assignments or log entries, what else would you be doing?" Hart asked seriously.

"I... don't know." Lexi reluctantly admitted.

"Right." Hart said decisively, then added, "If you *do* think of something that you'd rather be doing, then you can find a place in your schedule to do it. If it's something good, maybe some of the rest of us will want to do it with you. But, until then, we can work hard and work smart and stay on top of everything that we need to."

"I don't think I've heard you say that many words since I met you." RJ said with a grin.

"I usually don't have much to say." Hart said honestly.

"I think Hart's right. If no one has any better ideas, we can finish this meal, and then get to work on our log entries." Tracey said seriously.

"If you will excuse me, I am going to have to go to sickbay. I will join you as soon as I am able." Rocky said regretfully.

"Is this that treatment thing you were talking about, yesterday?" Hart asked curiously.

"Yes. Your atmosphere erodes my shell, so I need to have frequent treatments to reenforce my shell's integrity." Rocky said seriously.

"Is it something private? I mean, is it one of those things that you don't like to talk about and wouldn't want for anyone to see, or can I come with you?" Lexi asked cautiously.

"It's not something I care to discuss often, it's simply a fact of the life that I have chosen. But there is no shame involved. You may accompany me if you wish." Rocky said honestly.

"How long does it take?" RJ asked curiously.

"Typically, ten to fifteen minutes." Rocky responded.

"Yeah. I can be thinking about my log entry while you're getting your thing done." Lexi said simply.

*"I believe getting my **thing** done would take closer to half an hour."* Rocky said in a teasing voice.

Lexi looked at Rocky with confusion as Xon quirked an eyebrow. The others at the table howled with laughter.

* * * * *

The cadets walked into the ship's sickbay to find a single man sitting at a computer terminal, engrossed in his reading.

All of them remained silent until the man looked up from his work and asked, "How may I help you?"

"I am Cadet Ensign Rock. I have come for my treatment." Rocky said in what seemed to be a calm voice.

"Oh, yes. I've been looking forward to this." The man said with a smile, then gestured to an open area at the back of the room before continuing, "If you'll just move over here, I'll get the compound."

"Do you want us to stay over here?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"You may watch if you like, just stand far enough away that you don't get any of the compound on you. It won't harm you, but you'll probably have to replace anything that accidentally gets sprayed." The man said before

walking out of the room.

"Are you really okay with us being here, Rocky?" RJ asked cautiously.

"Yes. I'm glad you're here." Rocky responded quietly as he moved himself into place.

A moment later, the man returned with a canister that had a sprayer hose attached.

When the man had everything placed where he wanted it, he asked, "Are you ready?"

"Go ahead." Rocky said slowly.

Everyone watched as the man proceeded to spray a fine mist over Rocky, being careful to get every nook and cranny of the uneven exterior.

When the man finished, he said, "Flex for me."

Rocky twisted himself in one direction, then another, displaying surprising flexibility in his movements.

"Good. One last time." The man said, then began to spray Rocky, front to back, all over again.

When he was finished, he set the canister aside and said, "I'll see you again, day after tomorrow."

"Yes. I'll be here. Thank you." Rocky said simply, then turned himself and started toward the door.

The rest of the cadets followed silently, not knowing what to think about what they'd just witnessed.

* * * * *

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Alexandra Lorraine Gelt - 20050411-17:48:56

This is my first log entry, so you probably don't know who I am, except for my name, it's right up there ^ . But I'm from Maryland, then we moved to Texas and now I'm here.

Here is on the USS Copernicus heading toward Tellar.

I'm here because I'm being trained to run the helm.

I guess that's not weird because I haven't told you, I'm a nine year old girl.

OK

Now it's weird.

I spent about an hour running the helm today. Not all at once, but while my mentor was on his lunch and breaks.

I didn't really have to do anything while he was gone, but the crazy thing is that I was there.

It was ME on the HELM.

I don't really know what else to say except that if there's a girl out there somewhere who thinks that she can't do what I'm doing... well, she probably can't.

This is really tough.

But it's not because she's a girl. Girls can do this! I'm proving it every day that I'm here.

So, either do it or find another excuse.

Ball's in your court,

Lexi, out.

** * * * **

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Hart Korrigon - 20050411-17:52:20

I'm in security.

I can't talk about it.

Hart, out.

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Robert Anthony Parker Jr - 20050411-18:01:12

Tracey's a Lieutenant now! Not a Cadet Lieutenant but a REAL Lieutenant!

I started this with nothing but a dream.

I left my family and my home and everything that I'd ever known to follow a dream.

Now, here I am, on the USS Copernicus as a member of her crew.

I could tell you about all the incredible things that I'm learning (and if you're like me and remember pictures better than words, search for: Visual Learning, it will change your life).

But, at least in this first log entry, I think the most important thing I can share with you is the importance of friends.

I can talk about this because I know what it's like when you don't have anyone who likes you, not even you.

I also know what it's like to have really good close friends who care about you and push you to be the best person that you can be.

Now, here on the Copernicus, I've made new friends.

Right now, we're all working on our log entries. After that, we're going to work on our school work.

Yeah. That's what I said. Even though we're out here, working on a Starship, we're also in school.

But, the thing is, no one told us that we have to help each other.

No one told us that we have to 'play nice'.

We're all really different people.

Different ages, different personalities, different species.

*But still, we're here with a common dream and we're working **together** to make it come true.*

*We work together. We help each other. We **care** about each other.*

Knowing how to work a console and all of that is important, but knowing that the people around you have got your back, no matter what, that's what being here is really all about.

That's it.

Maybe next time I'll tell you my recently discovered feelings about isolinear circuitry.

Loi, I miss you.

RJ, out.

* * * * *

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Rock - 20050411-18:03:30

Not human.

Not humanoid.

Not carbon based.

All of these, I am not.

What am I?

A Starfleet cadet.

A member of a crew.

A part of a team.

So can you be, too.

Rocky, out.

* * * * *

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Xon s/o Sufaal h/o Sukaan - 20050411-18:05:00

Cadet crew assembled @ 17:30 fst, TerraMain, Dock 4

- Six Cadets (Including Self)*

Meeting with Admiral Hanson

- Video conference with my Brother, Ensign Winters*

Meeting with Captain Gravf

- Given assignments and told of Mentors*

Interlude

- Stow belongings*

Disembarkation

- Cadets + Mentors*
- Each at assigned station*

Communal Ingestion

- Cadets*
- Interrupted by Federation Tutoring Center representative*

Assisted School Registration

- Provided alternative option for schooling for cadets*

Further Communal Ingestion

- Exchanged Biographical Data*

Return to Quarters

- Exchanged further biographical data*

Sleep/Wake

Communal Ingestion

- Cadets + Admiral Hanson in attendance*

Mission Briefing

- Tellar - Vega Colony - Tellar*
- Cadet Sturgill Field Promotion to Acting Lieutenant*

Training

- Expressed Concerns with Lt Sturgill*
- Concerns Addressed Adequately*

Interface Installation

- Completed Successfully*

Communal Ingestion

- Scheduled Required Activities*

Log Entry

Independence does not mean loneliness.

Cooperation does not impede independence.

Contributions to a collective undertaking may yield unexpected rewards.

Callie, Be well. My thoughts are with you.

Xon, out.

** * * * **

Log entry: Acting Lieutenant Tracey Ephram Sturgill - 20050411-18:06:13

How can the most wonderful, incredible day of my life be so full of so many completely terrifying things?

I've been made responsible for all the cadets.

I've proven that I'm not even good at being responsible for myself! What if one of them gets hurt? What if one of them gets killed? If anything happens to any of them, how will I survive? Will I survive? Will I want to?

So, that was the BEGINNING of my day.

Oh, and I got promoted to Acting Lieutenant. It's a big deal. I know it is. But all I can think about is that the others, the 'cadets', are depending on me.

Who am I kidding? They're my friends!

Considering what happened to my friends before, maybe what they need to be protected from is ME.

I'm just being hysterical. You don't need that. I don't need that.

Captain Gravf told me that he wanted for the Cadets to be capable of working their stations for an undisclosed period of time during the trip from Tellar to the Vega colony.

I said I would handle it.

Captain Gravf told me that he wanted for the Cadets to cover breaks and lunches for the Mentors.

I said I would handle it.

Breaks and lunches went off without any incidents. I handled it.

From what I saw of the cadets at their duty stations, I believe that they will be ready when the time comes.

I could understand if any of the cadets were upset that I was put in charge of them. But none of them are. They are willing not only to trust me, but also to help me and offer me advice.

There is no one in the universe that I would rather have on my team.

From this point on, anything that I accomplish is due to them, and for them.

Denny, Price, I miss you, you're not forgotten.

Tracey, out.

Chapter 3 - Defying Reality

"How are you doing, Lexi?" Tracey asked with concern.

"You talk to Captain Gravf all the time. Do you think you could ask him if we could use the conference room or something? Your cabin is nice and big and everything, but I'd like to be able to sit at a table or desk or something to do my school work." Lexi said frankly as she readjusted her sitting position so she could rest her data padd on her folded legs, for a better viewing angle.

"I'll see what I can do. But how's the school work going?" Tracey asked seriously.

"So far, it's not bad. It's more reading than I'm used to, but it's not too hard." Lexi said honestly.

Tracey accepted the answer with a nod, then turned and asked, "Hart?"

"Fine." Hart responded without looking up from his padd.

Tracey had learned not to delve any deeper when given that particular response.

"Xon?"

"Fine."

"How about you, RJ?" Tracey asked seriously.

"I was worried about what kind of lessons I'd have to do, you know, with it being the Vulcan Academy of Science. But this is okay." RJ said as he glanced at Tracey with a brief smile.

"If I understood it right, some of that testing we did while we were at the academy was to see what our education level was." Tracey said thoughtfully.

"It seems that they must feel that I need to learn more about the other species in the Federation. I have a formidable amount of lessons on the

subject." Rocky said honestly.

"My mom always kept close track of what I was studying in school. I remember, one time, when she noticed that I was being taught 'Earth-centric' lessons, she had a fit. She hauled me into the principal's office and told them that if they didn't start teaching us about different cultures, she was going to see to it that every Starfleet brat at the base would be pulled out of classes and that she'd bring in a whole teaching staff to see that we were being taught things that we'd actually be able to use. She was so angry, she actually scared me a little bit." Tracey finished with a chuckle.

"It's good that she did that. I wish someone would have done that at my school, back home. I think they had a lesson plan that they must have made back in the 1950's and they haven't added anything to it since." RJ said frankly.

"Excuse me, but if you feel that 'somebody' should do 'something', perhaps you should endeavor to correct the situation, yourself." Xon said seriously.

"Yeah. Be 'somebody'." Lexi said with a grin.

"I wouldn't know what to do." RJ said helplessly.

"Define the problem. Then formulate possible solutions. Select one, then initiate it." Rocky said simply.

"Do you think I really could?" RJ asked cautiously.

"If you do not, then who will? If this deficiency in your local educational system has indeed been in place since the 1950's, then I believe that it is safe to assume that no one else is prepared to take action." Xon said seriously.

"How can I do something like that when I'm all the way out here, in space?" RJ asked thoughtfully.

"Define the problem. Then formulate possible solutions. Select one, then initiate it." Rocky repeated, then continued, *"It may be necessary to enlist the aid of others to carry it out, but if the situation is as dire as you indicate, then bringing the matter to people's attention and presenting*

them a plan of action may be all that is needed to facilitate change."

RJ sat silently for a moment, then quietly said, "I need to get my school stuff finished first."

"Then?" Rocky asked impatiently.

"Then I'll start working on it. I may need you guys' help. I've never done anything like this before." RJ said thoughtfully.

"You've got our help whenever you need it." Tracey assured him.

"I just thought of something." Lexi said suddenly.

Everyone turned their attention to her and waited.

"If it was Vincent who realized that there was a problem like RJ's, what do you think he would do?" Lexi asked as she looked around.

"He'd find a way to fix it." Tracey said with a smile.

RJ slowly nodded, then looked around and said, "Okay, yeah. I'm going to do it."

* * * * *

"Breaktime!" Tracey said suddenly.

"One more minute." RJ said as he continued to read.

"Everyone, get to a good stopping point, then head down to the mess hall. I've got something to do right now, but I'll meet you there." Tracey said as he stood.

No one answered verbally, but from the distracted nods that he received, he felt assured that his message had been received.

* * * * *

Tracey walked onto the bridge and directly to the command chair.

He had to wait for a moment for the officer on duty to acknowledge him.

"What can I do for you, Lieutenant?" The Lieutenant Commander asked as she turned her attention to him.

"I'm Acting Lieutenant Sturgill, Ma'am. I'm in charge of the cadets and I was wondering if there's any way we can use the conference room after our shift, so that we can do our school work." Tracey said professionally.

"At ease, Lieutenant. I'm Lieutenant Commander Neiman... you're Cassandra's son, aren't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Tracey said seriously.

"The last time I saw you, you must have been about five years old." Lieutenant Commander Neiman chuckled, then schooled her expression before continuing, "As I understand it, Admiral Hanson has taken possession of Captain Gravf's office while she's aboard, so the captain has been temporarily relocated to conference room one. Give me just a moment."

Tracey watched as Lieutenant Commander Neiman made an inquiry on her chair console.

"This vessel was originally outfitted with a number of conference rooms. Some of them have been repurposed over the years, but I have one that's currently listed as being unused. If it's suitable for your purposes, we can assign it to be exclusively for the use of the cadets." Lieutenant Commander Neiman said seriously.

"Thank you, Commander. That would be very helpful." Tracey said respectfully.

"Conference room seven is now reserved. If it turns out to be unsuitable for some reason, let me know and we'll find something else for you."

"Yes, Ma'am. Thank you, again."

* * * * *

When Tracey walked into the mess hall, he found the group of cadets seated at a table.

He walked to the serving line and picked up something to snack on before joining them.

"Are you guys going to start on your mentor assignments, now?" Lexi asked as Tracey approached.

"I think everyone should decide that for themselves. I know, for me, I'm at a good spot with my school work where I can pick it back up tomorrow and continue where I left off. So it's the perfect time for me to switch over." Tracey said honestly.

"Whether or not I'm at a good stopping point, I need to start on my communications stuff. There's a lot of it." RJ said frankly.

"Let me know if you need any help." Tracey said seriously.

RJ smiled at him and nodded.

"Lieutenant Fister!" Lexi said suddenly and hopped up out of her chair.

The others watched as Lexi hurried to the serving line.

"Remember, be nice. Be respectful. Don't react negatively if he says or does something to upset you. Calmly and patiently suggest alternative behaviors to him." Tracey cautioned.

"If that doesn't work, can I rip his face off?" Hart asked hopefully.

Tracey fought down a smile, then calmly said, "We'll consider that our backup plan."

* * * * *

"Rocky doesn't need a chair, so there's an empty seat." Lexi said as she guided, almost dragged, Lieutenant Fister to the table.

"Lieutenant Fister, please join us." Tracey said graciously.

"Lieutenants usually sit with other lieutenants." Lieutenant Fister stated seriously, as though that were justification for him to sit elsewhere.

"Tracey's a lieutenant, and he's sitting with us, so that makes it okay." Lexi said reasonably.

Although the man was clearly reluctant, he eventually took a seat.

There was a long moment of uncomfortable silence until RJ finally asked, "Since we're all off duty, is it okay if we call you by your first name?"

"I guess." Lieutenant Fister said cautiously.

Everyone waited.

Finally, RJ asked, "What's your first name, Lieutenant?"

"Armand."

"Great! Thanks, Armand." Lexi said with a smile of accomplishment.

Tracey decided that, before anyone could take the conversation in another direction, that he wanted to clearly state their intentions. "Armand, we overheard what the captain said to you about keeping your rank and staying in Starfleet, and if you'd let us, we'd like to help you."

"I don't need any help." Lieutenant Fister said abruptly.

"The evidence at hand would seem to indicate otherwise." Xon said seriously.

"Some of us had to learn how to behave in a situation that is completely foreign to us. We understand what it feels like to be completely removed from what is familiar and unable to decipher the expectations of others using verbal and visual cues that we were never taught." Rocky stated reasonably.

"I spent my whole life living on mercenary ships. Do you think I'm comfortable here?" Hart asked simply.

"I grew up in a trailer park in Georgia, being dirt poor. If it weren't for being able to watch what the others are doing, I'd be screwing up all the time." RJ said honestly.

"See? We get it." Tracey said as he tried to get Lieutenant Fister to look him in the eyes.

"And all we want to do is, if you say something wrong, we'll tell you a way that might be better." Lexi explained, then puzzled back over her words, trying to determine if they made any sense at all.

"And we won't do it in front of other people, I promise." Tracey quickly added.

"Why?" Lieutenant Fister asked suspiciously.

"Because it's the right thing to do." Xon said, as though it were the most obviously logical thing in the universe.

"Yeah. And you're a really great helmsman and I want to keep you as my mentor. If you end up getting kicked out, the next mentor I get might be someone who knows how to say 'Yes, Sir' without sounding like a dick, but that doesn't mean that they'll know more about running the helm than I already do." Lexi said bluntly.

"What is it that you're asking me to do?" Lieutenant Fister asked cautiously.

"Just listen when we tell you a better way to say what you're saying and don't get all mean and hateful with us." RJ said seriously.

Lieutenant Fister thought for a moment, then quietly said, "I may have a problem with that. Although I'm not always aware of it at the time, I tend to react badly when people criticize me."

"You'll just have to get over it." Lexi said firmly.

"Armand, we were already expecting you to react negatively to being corrected. We'll make you a deal. If you'll try to keep your reaction from being *too* nasty, we'll do our best to overlook your attitude, as much as we can." Tracey said as he *finally* got Lieutenant Fister to look him in the eyes.

"Nothing I've tried so far has seemed to work. And I'm one step away from being drummed out of Starfleet. I guess I've got nothing to lose." Lieutenant Fister said quietly.

"Just try to keep in mind that we're doing this to help you. We're on your side." Tracey said seriously.

Lieutenant Fister got a curious look for a moment, then said, "You know, I don't think anyone's ever been on my side before."

"I'm the one who can help you with that." RJ said frankly.

Lieutenant Fister's look of question wasn't the only one directed at RJ.

"Let's just say, I sort of know how that feels. Making a change takes some getting used to, but it's worth it." RJ said honestly.

"We've got some studying that we need to get back to, right now. Enjoy your dinner." Tracey said as he stood and started collecting his dishes.

"Yeah, some of the mean mentors gave their cadets extra work to do when they're off duty." Lexi said with a smile.

"I'm not counted as one of the mean mentors?" Lieutenant Fister asked with surprise.

"No. I don't think so." Lexi said, then stopped to think about it.

Finally, she continued, "But I could be wrong."

Lieutenant Fister watched as the cadets left the mess hall, then turned his attention to his forgotten dinner.

* * * * *

Once everyone was aboard, Tracey looked upward and said, "Conference room seven."

"Seven?" Lexi asked curiously.

"Yeah. I talked to the duty officer on the bridge, Commander Neiman, and she said that if it will work for us, we can use conference room seven as a classroom." Tracey said seriously.

"That's going to be kind of a pain." Hart said sourly.

"Why's that?" Tracey asked with surprise.

"I mean, having to carry all our stuff up and down every time we want to study." Hart said simply.

The lift door opened and Tracey led the way as he explained, "If we decide that we want to use it, it's going to be ours. We can leave our study stuff down here and no one will mess with it."

As they walked up to the door, it opened and the lights turned on.

"*It's dusty.*" Rocky said as they entered.

"Yeah. I guess that if they have at least six other conference rooms, they must not have used this one for a while." Tracey said thoughtfully as he looked around.

"A little cleaner and a few rags will fix it right up." RJ said as he watched Hart open a cabinet at the side of the room to peek inside.

"We can probably get that from ship's services." Tracey agreed.

"*If you can step out for a few minutes, I can clean the floor.*" Rocky said seriously.

A few glances were exchanged among the others, but no one seemed to be inclined to ask about it.

"Look at this." Hart said as he took a book, made out of extremely large sheets of paper, out of the cabinet.

"What's that?" RJ asked with interest.

"Blueprints." Hart said as he placed the book on the table.

"On paper? How old do you think these are?" Tracey asked quietly as he stepped closer to see.

"I don't know, but from the look of these, I'd bet that they're original, from when the ship was built." Hart said distantly.

"Fascinating." Xon said with a slight smile.

"Look at this. It's got a diagram of all the service crawl ways and maintenance shafts." Hart said eagerly.

"You know, with this, we might be able to do some exploring." RJ said with a grin.

After a moment to consider, Tracey said, "If we compare this to the diagram in the computer, we might be able to find some places that have been forgotten over the years."

"RJ, do you need any help with the cleaner and rags?" Lexi asked seriously.

"What?" RJ asked as he tore his gaze away from the blueprints.

"We're keeping this place, aren't we? Let's get started cleaning it up." Lexi said frankly.

"Um, yeah. Let's go." RJ agreed.

"I'll get your padd from the cabin." Tracey said after him.

"Thanks." RJ said before he and Lexi walked through the door.

"Rocky, do you need anything from upstairs?" Tracey asked as he finally was able to get his mind back on task.

"No. I have all the information that I need to study downloaded to my interface. If you will go and get what you need, I'll take care of the floor, now."

"C'mon, guys." Tracey said decisively.

Hart was nearly to the door before Xon could tear his fascinated gaze away from the blueprints.

* * * * *

When Tracey, Xon and Hart returned to conference room seven, they found RJ and Lexi hard at work, carefully cleaning every surface in the room.

"Do you guys need any help?" Tracey asked cautiously.

After a glance at Tracey, RJ said, "No. We're just about done. We're done with the table if you want to put that stuff down."

"Okay." Tracey said as he walked more fully into the room.

"Wow, Rocky! This floor is *spotless!*" Hart said with surprise.

"Yeah. How'd you do that?" Tracey said as he noticed that Hart was right.

"I believe that you will sleep better at night if I do not answer that question." Rocky said simply.

"Um, okay. I'll just have to trust you on that." Tracey said slowly.

"Would anyone mind if I were to use the viewscreen for one of my mentor assignments?" Xon asked curiously.

Tracey looked around to see if anyone were going to object, then said, "Go ahead."

Xon keyed something on the padd he had been working on, then something else on the keypad built into the conference room table.

The viewscreen came on and displayed a series of complicated equations.

Tracey stepped forward and carefully looked over the complex formulae before asking, "Why are you doing astrophysics calculations the long way instead of letting the computer do it?"

"Commander Pell believes it to be necessary." Xon said frankly.

"Good luck." Tracey said before stepping back to the table.

"The only thing I understand on the whole first line is the number three." RJ said honestly as he stared at what, to him, was incomprehensible gibberish.

Xon looked at the first line and said, "I believe that to which you are referring is the greek letter 'sigma' which, in this context, represents the concept of sum total."

"Right." RJ said weakly.

"I need a break." Lexi said as she put her padd down on the table.

"Yeah. I think I read the same sentence three times just now." RJ said tiredly.

"Do you want to quit for the night?" Hart asked cautiously.

Tracey looked at his padd to verify the time before answering, "You guys can do what you want, but I'd like to get a little bit more accomplished, first."

Lexi gave a sigh of resignation before saying, "Yeah. Me, too. But I need to get away for a few minutes and do something else before I can study any more."

"Good idea." Tracey said as he stood and gave a dramatic stretch.

RJ watched him stretch for a moment, then absently said, "I need to write to Loi."

"What's your boyfriend like?" Lexi asked as the group started toward the door.

"He's fifteen, like me. He's a really good student, you know, good grades, studies all the time. He's kind of quiet." RJ finished with a smile.

"Mess hall." Tracey said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to RJ and said, "I bet he's really proud of you."

"Yeah." RJ said simply, then quietly added, "I can't believe how much I miss him."

"From the look of the mission briefing, we should be back to Earth in about two weeks. So you'll be able to see him soon." Tracey assured him.

"I know. It's just, I've never felt like I needed to be with someone like this before. Even though I always had my little brother around, I never felt like I *wanted* to be around someone." RJ said frankly.

"Is that what it's like to be in love?" Lexi asked curiously.

The turbolift door opened and the group walked out before Tracey quietly said, "That's what it's like for RJ. I don't know for sure, but I think it's different for different people."

"Have you ever been in love?" Lexi asked seriously.

Tracey smiled at the question, then said, "No. Not seriously. I've had a few friends that I loved, but it wasn't like what RJ's talking about. When I was in love, it was about right then and there. It was fun and wonderful for a while, and then, when it stopped being fun, it was over. We were still friends, maybe even closer friends than we were before, but that's all."

All of them automatically got into the serving line and selected some things to snack on before continuing on to a table.

"What about you, Hart?" Lexi asked casually.

He gave her a suspicious look before answering, "I haven't really had the chance. Let's just say that the people I grew up around weren't the type of people that you fall in love with, they're the type of people you don't turn your back on."

"Is New Hope really that bad?" Tracey asked with concern.

"No. That was before New Hope. The only girls I really got to know at New Hope were Cheh, who is five, and Hailey, who is nine."

"Cheh and Hailey... Summers?" Xon asked curiously.

"Yeah. That's right." Hart confirmed.

"I am acquainted with their sister, Callie." Xon said carefully.

"I've heard about Callie. I've even seen pictures of her... whether I wanted to, or not." Hart chuckled to himself, then added, "Hailey is crushing on Lehman really bad. He tries to be nice to her, but not too nice, because her big brother is trying to protect her... not from Lehman, but from herself. If Lehman wasn't such a good guy..."

"Her big brother is Benny." Xon said, more than asked.

"Yeah. Him and Lehman and JonJon kind of work together to take care of Cheh and Hailey until their parents get out of the hospitals." Hart said frankly.

"Yes. I met Callie in the hospital on Vulcan. She explained what had happened to her family. I went to visit her at my brother's request." Xon said seriously.

"Is *that* where you learned to be around Humans?" Tracey asked curiously.

"Why do you suppose that I needed to learn how *to be* around Humans?" Xon asked curiously.

"I noticed it at Coffelt. Humans say and do things that, when you think about them, don't make any sense at all. After a while, Vulcans get used to it. I could tell when I talked to you for a few minutes that you were already past that point." Tracey said frankly.

"I would not say that we 'get used to it', I believe that it is more the case that we resign ourselves to the fact that Humans are hopelessly illogical." Xon said seriously.

Tracey shrugged, then responded, "Six of one, half a dozen of the other."

Xon's upper lip slightly twitched as he fought to quell the urge to respond.

* * * * *

"So, RJ, are you ready to start working on what you can do to fix your school, back home?" Lexi asked as the group of cadets left the mess hall.

"I can't, yet. I've still got too much communications stuff to study. But I should probably be able to work on it after our next break." RJ said thoughtfully.

Once they were all aboard the lift, Tracey looked upward and said, "Conference room seven."

Lexi looked around the group, then said, "My mom would freak if she found out that I was spending so much time with a group of guys."

"Are you saying that she doesn't know." Xon asked curiously.

"No. My parents divorced and we don't have any contact with my mom." Lexi explained, then continued, "But what I was saying is, when she still lived with us, she was always trying to make me be a little princess with pigtails and playing with dollies and crap like that. She'd freak if I wanted to play with the boys and do 'boy things'."

"What are boy things?" Rocky asked curiously.

As the group stepped off the lift, Lexi explained, "I guess it depends on who you ask. My mom had this whole list of things that boys and girls were supposed to do. But my dad said that if I find something that I enjoy doing and I have a talent for, that automatically makes it a 'girl thing' and I should do it."

"I think your dad's right." RJ said simply.

As the group walked into the conference room, Lexi said, "Yeah. Well, my mom's always had a problem with reality. She got this stupid idea that if she 'believes' hard enough, that she can make reality do what she wants... or something like that. My dad tried to explain it, but he was being really careful not to say the wrong thing and ended up not saying much of anything."

"Dads sometimes do that." Hart said with weary acceptance.

RJ nodded his agreement.

"My dad died when I was really young. I never knew him." Tracey said distantly, then quietly added, "I was about eleven or twelve when my mom married my step-dad. He's nice, and I love him and everything, but he's not my *real* dad."

"Some real dads are great, some aren't. It's the luck of the draw." Hart said frankly.

"What about yours?" Tracey asked him curiously.

"Mine's great. I'm just saying that I've seen other dads who weren't." Hart said seriously.

"I don't have a father." Rocky stated simply.

After a moment, Hart cautiously asked, "How does that work?"

"The physiology of the Horta isn't quite the same as that of humanoids. My mother was the last of her kind. So she repopulated our world." Rocky said carefully.

After a long moment of silence, Tracey looked around and asked, "Are we ready to get back to work?"

"Yeah." RJ said before picking up his data padd.

* * * * *

"Five minute warning." Tracey said suddenly, breaking the long silence.

"For what?" Lexi asked curiously.

"I think I'm going to call it a night, at least for the studying. If you're close to a good stopping point and you don't have anything that *has to* be done tonight, now would be a good time to shut it down." Tracey explained.

"Although I could continue further, I have no desire to do so." Xon said simply, then turned off the viewscreen that he had been using.

"Do you guys still want to help me with my 'school project?'" RJ asked cautiously.

"Sure. We can do that in my cabin, if no one objects." Tracey said with a smile at him.

"Sounds good. I like our little study room, but I think I've had enough of it for one day." Hart said as he turned off his data padd.

"How about you, Rocky? Are you ready for a break?" Tracey asked curiously.

"I will need a moment. I am having difficulty with one equation." Rocky said seriously.

"What is it? Maybe we can help." Tracey asked simply.

"When compensating for scalable gravitational vectors in close proximity to binary pulsars, how does one mathematically demonstrate the inertial coefficient?" Rocky asked carefully.

"Um, yeah. You might need to ask Ensign Lord about that one." Tracey said cautiously.

"When you have completed the equation, I would be interested to see your findings. It is an intriguing problem." Xon said seriously.

As everyone was getting up from their chairs, Lexi slowly said, "If it was me, I'd just call that part x for now and do the rest of the equation, then come back to it, after. Usually, when I do that, I've got enough information to figure it out."

Everyone stared at her with surprise for a moment. Finally, Rocky quietly said, *"Thank you, Lexi. I will try that."*

Lexi happily bounced up, out of her chair, then started toward the door as the others shared looks of surprise.

"Are we going to break, now?" Lexi asked from the doorway.

"Yeah. Right behind you." Tracey finally said.

* * * * *

"Alonzo!" Lexi called out from the serving line in the mess hall.

When the crewman looked up from his meal at the sound of his name, he smiled and waved at Lexi.

"When we get our food, can we sit with you?" Lexi called across the room.

Crewman August glanced around to see if people were staring at him, then nodded his agreement to her.

* * * * *

"Hi, Alonzo. How are you doing?" Lexi asked as she led the procession to the table.

"Very well. After my shift, I did some work on a writing project and lost track of time. I stopped for dinner when my stomach could no longer be denied." Crewman August said with a smile.

"We're just taking a break from studying." Lexi said simply.

"Oh? What are you studying?" Alonzo asked curiously.

"Some of us are studying for school and some of us are studying stuff for our mentors." Lexi said simply.

"I was wanting to ask you, if you're allowed to say, why are you on this ship?" Alonzo asked curiously.

"I thought they already told you, since you were sent to get us at the dock." Lexi said honestly.

"No. They just told me to bring you aboard and take you to the admiral, then later, the captain told me to take you to your quarters." Alonzo said honestly.

"We're all in the Starfleet Mentoring Program. Out of more than a hundred people who applied, we're the ones that actually made it." Lexi said proudly.

At Crewman August's look of confusion, Tracey explained, "We've been chosen to learn how to be Starfleet officers out here, on actual missions, by doing the job."

"I don't understand why they wouldn't just enroll you at the academy, like everyone else." Crewman August said slowly.

"I think it's because different people learn things different ways. Doing it this way is probably a whole lot more trouble than just sending everyone to the academy, so they only do it for the people they think might be worth the effort." Tracey said seriously.

"So, all of you are here, learning how to be Starfleet officers, by actually *doing* the job?" Crewman August asked to confirm.

"That's it." Tracey said simply.

"I'm being trained to be a helm officer." Lexi said proudly.

"Helm?" Crewman August asked with surprise.

"Yep. There were a few times today when I was actually the one steering the ship." Lexi said seriously.

"Rocky is on navigation." Tracey said as he pointed downward.

Crewman August looked under the table at Rocky, then quietly asked, "How is that even possible?"

"Certain adjustments had to be made for me to interface with the bridge controls, but I promise you that the ship's safety is everyone's primary concern." Rocky said reassuringly.

Crewman August didn't seem to be certain, but finally looked around the table and cautiously asked, "What about the rest of you?"

"I'm on communications." RJ said with a proud smile.

"Security." Hart said simply.

"Hold on. Wait. *You're* in charge of *security*?" Crewman August asked disbelievingly.

"Why is it so easy for you to accept that RJ's on communications but you can't believe that I can run security?" Hart asked challengingly.

"You're just so... young." Crewman August tried to explain.

"I may not be big and muscled, but neither is Lieutenant Okawa, and no one, anywhere, has a problem with *her* being in charge of security. At least, they'd better not, if they know what's good for them." Hart said passionately.

"Before we came here, Starfleet tested all of us to see what we might be good at. *We're* the best. If Starfleet believes that Hart is good enough, then I'm willing to give him a chance." Tracey said firmly.

"You're the best..." Alonzo said thoughtfully as he looked around the table.

"Is that really such a difficult concept for you to accept?" Xon asked cautiously.

"No. I was just thinking... you know that I told you that I was doing a writing project, earlier." Crewman August began.

Xon nodded for him to continue.

"Well, that's what I do in my spare time. I write. I was just thinking that what you're doing might make a really interesting story." Crewman August said with growing enthusiasm.

"You want to write about *us*?" RJ asked cautiously.

"No. Not about you specifically. I only write fiction. But I think it would be really interesting to write a fictionalized account of your story." Crewman August said with a smile.

"So you'd write a story about us, but not about *us*." RJ asked cautiously.

"It would be about a group of kids who were gathered together because they had incredible potential. Then they would be given a chance to fulfill that potential to the best of their abilities. I wouldn't use your names and none of the characters would be anything like any of you. But the situation would be basically the same." Crewman August explained.

"It's okay with me, but you have to have at least one girl... and she can't be a sissy." Lexi said firmly.

"I should be able to handle that." Alonzo said with a smile.

"I think, for much the same reason, a non-humanoid should also be included." Rocky added.

"Non-humanoid. Got it." Crewman August said fondly.

"Should you happen to include a Vulcan character, I would ask that you characterize him in a manner that demonstrates that he is reasonable and logical." Xon said calmly.

"No Vulcan jokes, got it."

"Even if you're not really going to be writing about us, could you still make one of your characters be poor and from a trailer park in Georgia? I'd really like for other people like me to get the idea that it's not impossible for them to get out of there." RJ said honestly.

"Okay, yeah. I think that's a good message to include." Crewman August said thoughtfully.

"While you're at it, having one of them being from a colony world would be a way of letting them know that they're included in all this." Tracey added seriously.

Alonzo nodded, then looked to Hart and asked, "Anything for you?"

"If you write a guy who's anything like me, there's just one thing I want you to be sure to include. That's that, back home, he's got people who love him. He's not here because he doesn't have anything good in his life." Hart said firmly.

"I'll be sure to include that." Alonzo said in a stunned whisper.

"Our snack's done. Some of us still have more work to do." Tracey said as he looked around the table.

Lexi got up and as she passed Crewman August, she whispered, "Remember that the one from Coffelt likes to boss people around."

* * * * *

"So, are we ready to get up to the cabins?" Tracey asked as they walked out of the mess hall.

"Before we do that, would you guys help me figure out what to do about my old school?" RJ asked seriously.

"You should have thought of that before you made other arrangements." A voice said from behind the group.

They turned to find Mr. Whipple glaring back at them.

"We weren't talking *to* you or *about* you." RJ said firmly.

"I bet you're regretting not taking Federation classes, now, aren't you." Mr. Whipple said with satisfaction.

"You lose." RJ said coldly, then continued, "None of us have taken your classes, so we don't know what they're like. We just know what *you're* like, and that was enough to tell us that we want to take classes with someone else."

Tracey looked at RJ with surprise. Timid, uncertain RJ all of a sudden had a voice.

"I'm sure that's..." Mr. Whipple began to say, but was interrupted.

"Whatever." RJ said shortly, then continued, "We're not your students. You don't have any reason to talk to us. An old man harassing a bunch of kids is creepy."

"I'm not..."

"Yes you are... whatever you were about to say, you are, trust me." RJ said seriously.

"I'm going to talk to the captain about this!" Mr. Whipple finally erupted.

RJ smiled as the man stormed away, then quietly said, "I'm sure he's going to be real happy to see you."

"That was awesome!" Hart said with an uncharacteristic big grin.

"Yeah. Well, I'm in communications. Remember that not all communication is nice." RJ said, obviously very pleased with himself.

"Do you think the captain's going to be mad?" Lexi asked anxiously.

"Yeah. But not at us." Tracey said thoughtfully, then seemed to snap out of it and continued, "Don't worry about it. I think the captain will handle it himself. He's probably itching to let his inner Tellarite out to play. But if he *does* want to ask us about it, just leave it to me. I'm in charge, so it's my responsibility."

"But that's not fair to you, is it?" Lexi asked with concern.

"It's my job, Lexi. When I was put in charge, this is what I agreed to do. When you guys screw up, it's my fault. But when you do something really great, it's my fault, too. I'm betting that you guys are going to keep me in the plus column." Tracey said as they stepped onto the lift.

"Are you guys going to help me with my school thing?" RJ asked hopefully.

"Conference Room Seven." Tracey said, in lieu of a response.

* * * * *

"This is it, right? We're going to go to bed, next?" Lexi asked hopefully.

"You can go to bed whenever you want. As soon as you're off duty, you're on your own time." Tracey said frankly.

Lexi rolled her eyes, then in a tone of long suffering, she asked, "Does anyone have anymore stuff that they need to do after we're done with RJ's stuff?"

"Yes." RJ said simply.

When she looked at him impatiently, he said, "I need to go through some communication scenarios. But I don't need the whole group to do that."

"RJ, when you've got all of us to help you, it'd be stupid to limit yourself." Hart said frankly.

"*Lexi, you were right.*" Rocky said suddenly.

"I was right about what?" Lexi asked cautiously.

"*I did as you suggested and substituted a placeholder for the unknown formula in the equation. Thank you, Lexi. That was incredibly helpful.*"

Rocky said seriously.

"See, that's what I'm talking about. Let's do your school thing, then we'll all help you with your scenarios." Hart said seriously.

"And if that doesn't work, you can always ask Mr. Whipple for help, since he doesn't appear to have anything better to do." Tracey said with a playful grin.

"Yeah. Let's do *that*." RJ said flatly, but couldn't hold his expression and ended up breaking into a smile.

* * * * *

After a small amount of research and discussion, the group came up with a list of demands to present to the administrators, teachers and parents in RJ's school district. In the modern, information age, distribution of the 'manifesto' was the easiest part of the process, and when it was done, RJ was surprised to find that it hadn't even taken a full thirty minutes.

"When you guys said that I should do something, I kinda thought that it would be more." RJ said honestly.

"I suppose that we could have organized sit-ins or riots or protests... And I guess we still can, if you really want to. But let's see how this goes first. A list, in clear language, of what's wrong and how to fix it... it's *just* crazy enough to work." Tracey said honestly.

RJ sat for a moment, then smiled as he said, "But, it was so easy... why didn't someone do this sooner?!"

"They needed 'somebody' to stand up and tell them what's wrong and how to make it right. You're 'somebody'." Lexi said seriously.

"We'll have to wait and see how it turns out. Next up, we have RJ's communications scenarios." Tracey said to the group.

"Okay, if you don't mind, I'll just go ahead and put it on the big screen so everyone can see what I'm doing." RJ said as he moved to the screen controls.

"Go ahead. You do your exercise and when you're done, we'll offer suggestions." Tracey said as he turned his chair to view the screen more comfortably.

"This is the USS Haverston requesting immediate aid. We've lost main power and are functioning on emergency systems. We estimate that our life support will fail in twenty-one minutes." A woman's voice said frantically.

RJ pressed a button on the keypad, then carefully said, "Notify captain about the distress call."

"Look at the transponder frequency." Xon said quietly.

"Yeah, that carrier wave doesn't look right, either." Lexi said seriously.

"Does your program have the ability to show long range scans?" Tracey asked carefully.

RJ quickly pressed the button again, then said, "Tell Captain that the transponder frequency isn't Federation and suggest that sciences do long range scans."

A scanning image filled the screen, which revealed nothing, then the text message, *"Captain's order: Contact Starfleet requesting status and location of USS Haverston... Scenario Complete."*

"So, someone was trying to lure us into a trap." Tracey said speculatively.

"It would have worked, if it wasn't for you guys." RJ said honestly.

"That's why we're doing this, so you'll learn. Do another one." Lexi said firmly.

"Are you sure you aren't too tired?" RJ asked her with a grin.

"Just shut up and load it." Lexi growled.

* * * * *

Going through the communications scenarios turned out to be reminiscent of playing the Starfleet Sim although, many times, with considerably darker

themes.

Working as a group, they were able to solve most of the problems on the first try, but there were a few scenarios that challenged the entire group.

When they reached a good stopping point, Tracey looked around the group and asked, "Is everyone ready for bed, now?"

"No. But I'm ready to be done studying." Hart said frankly.

"Me, too. My brain is fried." RJ agreed.

"What else is there to do, besides eat?" Lexi asked curiously.

"We could check out the recreation deck." Tracey said frankly.

"We have a recreation deck? What are we waiting for?" Hart asked immediately.

"Anybody too tired?" Tracey asked with a glance at Lexi.

"Don't make me have to hurt you." Lexi said sternly.

"Come on." Tracey chuckled.

* * * * *

When the group stepped off the turbolift they were greeted by what appeared to be a small indoor mall. The various 'shops' each had a different type of entertainment for the crew to enjoy.

One was something like a small movie theater. Another was filled with various games, computerized and otherwise.

In the central 'mall', there were several conversation areas where members of the crew could congregate during their off duty hours.

As the cadets were walking, RJ spotted something of interest to him.

"Can we stop here for a minute?" He asked hopefully as he walked closer to the gym.

"Do you feel like working out?" Tracey asked with a smile.

"Not at the moment, but maybe sometime." RJ said honestly.

"Yeah. Me, too." Hart added.

"Actually, maybe we could come down here together. It might be good for all of us to work off some energy." Tracey said thoughtfully.

"Sounds good to me. I've been wanting to bulk up." Rocky casually added.

"Yeah. Swimsuit season's just around the corner." Tracey said with a smile.

* * * * *

They spent a few minutes looking around the gym. Although it was small, it was outfitted with all the essential equipment that they might need.

When the cadets were finally assured that they had seen all that there was to see, they walked back into the central courtyard and spotted Lieutenant Fister in one of the conversation areas, sitting by himself.

"Armand! How are you doing this evening?" Tracey asked as he approached.

"Oh. It's you." Lieutenant Fister grumbled.

"The correct way to greet people is, 'Hello, it's nice to see you. How are you doing?'" Tracey said patiently.

"Whatever." Lieutenant Fister said as he looked away.

"Say it." Lexi said firmly.

"What?" Lieutenant Fister asked in confusion.

"What Tracey just said to you. Say it. At least say, 'Hello. How are you?'"

"Hello how are you." Lieutenant Fister said grudgingly.

After a moment of thought, Tracey said, "Later on, we'll probably work on getting you to say it like you mean it, but for now, that'll do."

"Do you not have anything better to do than harass me?" Lieutenant Fister asked tiredly.

"Actually, yes. We *do* have better things to do. But instead of doing those 'better' things, we're trying to help you. Lexi wants to keep you as her mentor and none of us wants to see you leave." Tracey said frankly.

"Except me." Hart said immediately.

"Except Hart, but I think if we do this right, you'll win him over at some point." Tracey conceded.

"I'm no good at this." Lieutenant Fister said honestly.

"We've noticed. I doubt that we'll ever make you 'good' at it. We're shooting for 'passable'." Tracey said honestly.

Xon slowly nodded his agreement with Tracey's plan.

Lieutenant Fister was silent for a long moment, then he grudgingly said, "Thanks."

"You're very welcome. Now, if you will excuse us, I think it's just about our bedtime. We hope that you have a nice evening." Tracey said carefully.

"Except Hart." Lieutenant Fister interjected.

"Actually, I really *do* want you to have a nice evening. Because, if you have a bad evening, you might be crabby in the morning. And I don't want to have to put up with what that will cause to happen." Hart said frankly.

Lieutenant Fister thought for a moment, then said, "I hope you have a nice evening, too, including you, Hart."

"That was GREAT! If you can keep doing stuff like that, then the captain won't ever want to get rid of you." Lexi said happily.

Lieutenant Fister glanced at her and gave a very brief, very slight, smile.

"Goodnight, Armand. We'll see you in the morning." Tracey said sincerely.

"Goodnight." Lieutenant Fister said, then watched the cadets go.

* * * * *

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Alexandra Lorraine Gelt - 20050411-21:15:22

I don't think I mentioned it last time, but Tracey, he was a Cadet Lieutenant, was made an Acting Lieutenant and put in charge of the rest of the cadets.

That's not a bad thing, Tracey's a really good guy and I like him.

He's fixed things so that we have a study room of our own, which is really nice. But he also helped us to figure out what things we need to work on and then kind of scheduled things so that we'd work on them and not forget anything.

Writing it down, it doesn't really sound like that much, but when you've got a hundred things swirling around in your head all wanting you to work on them at once, it really helps to have someone say, "Homework time".

Anyway, there's other stuff I want to talk about, but if I've got to be doing log entries all the time, I need to save some stuff to tell you later.

Remember, wishing and dreaming is great. But nothing's going to happen if you don't do something. Make it happen!

Lexi, out.

* * * * *

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Hart Korrigon - 20050411-21:20:20

I'm still in security.

I still can't talk about it.

Hart, out.

* * * * *

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Robert Anthony Parker Jr - 20050411-21:24:03

It's weird. When I started this whole thing, trying to get into Starfleet, I thought I'd have to work really hard to change myself to be what I was supposed to be.

But a few things happened today to make me see that who I already am is part of why they chose me.

I had the feeling that communications officers were all nice and polite all the time and all they ever did was answer calls and 'play nice'.

But I've figured out that we're actually the first line of defense in a lot of ways. Sure, there are times when we have to be nice. But sometimes we have to ask questions and give answers that people don't like and tell people 'no'.

I have a lifetime of experience doing that!

Even though I really didn't know what I was getting into, I think I ended up right where I needed to be.

I can't wait for tomorrow!

Loi, I miss you.

RJ, out.

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Log entry: Cadet Ensign Rock - 20050411-21:26:09

We are six.

Together, we are somehow more.

Each brings experience.

Each brings knowledge.

Combined, our potential is augmented.

I cannot quantify.

But it is true.

Rocky, out.

* * * * *

Log entry: Cadet Ensign Xon s/o Sufaal h/o Sukaan - 20050411-21:30:44

Observations regarding the Cadet Crew.

My perspective:

Acting Lieutenant Sturgill - Command

- *Decisive.*
- *Willing to consider outside points of view.*
- *Willing to take action.*
- *Willing to accept responsibility.*
- *Acceptable.*

Cadet Ensign Korrigon - Security

- *Impatient, yet quiet.*
- *Argumentative, yet considerate.*
- *Volatile, yet calming.*
- *Fierce.*
- *Acceptable.*

Cadet Ensign Rock - Navigation

- *Intelligent.*
- *Wise.*
- *Strangely approachable.*
- *Dedicated.*
- *Acceptable.*

Cadet Ensign Parker - Communications

- *In some situations, reserved and uncertain.*
- *In some situations, forceful and outgoing.*
- *Inspires trust.*
- *A genuinely 'good' person.*
- *Sometimes unpredictable.*
- *Ultimately, acceptable.*

Cadet Ensign Gelt - Helm

- Tenacious.*
- Insightful.*
- Caring.*
- Acceptable.*

Based on my observations, I believe the selection process for the Federation Mentoring Program to be adequate. The selected individuals demonstrate the capacity to function well as individuals and more so as a team.

Callie, Be well. My thoughts are with you.

Xon, out.

** * * * **

Log entry: Acting Lieutenant Tracey Ephram Sturgill - 20050411-21:36:52

I was able to arrange a conference room where we could study together.

It seemed to me that it would be a good way for us to motivate each other so that no one would fall behind in their studies.

What I didn't expect was the way that everyone worked to help each other.

RJ had some training scenarios for communications, and the whole team worked together to help him recognize every element of the exercises.

Even though what we did seemed to be for RJ's benefit, I think we all learned a lot about group problem solving. As we were going through the different scenarios, we listened to each other and considered each other's points of view.

I think we learned more than most of us realized. And I think that the things we learned are things that we're going to be using and developing for a very long time.

Does every commanding officer feel like this? Because I can't imagine any other team that I'd want to be in charge of.

Denny, Price, I miss you. You're not forgotten.

Tracey, out.

Chapter 4 - Learning the Ropes

The sound of movement woke Hart from his typical light sleep. Growing up on mercenary vessels, he had learned never to allow himself to sleep so deeply that he was unaware of his surroundings.

Remaining still, he listened carefully and could detect the low hum of the ship's engines. From the engine output, he deduced that they were continuing to proceed at the same speed as when he went to bed.

Another sound in close proximity nearly made him open his eyes, but he held himself back, maintaining the illusion that he was asleep until he could more fully evaluate his situation.

When the sound repeated, more distantly, Hart slitted open one eye and caught a glimpse of Xon as he left the room and entered the bathroom that they shared with Tracey and RJ.

Once the bathroom door was closed, Hart cautiously opened his eyes and did a quick visual survey.

The room that he shared with Xon was in pristine condition.

Although Hart wasn't much of a 'neat freak', he had lived on starships long enough to know not to leave anything unsecured. If there should be a space battle, or if the ship were to lose power to the gravity plating for some reason, anything left loose could easily become airborne.

Hart glanced at the time and saw that the alarm was set to go off in two minutes. He reached up and turned off the alarm, then got out of bed and gathered his clothes, including a fresh 'Cadet' uniform, so that he could prepare for his day.

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Upon entering the bathroom, he could hear that the sonic shower was activated and assumed that Xon was showering.

After a quick stop at the toilet, he went to the second sonic shower stall to do likewise.

While doing so, he reflected on the fact that it seemed that he and Xon were uniquely suited to be roommates. Before arriving at the academy, he never would have considered the possibility that he would get along well with a Vulcan. But since Hart could not abide mindless chatter, Xon was without a doubt the best roommate for him.

Tracey seemed to assume that when someone was quiet, that they were unhappy or angry about something. Even when Hart and Xon explained that they weren't 'chatty people', Tracey still seemed to harbor a feeling of concern that they were being left out or that he had offended them in some way.

RJ, on the other hand, never shut up. In Hart's estimation, it was good that RJ had been assigned to communications, because he had no doubt that RJ wouldn't be able to perform well in a job that didn't require incessant talking.

Lexi was full of youthful enthusiasm and Rocky was understandably inquisitive about exploring a world with which he was completely unfamiliar. All of them were nice enough and Hart was content to share company with them. But he was nonetheless relieved that he and Xon were roommates. After a long day of work and studying, being able to sit quietly and concentrate on his own thoughts was as close to relaxing as he ever got.

* * * * *

When his shower was finished, Hart dressed, retrieved his sleep clothes from the fresher and returned to the cabin he shared with Xon.

In the whole time that they'd been showering, they hadn't heard a peep from either Tracey or RJ. Hart got the sense that both of them more or less dragged themselves out of bed at the last possible moment.

Hart took all of a minute to make his bed in accordance with Starfleet regulations. It wasn't that he was worried that they were going to have a

surprise inspection of their quarters. The fact of the matter was that he understood the underlying reasoning. If you made your bed according to Starfleet specifications, then a space battle or loss of gravity made it far less likely that anything might be dislodged and floating as an obstacle or hazard when you returned to your cabin.

As expected, Xon had already made his bed and was now reviewing correspondence on a Starfleet padd.

It seemed strange to Hart that Xon seemed to get a surprising number of emails.

Although he hadn't shared company with a Vulcan for any length of time before, he never expected that they would be much for writing letters.

Since he had a few free minutes, Hart decided that he would get his study padd out and check his email, too.

* * * * *

The first thing he saw when the email program opened was three separate messages. The first was from Lehman so he opened it.

The letter wasn't really *about* anything, but was just an accounting of what had been happening at the New Hope colony and at Lehman's school since their last exchange of letters.

The next message was from JonJon.

It seemed strange to Hart that while he had been there, at New Hope, he and JonJon had spent quite a bit of time doing things with Lehman, but never really had much of anything to say to each other. But now that they were apart, JonJon had opened up and would fill Hart in on what was happening with his father at the New Hope Inn and with the colony, in general.

JonJon never spoke of anything personal, but his letters were very informative and relaxing to read.

The third letter was from Hailey Summers.

Hart and Hailey hadn't exchanged more than a few words with each other the whole time he was there, mostly because they really had no interests in common. He got the feeling that Hailey simply enjoyed writing letters.

Her letter was nearly incomprehensible, meandering from point to point without reason. It was more of a 'stream of consciousness' than a letter. But still, as he read it, he could almost hear her speaking the words in her own youthful excited voice.

Toward the end of Hailey's letter was a small paragraph which was written by her newly adopted sister, Cheh. Hart couldn't help but think back to the moment when he had first seen the little Avalla girl and thought that she was dead.

Although the little paragraph didn't say much more than how much she was enjoying going to school, it very nearly made him tear up.

The sound of movement caused Hart to look up and he saw that Xon was putting his padd away.

A glance at the top of his padd confirmed that it was time for them to go to the mess hall to await their classmates.

* * * * *

Hart and Xon waited outside the mess hall door silently for a number of minutes before the first of the other cadets showed up.

"How are you guys doing? How'd you sleep?" Tracey asked cheerfully as he approached with RJ following a step behind.

Hart glanced at Xon, to see if he were going to answer, then looked back to Tracey and said, "Fine."

Before Tracey could respond, RJ quickly interjected, "I got some *great* news from back home."

Since Xon hadn't verbally responded, Hart knew that Xon would, at most, quirk an eyebrow in question, to prompt RJ for more information. Since Hart didn't feel like playing twenty questions, he quirked an eyebrow as

well.

"Loi told me that last night, his mom and my dad went on a date together." RJ said happily.

Hart couldn't think of any possible response to that, so he remained silent, assured that RJ would continue the story until he had a compelling reason to stop.

"They've been kind of seeing each other for a couple months, now. But last night was the first time that they went on a real *official* date." RJ said happily.

"I take it that you approve..." Xon said in a leading tone.

"Yeah. My dad's been alone for a long time, taking care of me and my brother. He deserves to have someone to help him with things and... you know... share it with him." RJ said sincerely.

Hart thought about his own father, who was now single, and wondered if he, too, needed someone to share his life with him.

"Is it going to be weird having your dad dating your boyfriend's mom?" Tracey asked curiously, then smiled and waved as he saw Lexi and Rocky approaching.

"I think that Loi and I are both so glad to see our parents getting the chance to be happy that we haven't thought about it yet." RJ said honestly, then added, "I'm sure the weirdness will happen eventually."

"Probably about the time you go home for shore leave." Tracey said with a grin, then motioned for the cadets to walk with him into the mess hall.

"Even if it's weird, I think it'll be worth it." RJ said frankly as they all started to walk.

* * * * *

After making his breakfast selections, Tracey made his way to a table that would accommodate all of them.

As Lexi was walking toward their table, she noticed Lieutenant Fister at another table, eating by himself.

She broke away from the group and hopefully asked, "Would you like to have breakfast with us?"

"If you don't mind, I think I'd like to be alone to get myself in the right frame of mind for work." Lieutenant Fister said cautiously.

"Alright. But if you change your mind, you can come over and join us whenever you want." Lexi said seriously.

"I'll remember. Thank you." Lieutenant Fister said quietly and finished with a smile at her.

* * * * *

Once they were all settled in around the table and enjoying their meals, Tracey casually asked, "So, does anyone have anything special planned for today?"

"I don't know if Lieutenant Baz comes from a race of super geniuses but he seems to expect me to learn and remember every detail of everything he tells me." RJ said frankly.

"Welcome to Starfleet." Lexi said between bites of food.

RJ looked at her with surprise at the callus statement.

From below them, Rocky said, *"If you're looking for sympathy, I think you're at the wrong table. All of us are being bombarded with large amounts of information, just as you are."*

Hart nodded, then said, "We're just not bitching about it."

"Are you guys really as overwhelmed as I am?" RJ asked cautiously.

"I am entirely 'whelmed', but I will admit that there is a formidable amount of information that I am expected to not only learn, but to *master*." Xon said frankly.

"It's apples and oranges. We all have our own stuff to learn, but none of it's *exactly* like yours." Tracey said informatively.

"Your choices would seem to be to either continue to *do* the work, or tell your mentor that you are having difficulty and possibly receive suggestions for how to learn and master the information more effectively." Xon said seriously.

RJ looked around the table, then quietly said, "It's no fun bitching and whining when no one feels sorry for me."

Tracy and Hart broke into smiles at the announcement.

"Are you going to ask Lieutenant Baz for help?" Lexi asked curiously.

"Let me see how things go, today. If it gets to be too much, I'll talk to him about it." RJ said seriously.

"Lieutenant Sturgill? When do you think that you'll be able to get the other stations retrofitted so that I may use them?" Rocky asked cautiously.

"I'm Tracey, when we're off duty." Tracey gently told him, then answered, "I'll have to wait until we're all on shift, then I'll see which station we can work on next."

"Thank you, Tracey." Rocky said sincerely, then continued, *"I will feel better when I know that if something disastrous should happen, that I will be able to do my part, the same as any other member of the bridge crew."*

"We'll get you there, Buddy." Tracey assured him with a smile.

* * * * *

As the cadet crew walked onto the bridge, they could see that the regular crew were all in the process of taking their stations.

Hart walked to the security station and noticed that Lieutenant Okawa was standing with the aid of her crutches, listening to the security ensign who was still seated. As Hart stood at Lieutenant Okawa's side, he listened as she was briefed on the complete absence of any matters regarding security during the previous shift.

As soon as the briefing was complete, Lieutenant Okawa told Hart to take the station and run through the standard security checks.

"Lieutenant Okawa, I was wondering if it would be possible to do the retrofit of the security station today, so that Cadet Ensign Rock can have access?" Tracey asked hopefully as he approached.

"No. That won't be possible. I have a number of things scheduled for today. Let me look at my calendar and I'll send you a text message of when we'll have time for your project." Lieutenant Okawa said firmly.

"Just let me know when." Tracey said cautiously, then went back to the auxiliary station that he had been using.

As soon as Tracey was out of hearing range, Lieutenant Okawa quietly said, "Although the command staff are in charge and can 'order' us to drop everything and do as they say, I've realized that things work out much better when we stand our ground and work 'their' requests into 'our' schedule."

"Do you really have other things scheduled for us to do today?" Hart asked cautiously.

"Yes. And, if I didn't, I would have agreed to do Lieutenant Sturgill's project. What I'm saying is that to do your job, you need to *do* your job, you can't drop everything and come running every time the captain or a duty officer clears their throat." Lieutenant Okawa said firmly.

"I understand." Hart said professionally, then added, "I'm done with the security sweep. Would you like to sit down?"

"No. Right now we have other things to do. Summon Ensign Ton to the bridge to take over for us. We're going to be attending a meeting, soon." Lieutenant Okawa said seriously.

Hart pressed the dedicated security communication button, then said, "Ensign Ton to the bridge, please. Ensign Ton to the bridge."

"Go ahead and make your log entry, stating that you're going to be in a security meeting for the next hour or so. As soon as Ensign Ton gets here,

we're going to leave." Lieutenant Okawa said simply.

Hart immediately went to his task.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Baz? Would this be a good time for you to retrofit the communications station?"

"Please, tell me that you're kidding." Lieutenant Baz said with an anxious look at Tracey.

"No. Cadet Ensign Rock needs to be able to access all of the bridge stations so that in an emergency, he can step in." Tracey said carefully.

"I understand the need for it, but *now* is not a good time." Lieutenant Baz said frankly.

"Can you predict when it *will be* a good time?" Tracey asked simply.

"No. I can't predict that." Lieutenant Baz said, a little combatively.

"I tell you what, Lieutenant Okawa isn't ready to do the Security station, either. She said that she'll send me a text message and let me know when she has time. How about we do that? If you find out that you've got the time to do it, you let me know and I'll arrange for coverage or a free console or whatever else you need to make it work." Tracey offered reasonably.

"Yes. I'd just like to get to the point where I can feel confident that Cadet Ensign Parker is comfortable with all the various functions of inner as well as intra ship communications." Lieutenant Baz said honestly.

"That long, huh?" Tracey said with a grin at RJ.

"Hey!" RJ said in offense.

"I'm not saying that you won't learn it in time, but I'm betting that *he* won't feel confident in your abilities before we get back to Earth." Tracey said frankly.

Lieutenant Baz appeared to be stunned by Tracey's assessment.

"Let me know when you're ready." Tracey said with a smile at him, then walked casually to the helm.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Fister, I know that the helm controls have already been retrofitted so that Cadet Ensign Rock can access them, but have you had a chance to check them out?" Tracey asked seriously.

"No. The retrofit was done while we were in dock. I didn't think to verify it." Lieutenant Fister answered honestly.

"If you let me know when you have the time, we could do that, just to be sure that it's functional when Rocky needs to be on the helm." Tracey said reasonably.

"We can do it now. Lexi, will you watch the helm for a few minutes while I get my tools?" Lieutenant Fister asked professionally.

"Sure. I've got this. Take all the time you need." Lexi said confidently.

"I'll be right back." Lieutenant Fister said before hurrying off the bridge.

"He seems different. How are things going?" Tracey asked curiously.

"He hasn't talked to me or anything about it, but I think he's happy." Lexi said frankly.

* * * * *

"The meeting won't be for a few minutes, but I like to show up early, just in case anything unforeseen happens to eat up my time." Lieutenant Okawa said as she led the way into a conference room.

Hart felt the cold stares of all the security officers as they noticed him. Although no one spoke a word, they might just as well have. The sentiment hanging in the air was, 'You're not welcome here.'

Lieutenant Okawa looked around the room, then firmly said, "This is Cadet Ensign Korrigon and he's been assigned to security. I have some matters to clear up before we start the meeting, introduce yourselves."

Without a backward glance, Lieutenant Okawa left the room.

"...weve heard the stories about a bunch of cadets being brought on the ship but i didnt know that we were getting anyone in security because thats really incredible because i didnt think anyone could get into security without a background in criminal justice or military training or something like that because someone in security needs to have that kind of background and youre just a kid and you cant have the experience that theyre always looking for and even if you learned all the stuff that youre supposed to know you have to be good at hand to hand combat and be able to use phasers and know about the ships weapons and the shields and about the security protocols..."

"Cadet Ensign Korrigon, I see that you've met Ensign Emery, but it's not fair if you don't give the rest of us a chance to get to know you." Another Ensign interrupted as he placed a hand on Hart's shoulder and gently guided him to walk away.

Hart's first instinct when he felt the touch was to break the man's wrist. It probably wouldn't be the smartest thing to do, especially in a room full of security officers. But logic be damned, he still had to fight very hard not to do it.

"I'm Ensign Patterson, and in case Seth forgot to say it, welcome to Security." The twenty-something year old man said with a disarming smile.

"Thanks." Hart cautiously responded, and was relieved that Ensign Patterson had removed the hand from his shoulder.

"You don't like to talk much, huh? That's a good trait to have in security." Ensign Patterson said with a grin.

Hart glanced back at the chattering ensign that he'd just escaped from.

Ensign Patterson gave a good-natured laugh, then said, "Seth talks a lot, but he says very little. There have been times that he's been surprisingly effective in gathering information."

Although Hart couldn't conceive of a situation where that would be the case, he had no problem taking Ensign Patterson at his word and nodded

his acceptance.

"Just about everyone in security has a specialty, mine's cyber security." Ensign Patterson said, then looked at Hart knowingly.

* * * * *

As Tracey was looking over the schedule for the upcoming breaks and lunches, he heard the captain call his name.

"Yes, Sir?" Tracey said immediately as he turned.

"I have some matters to discuss with Admiral Hanson. I won't be available during that time. I'm going to leave you in command, you can go to Commander Pell if you run into any problems." Captain Gravf said simply.

"Yes, Sir." Tracey said smartly.

The captain walked to the auxiliary station that Tracey had been working on and brought up the command menu and signed himself off.

"I have command." Tracey said as he leaned in and signed on.

"I stand relieved." The captain said easily, then left the bridge.

Tracey did as he had been taught and walked the bridge to verify that he knew what was going on at each station.

When he finally made his way to the Sciences station, he quietly told Xon and Commander Pell, "The Captain is going to be off the bridge for a little while. He left me in command."

Tracey couldn't tell which of the pair was least interested or least impressed by the announcement.

"Xon, I don't want to tie myself down when I'm in command. Will you take care of seeing that everyone gets a break?" Tracey asked hopefully.

"Yes, Sir." Xon said respectfully.

With those two words, Tracey felt assured that it would be dealt with and that he could put the matter of breaks out of his mind.

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Tracey turned to go to the command chair but noticed that Lieutenant Fister had returned to the bridge.

As Tracey walked toward the helm, he overheard Lieutenant Fister telling Lexi to go to engineering and assume control of the helm from there.

"I didn't realize that you'd have to take the helm down to test the controls." Tracey said honestly.

"Strictly speaking, you don't." Lieutenant Fister said seriously, then added, "But if you have to make any adjustments, even a small one, then you have to stop everything and have someone take control of the helm from another location before you can do anything more. Doing it this way from the onset just makes more sense."

"I didn't know that. Thank you, Lieutenant Fister." Tracey said respectfully.

The lieutenant let slip a small smile at being treated as an esteemed member of the crew.

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After a moment to observe any reaction, Ensign Patterson smiled and continued, "It so happens that just last night I detected signs of a rather sneaky someone trying to gain access to some of our secure files."

"Really? Could you tell if it was someone aboard the ship or someone outside?" Hart asked curiously.

"Well, although the access was coded as coming from a subspace source, I'm reasonably sure that that was a false trail, left for me to follow, leading me nowhere." Ensign Patterson said with a grin.

"So you think it's someone on the ship? That means that it's one of less than a hundred people. That shouldn't be too hard to track down." Hart said thoughtfully.

"I don't think I'll bother. They weren't able to get into anything, anyway. Our security held." Ensign Patterson said proudly, then quietly added, "I

guess I'd just like to know who it was that tried to hack us, so I could be sure of their motivation and that they weren't some sort of a potential threat."

"Yeah. I guess I can understand that." Hart said with a nod, then slowly continued, "Being in security, it's probably best to look into things so you have an idea of how 'secure' things really are."

After a moment, Ensign Patterson finally dropped the pretense and asked, "How did we do?"

"From the outside, things are pretty tight. Inside... not so much. You've got a few holes." Hart said frankly.

"Well, it was good enough to keep *you* out." Ensign Patterson said with a grin.

"Who said that I ever tried to get in?" Hart asked innocently.

"Right." Ensign Patterson chuckled.

"By the way, not that this has anything to do with anything, but I read somewhere that a Dr. Klineman said that someone named Auren... Auren Patterson is doing well and that if he keeps making significant progress, that he could be released to home care by the end of this year." Hart said offhandedly.

"How do you know about my brother?" Ensign Patterson asked cautiously.

"A little bird told me." Hart said with a roll of his eyes.

"What *else* did the little bird tell you?" Ensign Patterson asked hesitantly.

"Nothing... Well, nothing important." Hart said slowly, then thought to add, "But you'd better call your wife and let her know that your mortgage payment is due in three days. It hasn't been received, yet."

"Oh, yeah. That's right." Ensign Patterson said quietly.

Hart waited for a long moment for Ensign Patterson's reaction.

"I'll admit that you've got some skills. But even so, I believe that I still have a few things that I can teach you."

"Yeah. I'd like that." Hart said gratefully, then thought to add, "But I'll be sure to keep an eye on you, since you got a C in Systems Analysis, back in college."

"That professor had it in for me. It didn't have anything to do with my academic performance. It was personal."

* * * * *

Tracey was back at his auxiliary station, verifying for himself that the *Copernicus* was still on schedule to arrive at their intended destination.

A beeping sound drew his attention and he automatically accepted the incoming audio link.

"*Captain, we have a 'Cadet' in Engineering, requesting access to the auxiliary helm controls.*" A woman's voice said with an impressive amount of vitriol behind the word 'cadet'.

Tracey was momentarily shaken by the woman's forceful attitude, but before he could respond timidly, he reflected on what he had observed of his mother's behavior and professional attitude.

"Captain Gravf is off the bridge right now, taking care of other business. I am Lieutenant Sturgill. He left me in command." Tracey said seriously, then paused to give the woman a chance to respond or ask a question, if she had one.

Finally, Tracey continued by asking, "Who is this?"

"This is Lieutenant Commander Angeles, I'm the Chief Engineer." The woman responded cautiously.

"Thank you." Tracey said professionally, then continued, "If the 'Cadet' that you're talking about is Cadet Ensign Gelt, then she has permission to use the auxiliary helm, so that we can do some fine tuning and adjustments on the bridge station."

After a long moment, Lieutenant Commander Angeles slowly responded, "Aye, Sir."

"Sturgill, out." Tracey said before disconnecting the audio stream.

* * * * *

Tracey walked immediately to the helm and said, "I just talked with the Chief Engineer and Lexi should be taking control of the helm in just a minute."

"This shouldn't take too long. If there are no adjustments to be made, we should be done in five minutes. Even if we have to fine-tune some of the inputs, it shouldn't take more than half an hour." Lieutenant Fister said professionally as he kept the majority of his focus on the helm.

"Thank you. Let me know if anything comes up that changes your timetable." Tracey said simply, then went back to the Science station to update Commander Pell and Xon.

* * * * *

It took every bit of self control at Lexi's disposal to maintain a calm facade.

At first, the Chief Engineer had outright refused to allow her access to the Engineering helm controls. But after a call to the bridge, Lexi was finally allowed to do her job.

Lexi pressed the dedicated comm control and said, "Lieutenant Fister, I'm ready to take control."

"It's all yours. I'll notify you when we're finished up here." Lieutenant Fister answered.

"I have control." Lexi said as she signed in and assumed full control of the helm.

"I stand relieved." Lieutenant Fister responded, then the link closed.

"You're really a helmsman?" A crewman asked from the station next to Lexi.

"Yeah." Lexi said absently as she reviewed their course and heading.

"How'd a little kid like you get to be a helmsman?" The crewman asked curiously.

"The same way as anyone else. I just started earlier." Lexi said as she looked carefully at the engine output and velocity.

"A little kid your age should be out on a playground somewhere, not piloting a starship." The crewman said derisively.

Lexi fought to keep her focus on her task, but her rising temper was becoming a distraction.

After a moment to force the anger down and out of her voice, Lexi coldly said, "Listen. Even though I'm *officially* a cadet, I'm still a cadet *ensign*. Not only that, but I'm also a *bridge officer*. When we're off duty, I can answer your questions, but right now I have a job to do."

"Are you saying that you outrank me or something?" The crewman asked cautiously.

Lexi let out a huff of frustration, then calmly said, "No. I'm saying that if you don't stop distracting me, I'm going to bring this ship to a complete stop until you'll leave me alone to do my job."

Before the crewman could respond, Chief Engineer Angeles approached and said, "Man your station, Crewman, and leave Ensign Gelt to her duty."

"Yes, Ma'am." The crewman said smartly, then made a show of going back to his work.

Lexi spared a moment to glance away from her console to look at the Chief Engineer uncertainly.

"Now that they know that I'm on your side, they should leave you alone." Chief Engineer Angeles said quietly.

"Thank you, Ma'am." Lexi said sincerely, then went back to her job of piloting the ship.

* * * * *

"Did you have a chance to get to know everyone?" Lieutenant Okawa asked as she slowly approached Hart and Ensign Patterson.

"No, Ma'am. Not everyone." Hart told her honestly.

"I'm sure that you'll get to meet everyone else before very long." Lieutenant Okawa assured him, then seriously added, "Take your seats. We're about to begin."

Hart and Ensign Patterson took seats at the conference table, side by side.

Lieutenant Okawa slowly made her way to the head of the table then said in a louder voice, to be heard by all, "I wanted to have this meeting for a few reasons. First off, to introduce all of you to Cadet Ensign Korrigon. Before any of you can speculate as to his fitness as a security officer, let me tell you that he's not here to learn to do *your* jobs. He's here to learn to do *mine*."

The announcement stunned all attending into silence.

"I've been assured that Ensign Korrigon has enough fundamental knowledge to at least *understand* your jobs, if not perform them. Keeping that in mind, he's been sent to us to learn how to *lead* a security team." Lieutenant Okawa explained.

Hart was as surprised by her words as any of the other security officers. No one had ever explained *exactly* what he was there to learn.

"So, when you receive an inquiry or an order from Ensign Korrigon, I'm asking you to treat it as though it were coming directly from me. He and I are both going to be depending on your support." Lieutenant Okawa said, then looked around the conference room to convey her seriousness.

After a moment for that to sink in, she continued, "Let's consider that settled and move on to other matters. When we arrive at Tellar, we're going to be taking on a contingent of doctors and ferrying them to the Vega colony."

"So we're going to be acting as chaperones?" One of the security officers that Hart hadn't met before asked cautiously.

"Essentially, yes." Lieutenant Okawa said unenthusiastically, then continued, "We can *hope* that these medical professionals will behave respectably. But experience has shown me that, more often than not, situations like this are looked upon as more of a luxury cruise rather than a diplomatic honor. That being the case, be prepared to deal with instances of pranks, sexual harassment, drunkenness and other inappropriate conduct."

"And unless they're posing a legitimate threat or causing actual harm, we're supposed to look the other way." The unknown ensign said, completing the thought.

"We'll make our presence known and do our best to enforce polite behavior that way. But if our *guests* are too thick headed to take a hint, then we'll do what we absolutely have to, to maintain a safe and reasonably comfortable environment to conduct them to their destination." Lieutenant Okawa said frankly.

"This is a good mission to start you out on. If you can handle this, you shouldn't have any problem with anything else." Ensign Patterson said to Hart quietly.

"Next, we're going to do a full diagnostic and physical survey of all the security systems and subsystems. Not only will this be a good opportunity for Ensign Korrigon to become familiar with everything we deal with, but I'd really like for us to see if any undocumented 'modifications' were made to the ship while we were in dock." Lieutenant Okawa said seriously.

Hart looked at her with surprise at the suggestion.

When she noticed, she said as an aside, "It's been known to happen."

Hart slightly nodded that he believed her, then sat back and listened as she outlined the plan to do an in depth security survey of the entire ship.

* * * * *

When Tracey saw Commander Pell leaving the bridge, he casually made his way to the Science station.

"I don't know if you realized this, but *we're* the ranking officers on the bridge, right now. *We're* in command." Tracey said with a smile.

"Yes. I am aware of that fact." Xon stated tonelessly.

"I just wanted to be sure that you knew so that you'd be ready to jump in if anything happens." Tracey explained.

"Rest assured, I am prepared." Xon said simply.

Tracey smiled at the reaction, then walked to the helm to check on Lieutenant Fister.

* * * * *

"How's it going?" Tracey asked casually.

"I'm just waiting on Ensign Rock to relinquish the navigation controls so that he can test out this interface." Lieutenant Fister said seriously.

A scraping sound drew Tracey's attention and he watched as Rocky approached.

"You know what to do, right?" Lieutenant Fister asked seriously.

"*Do you want me to go through the standard test sequence?*" Rocky asked to confirm.

"Yes. First, override the console controls, then run through the test." Lieutenant Fister said professionally.

There was a beep from the helm console, then Tracey could see what looked like a series of course corrections being performed.

"That doesn't look right. Could you go through the docking sequence, again?" Lieutenant Fister asked slowly.

"*Yes. Of course.*" Rocky responded, then another series of calculation scrolled up the console screen.

"Do it again, but this time, deviate twelve centimeters, two hundred twelve degrees." Lieutenant Fister said even more slowly.

More calculations scrolled up the screen and Lieutenant Fister shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"Some pencil pusher at Starfleet must have decided to 'round off' the precision requirements, to make his job easier. This is *exactly* what I was afraid of." Lieutenant Fister said with frustration.

"Can you fix it?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"Yes. Actually, this is the worst case scenario that I anticipated when I gave you my time estimate. We should be able to get this sorted out in twenty to twenty-five minutes." Lieutenant Fister said confidently.

"Just let me know if there's anything that you need for me to do." Tracey said carefully.

"You'll be the first." Lieutenant Fister said simply.

"*Am I done?*" Rocky asked cautiously.

"Yes. I need to work on getting this thing *really* calibrated. I'll need you to test it out again in a few minutes." Lieutenant Fister said as he knelt on the floor and opened his tool bag.

"*You know where to find me.*" Rocky responded in what sounded like a cheerful tone.

Tracey watched as Lieutenant Fister expertly opened the access panel under the helm console.

* * * * *

A beep sounded and Lexi accepted the incoming comm signal.

"*Forward scanners indicate a rogue meteoroid at heading 346 mark seventeen. I'm sending updated navigation coordinates to compensate.*" Rocky said seriously.

"I've got it, Rocky. Laid in and verified. Course change initiated." Lexi responded professionally.

"It is possible that this rogue meteoroid is the result of a more distant impact, dislodging multiple objects. Be prepared for further course corrections." Rocky warned.

"Just let me know as soon as you spot something." Lexi said easily as she reflexively looked at her forward scanners.

"Count on it." Rocky responded in a voice that sounded to be confident.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Sturgill, I have just initiated a course correction." Rocky said as he continued to scan for other obstacles in their path.

"Why did you do that?" Tracey asked as he walked to the navigation station to look over Ensign Lord's shoulder at the readings.

"There was a rogue meteoroid near our projected flight path." Rocky said simply.

Tracey could easily see what Rocky was talking about and responded, "Good work. Send the coordinates to Xon so that he can backtrack where it came from and maybe give us an idea if there are going to be any more."

"Transmitting now." Rocky said immediately.

Tracey turned in time to see Xon accept the incoming transmission.

He glanced back at the navigation console, at the forward scanners, simply to assure himself that there was nothing else in their immediate path, before walking casually over to the Science Station to see what Xon was going to do with the information that he had been provided.

* * * * *

From the command chair, Tracey watched Rocky go back to the helm and go through the test sequence again with Lieutenant Fister.

Both of them seemed to be pleased with the results, so Rocky returned to the Navigation station while Lieutenant Fister closed things up and put away his tools.

Commander Pell walked back onto the bridge after what Tracey estimated to be somewhere near double the time of a standard break.

Seeing that she had returned, Tracey decided to make another round of the bridge, just to verify for himself how everyone was doing.

As he approached the Communications station, he could easily see that RJ was once again being overwhelmed with the information that Lieutenant Baz was bombarding him with. Although Tracey would have liked very much to help out his friend and roommate, he knew that this was something that RJ could only do for himself. He would either have to find a way to assimilate all the information that Lieutenant Baz expected him to learn, or talk honestly with Lieutenant Baz and either work at a slower pace or use some other sort of learning technique more compatible with RJ's style of learning. Either way, he felt that there was nothing more that he could do but encourage RJ to make a change.

The sound of the turbolift doors opening caused Tracey to look and he felt a sense of relief wash over him at the sight of Captain Gravf walking onto the bridge.

He stepped away from the Communications station and met Captain Gravf at the command chair as he arrived.

"May I assume that all has gone well in my absence?" Captain Gravf asked as he signed on to his chair console.

"Yes, Sir. We've had to make one minor course correction due to a rogue meteoroid near our projected flight path. I should mention that Cadet Ensign Rock made the correction on his own initiative, when he spotted the problem." Tracey said carefully.

"He didn't notify you before making the correction?" Captain Gravf asked with concern, then motioned toward his chair console.

Tracey quickly relinquished command on the screen, then answered, "No, Sir. But considering the proximity of the meteoroid, I think he took the correct action. If he had notified me and I'd been involved in something else and not able to deal with it immediately, it might have put the ship at

risk. He notified me immediately after he had contacted Ensign Gelt on the helm in Engineering to make the course correction."

Captain Gravf glanced at the helm, then said, "Am I to understand that there was a problem with Ensign Rock's helm interface?"

"Not exactly a problem. Lieutenant Fister just wanted to be sure that Ensign Rock would have access to all the controls that he might need. When he tested the interface, he found that the controls had been... crudely calibrated. He thought that Ensign Rock should be able to operate the helm with a much higher level of precision, for docking maneuvers and things like that, so he had Ensign Gelt take the helm in Engineering while he took the time to make those adjustments to the interface." Tracey said carefully.

"What is the current status of the helm?" Captain Gravf asked carefully.

"It's fully operational. When Ensign Gelt relinquished control of the helm in Engineering, Lieutenant Fister told her to take her break before coming back to the bridge." Tracey said seriously.

Captain Gravf nodded, then thought to ask, "Is there anything else of which I need to be aware?"

"Only that Ensign Rock notified Ensign Xon about the course correction so that he can try and trace where the rogue meteoroid came from, just in case there's any chance that there might be more of them heading our way." Tracey said thoughtfully.

Captain Gravf seemed to consider for a moment, then asked more quietly, "How would you characterize Ensign Rock's performance thus far?"

Tracey was surprised by the question and had to take a minute to think about it.

He finally carefully answered, "I think that Ensign Rock not only took the correct actions in regards to regulations, but also in practical application. I can't think of anything he might have done differently to improve his performance."

Captain Gravf made a quick notation on his chair console, then stood.

As he began to walk, Tracey followed along, uncertain of what the captain was going to do.

"Cadet Ensign Rock?" The captain said to gain Rocky's attention.

"Yes, Sir?" Rocky said as he rotated in place to face the captain (despite the fact that he didn't have anything remotely resembling a face).

"In light of your exemplary performance thus far, you shall henceforth be addressed as Acting Ensign Rock, and have the rank and authority of any other ensign serving on this ship." Captain Gravf said firmly.

"Thank you, Sir." Rocky responded respectfully.

"As you were, Ensign." Captain Gravf said before turning to walk back to his command chair.

"Congratulations, Rocky." Tracey said quietly.

"Thank you, Tracey." Rocky responded in what sounded to be a somewhat overwhelmed tone of voice.

Tracey noticed Ensign Lord's beaming smile of pride for her pupil and couldn't help but give her a smile in return before going back to his auxiliary console.

* * * * *

Just as Tracey was looking over his station, Xon walked up to him and quietly said, "Before you become involved in other projects, perhaps you would like to take a break."

"Yeah, thanks. I seem to be able to remember everyone else's but I can never remember to take mine." Tracey said with a grin.

"Commander Pell has chosen to investigate the origin of the rogue meteoroid, so I will remain available should the captain need my assistance in your absence." Xon said seriously.

"Good plan. When Lexi gets back, will you see that Fister gets a break?" Tracey asked hopefully.

"Yes. I have that in my schedule." Xon assured him.

"I should have known that you would. But I just had to check to be sure."

"Seeking verification is logical."

* * * * *

After a quick trip to the restroom, Tracey went to the mess hall to get himself a snack. He wasn't 'hungry' as much as he felt that he needed something to give him a little energy boost.

As he walked through the food service line, he was happy to find that they had some small 'wraps' that were just the sort of thing that he was looking for. They were simply tortillas spread with hummus, filled with deli meats and/or vegetables, then rolled closed.

He took his selections to a table and had just seated himself when he noticed Rocky trundling into the mess hall.

"Hi, Rocky. Breaktime?" Tracey asked pleasantly.

"Yes. Even though I don't have the same biological needs that you do, I still find it nice to get away from my duties for a moment." Rocky said pleasantly.

"That's what breaktime is *really* all about. We just eat something or hit the bathroom while we're at it." Tracey said comfortably.

"If I may ask, what did you say to the captain to get him to promote me?" Rocky asked cautiously.

"I just told him what happened while he was off the bridge. He came up with the idea to promote you all by himself." Tracey said honestly.

"I did nothing to warrant praise or a promotion. I simply performed my duty, just the same as any other member of the crew." Rocky said thoughtfully.

"That's right. You did *exactly* what would be expected of any other member of the crew. And now, you've got the same rank as them. You haven't been promoted to say that you're *better* than anyone else, the captain's just said that you've proved that you're *as good as* any regular member of the crew." Tracey explained carefully.

"Breaktime?" A familiar voice interrupted.

Tracey turned and smiled as he said, "Hart? Do you want to join us?"

"Sure. I just got out of a meeting. Lieutenant Okawa told me to take a break before I go back to the bridge." Hart said as he took a seat.

"Rocky just got promoted to Acting Ensign." Tracey said proudly.

"Really? Just now?" Hart asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Just a few minutes ago." Tracey confirmed.

"Way to go, Rocky!" Hart said with a smile under the table.

"*Thank you, Hart.*" Rocky responded timidly.

"Do you have any idea of what Lieutenant Okawa has in store for you the rest of the day?" Tracey asked curiously.

"Yeah. She's leaving me on my own on the bridge while she works on some stuff that she needs to get done before we reach Tellar." Hart said simply.

"I don't know how much help I'll be, but if you need my help with anything, let me know." Tracey offered sincerely.

"Don't worry. I've got the whole security team to back me up. If I run into any trouble, I've got plenty of people I can call on for help." Hart said confidently.

"Good." Tracey said honestly.

"Are you guys about done here?" Hart asked as he looked at Tracey's empty plate.

"I am. Are you ready, Rocky?" Tracey asked as he leaned back to glance under the table.

"Yes. *I believe so.*" Rocky said quietly.

As Tracey and Hart stood from the table, Hart said, "Up until now, Lieutenant Okawa has been *saying* that I can handle doing the job, but she still hasn't left me alone for more than a few minutes to really *do* it."

"I know what you mean. Today, Captain Gravf left the bridge so that he could have a meeting with Admiral Hanson, and for a little bit, Commander Pell left, too. To be honest, it was a little scary, but it felt good. And it's not like they were doing anything to *prove* that they trusted me. They just did their jobs and took their breaks, just the same as if it was anyone else doing my job." Tracey said as they walked.

"*Ensign Lord still hasn't had enough confidence in me to allow me to work on my own.*" Rocky said thoughtfully.

"Or maybe she doesn't have enough confidence in herself." Tracey said matter of factly.

Hart nodded his agreement, then added, "If you just got promoted, then it's probably not something wrong with what you're doing."

"*Thank you. I probably wouldn't have considered that the situation might stem from Ensign Lord's insecurity.*" Rocky said honestly.

"I think it's going to be important for all of us not only to take into account what our mentors say and do, but also who they *are*. When our emotions are already running high because we're under so much pressure, it's easy to misunderstand things or take them personally even when it's something that our mentors are dealing with that has very little to do with us." Tracey said thoughtfully.

"I guess since your mentor's a Tellarite, that's probably a really good thing to keep in mind." Hart said with a grin.

"Actually, for as gruff as Captain Gravf acts, I think I understand where he's coming from the best. I'm a lot more comfortable with him as my mentor

than I would be with just about anyone else, especially Commander Pell." Tracey said as he led the way into the hallway.

"I guess I feel the same way about Lieutenant Okawa. I *get* her." Hart said as they walked.

"I don't get Ensign Lord." Rocky said regretfully.

"I have the feeling that she doesn't really *get* herself. Maybe you two can figure it out together." Tracey said assuringly.

"Tracey, before we go back to the bridge, could you possibly help me with something?" Rocky asked tentatively.

As Tracey was about to respond, something occurred to him and he blurted out, "This is why you came to the mess hall on your break, isn't it?"

There was a long moment of silence as the trio stepped onto the turbolift.

"Yes. Although, it was not my intention to deceive." Rocky said repentantly.

"That's okay, Rocky. I'm not mad or anything. Just tell me what you want." Tracey assured him.

"Do you recall when you received your promotion? The captain asked you to change into your proper uniform before returning to duty." Rocky said in a leading tone.

"Please enter or verbally state your desired destination." The standard Starfleet computer voice said from the ceiling of the lift.

"Deck four." Tracey said absently in response, then looked down to Rocky and regretfully stated the obvious, "Yeah. I remember that. But you don't wear a uniform."

"When you were promoted, it occurred to me that I might be as well. So I made certain preparations for that eventuality." Rocky timidly admitted.

"Okay. I get that. So what do you need for us to do?" Tracey asked cautiously as the lift doors opened.

Tracey and Hart followed Rocky off the lift and waited for his response.

"I have acquired the proper rank insignia and uniform jacket befitting an ensign. However I do not possess the manual dexterity to be able to fashion a suitable approximation of a uniform for myself." Rocky said quietly.

"Well, to be honest, all I know about sewing is how to fix a little rip or something like that." Tracey said frankly.

"I know how to do some stuff, but what *exactly* are you wanting us to do?" Hart asked cautiously.

"I would simply like to be able to display the evidence of my rank and duty station, the same as any other member of the crew. I am not seeking to recreate an entire uniform, as such. But I feel that my status as a member of the crew should be visible and easily understandable." Rocky said in an urging tone.

Tracey smiled at Hart, then said, "I think that between us, we'll be able to come up with something."

"I believe that I have everything that we will need in my cabin." Rocky said as he began to lead the way, then paused before adding, *"There are breathing units just inside the door."*

* * * * *

When the turbolift doors opened, Tracey, Hart and Rocky each went immediately to their stations.

Tracey signed in and confirmed that nothing worthy of mention had occurred during his absence.

He couldn't help but smile as he glanced toward the navigation station and could easily see the command uniform strap with an ensign's insignia prominently displayed on Rocky's back.

Suddenly, the captain's words from days before came back to him and he was halfway to the communications station before he had an inkling of

what he was going to say.

"Lieutenant Baz, could I speak to you for a moment?" Tracey asked seriously.

"This isn't a good time." Lieutenant Baz said firmly.

"Yes. I believe that." Tracey said simply, then added, "I'll wait."

Lieutenant Baz looked at Tracey with annoyance, then turned and asked, "What do you need?"

"Would you like to step away so that we can speak privately?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"Whatever you want, just say it." Lieutenant Baz said firmly.

"I need for Cadet Ensign Parker to be prepared to assume full control of the Communications station on our trip from Tellar to the Vega colony." Tracey stated impassively.

"What do you think I've been trying to do the past two days?" Lieutenant Baz asked disbelievingly.

"I don't know. But if I were to guess, I'd say that you're trying to make RJ's training as miserable and difficult as possible so he'll quit before he's asked to prove that he can do the job." Tracey said in an icily controlled low tone.

"You don't have any idea what you're talking about." Lieutenant Baz hissed.

"True." Tracey easily admitted, then added, "But even from across the bridge I can see that what you're doing isn't working. I don't think that giving RJ more to memorize and pushing him harder is going to make him learn any faster. In fact, if I were him, I probably would have given up already."

"If he gives up, it means that he can't handle it. That has nothing to do with me." Lieutenant Baz said seriously.

"Listen. The captain made it my responsibility to see that all the cadets are ready to take their stations and work full shifts when we leave Tellar. I can honestly tell you that I'd trust any one of the other cadets as much as I'd trust their mentors to do the same job. But when it comes to communications... when you leave the bridge to take a break, I make sure that I'm free to jump in if RJ needs me. I have NO confidence in his training. According to Starfleet, he's got everything that he needs to be capable of doing his job... except, maybe, someone who knows how to teach him." Tracey said quietly as he held Lieutenant Baz's gaze.

"I've been working communications since before you were born. I could tear down a console and rebuild it blindfolded if I needed to." Lieutenant Baz snarled.

"Good for you." Tracey said flatly, then asked, "In all that time did you ever teach *anyone else* how to do your job? Because I'm guessing that you didn't. I'm not saying that you don't know about communications, I'm saying that you don't know how to *TEACH*. We've only got a few days left. What you're doing isn't working. Do. Something. Else."

After a long pause, which was more of a staring contest than anything else, Lieutenant Baz finally said, "I'm taking my break."

Tracey nodded his acceptance.

"RJ, call me if you have any problems." Lieutenant Baz said under his breath before rushing away.

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"Holy crap! What did you just do?" RJ asked in a whisper as he looked at Tracey with wide eyes.

"My job." Tracey said frankly.

The expression in RJ's eyes seemed to say that he had a million questions to ask, but didn't know where to begin.

"RJ, you can do this. I know that you can. I think that if you're really honest with yourself, that *you* know you can, too. But you're going to need help to

be ready in time. I can't do that for you. I think that Lieutenant Baz is probably the only one who can. We just have to convince him to work *with* you to help you to learn and not just pile tons of work on you and expect you to somehow *absorb* it." Tracey carefully explained.

"You really think I can do this?" RJ asked cautiously.

"My job is to make sure the cadets are ready to take their stations when we leave Tellar. I believe in you so much that I'm willing to fight for you. But for this to work, I think that you're going to need help, not someone sabotaging you with ineffective teaching techniques." Tracey said seriously.

"I guess I'm not as sure as you are. But if you believe in me that much, I'll trust you and find a way to make this work." RJ said with rising confidence.

"Then you need to communicate with Lieutenant Baz, let him know what's working and what isn't. I bet that if you both really try that you'll come up with something that works." Tracey said assuringly.

RJ seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, then he quietly said, "Back on Earth, Vincent said something about me being a 'Visual Learner'. I guess I should tell Lieutenant Baz about that. Maybe it'll help."

"Talk it over with him. It couldn't hurt." Tracey said frankly.

"Thanks, Tracey." RJ said sincerely, then glanced back to his console to make sure that nothing was trying to gain his attention.

"Yell if you need me." Tracey said as he patted RJ's shoulder before turning to go back to his station.

* * * * *

Tracey made a quick change to the break schedule to switch Ensign Lord and Lieutenant Baz, then began to look over the different department reports to be sure that he was up-to-date on everything that was going on.

"You seem to have had quite the exchange with Lieutenant Baz. Is it something of which I should be made aware?" Captain Gravf asked in a casual tone as he approached.

"No, Sir. I was just doing what I could to make sure that all the cadets will be ready to take their stations when we leave Tellar." Tracey said seriously.

"I have found that it is easy for one to get caught up in the moment and lose sight of the longer term. It pleases me to see that you remain cognizant of your objectives." Captain Gravf said thoughtfully.

"Thank you, Sir." Tracey said sincerely, then thought to add, "I'm just worried that I might have been too forceful with Lieutenant Baz. I'm only an Acting Lieutenant and he has seniority..."

"You were doing the job that I asked of you." Captain Gravf interrupted, then added with a smile, "If your mother had been present to witness what I've just seen, I'm sure that she would have been very proud."

"I've never seen myself as being anything like her, but I guess it's in there, whether I want to admit it or not." Tracey said thoughtfully.

"It appears that the nut doesn't fall very far from the tree." Captain Gravf said frankly.

Tracey tried valiantly to restrain a smile as he said, "Yes, Sir."

Chapter 5 - Exercises and Excuses

After his talk with the captain, Tracey made a point of seeing that Xon went to break. All the while he kept close watch on RJ, just to be on the safe side.

When Lieutenant Baz finally returned from his break, he seemed to be filled with renewed determination.

The lieutenant talked quietly with RJ for a moment, then made a call to summon another communications worker to the bridge.

A few minutes later, an ensign walked onto the bridge and took control of communications, and after a brief conversation with her, Lieutenant Baz and RJ walked together to the turbolift.

As Tracey watched them leave, he sincerely hoped that they would come up with a way of helping RJ to learn his duties.

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The morning progressed without incident. Tracey noticed that Hart seemed to be absorbed in his work, but just when he was about to go over and ask him if he needed a break, a security ensign arrived to relieve him.

Lunches and breaks came and went without incident. Tracey was briefly in command while the captain took his lunch, but Commander Pell was present on the bridge, so Tracey didn't feel unduly nervous. Hart continued to work diligently on the security station and saw to his own coverage for his lunch and breaks, but Lieutenant Okawa did not return during their shift.

Lieutenant Baz and RJ returned to the bridge about an hour before the shift was over.

Although Tracey was understandably curious about what was going on, he remained at his auxiliary station and did his best to surreptitiously keep tabs on what they were doing.

From Tracey's point of view, they seemed to be having a productive conversation.

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When the second shift arrived to take their stations, it was all that Tracey could do to restrain his curiosity about how things were going. He was able to hold it back until they got to the mess hall, but only just.

Once everyone had made their dinner selections, they settled in around a table.

"What happened with Lieutenant Baz?" Tracey asked anxiously.

"We talked and decided to try some different things to see if they'll work." RJ said simply.

"Do you think it'll help?" Tracey asked hopefully.

"Maybe. It's really too soon to tell. But I think it's going to make a big difference just knowing that he'll listen to me if I feel like something's not working." RJ said honestly.

"Yeah. I bet it's frustrating. I hope it works out."

"Don't start doubting me, Tracey. You said that you believe that I can do this. I'm counting on you to keep on believing in me until I can prove a few things to myself." RJ said anxiously.

"You've got it, RJ. I believe in you. Stay on task and keep moving forward. If you're ever in doubt, I'll be right here to back you up." Tracey said passionately.

"Okay. I just needed to be sure." RJ said with a grin.

* * * * *

"So, how is everyone else doing today?" Tracey asked as he looked around the table.

"I am still concerned that I do not have access to the security and communications bridge stations." Rocky said from beneath the table.

"I'll have to talk to Lieutenant Okawa about it in the morning, but I think that we could probably get the security station done tomorrow." Hart volunteered.

"Are you going to need help with the modifications?" Tracey asked curiously.

"I don't think so. But if I get stuck on something I'll either figure it out myself or ask someone in security to help me, just the same as anyone else doing my job." Hart said challengingly.

After a moment to process the surprise, Tracey cautiously asked, "What's up with that?"

"Lieutenant Okawa has been treating me like a *real* member of her crew. In fact, the only person who's been treating me like I'm not competent to do my job is you." Hart said frankly.

"I didn't mean anything by it. I just want to be sure that you know that I'm willing to help if you need it." Tracey tried to explain.

"Okay. I got that." Hart said as his anger began to subside.

"If it bothers you, I'll stop offering to help." Tracey continued.

"Would you just ease up on it a little bit?" Hart asked hopefully, then added, "I know that we're all cadets, but we're doing our jobs just like the regular crew."

"I can try." Tracey offered weakly.

"Maybe if you tried treating the rest of the crew the same way you treat us that it'd make it easier." Lexi cautiously suggested.

"I cannot speculate how Lieutenant Commander Pell would react to being addressed in a patronizing and condescending manner. However, I am certain that it would not be received favorably." Xon said reasonably.

Hart grinned at his roommate, but remained silent.

"No. What I meant to say was that Tracey should start talking to us like he talks to *them*, not talk to them like he talks to us." Lexi quickly explained.

"*Yes. That might be best.*" Rocky interjected.

"You guys are probably right. I guess that since the captain made you my responsibility that it seemed right for me to kind of watch over you and try to help however I can. I didn't realize that I was talking down to you."
Tracey said repentantly.

"The captain made our training your responsibility, but if you think about it, the rest of the crew is your responsibility too. By focusing all of your attention on us you are, in essence, neglecting the greater part of your duty. You are not here to learn how to be the 'cadet' lieutenant in charge of the 'cadet' crew. You are learning the duties and responsibilities of a captain and your concern should be for your 'entire' crew." Xon stated seriously.

"I guess that instead of worrying so much about if all of you are ready, that I need to take a long look at myself and see what I need to work on."
Tracey reluctantly admitted.

"Remember that if you need any help that we're all here for you." RJ said frankly.

"I think the biggest help that I needed was to be told that I was doing it wrong. Now that I know what the problem is, I can work on fixing it."
Tracey said honestly.

"Look at that." Lexi said suddenly.

Everyone at the table followed her gaze.

Mr. Whipple was sitting alone and had a notable scowl.

"Do you think that we'd be as miserable as him if we took his classes?" Lexi asked speculatively.

"Probably." Hart answered simply.

"I get the feeling that he'd probably be trying to force all of us to work according to his lesson plans instead of us doing the lessons that we need to be doing." RJ said thoughtfully.

"Sounds about right." Hart agreed.

"I think that we made the right decision." Rocky said frankly.

"You know, even though I've had tons of schoolwork to do since I've been here, I'm starting to feel smart for the first time. I'm used to feeling like I'm only understanding part of what they're trying to teach me and then I have to fight and struggle to figure out the rest. I never would have thought that the Vulcan Academy of Science would be easier than regular public school." RJ chuckled.

"I would speculate that the educational evaluation at the Starfleet Academy might have made it possible for the Vulcan Academy of Science to provide you with lessons within your ability and tailored to your style of learning." Xon said thoughtfully.

"Yeah." RJ easily agreed, then got a look of confusion before asking, "If they could figure out how to teach me all the way across space, why couldn't Lieutenant Baz figure out how to teach me right here?"

"I'm guessing that it's because he didn't think about it." Tracey said honestly.

"It seems to me that the responsibility for your education should fall to you. Lieutenant Baz has superior knowledge that you lack, but depending on him to determine how to teach you that information is beyond the scope of his duties." Xon said carefully.

"But he's supposed to teach me." RJ halfheartedly objected.

"Xon's right." Tracey confirmed, then continued, "I was mad at Lieutenant Baz for not recognizing that his teaching technique wasn't working, but now that we've recognized the problem, you really need to show that you *want* to learn by doing your part."

"Yeah. I guess that's kinda unfair of me." RJ said reluctantly.

"Lazy." Lexi said sternly.

Everyone looked at her with surprise.

"Do you want to figure out how to learn this stuff, so you can learn more stuff later or do you want to be spoon fed your lessons by Lieutenant Baz?" Lexi asked frankly.

"Do I have to answer that right now?" RJ asked hesitantly.

Lexi rolled her eyes and waited for the answer that she knew would be forthcoming.

"Why can't I just let Lieutenant Baz try things until something works?" RJ asked hopefully.

"If you wanted to do things the easy way, then you should have stayed on Earth. You're here to work. If you won't do that, then you should quit and leave." Lexi said firmly.

"No. I know what you're saying is right. I just don't like it." RJ grumbled.

"You don't have to like it. You just have to do it." Hart stated simply.

"Yeah. But it's not fair that I'm the only one who has to figure stuff like this out." RJ whined petulantly.

"Life's not fair. Time to put on your big boy pants and get over it." Hart informed him in a no nonsense tone, then added, "All of us have different things that we have to work through."

"And even if we don't have things right this minute, we're sure to have some before our training is over." Tracey added.

*"But I believe that the only way that this is going to work is if each of us is willing to take responsibility for our own training. We can help each other, but we each need to learn to **depend** on ourselves."* Rocky said thoughtfully.

"It's like what Vincent told me." Lexi said seriously. "It's only going to happen if you make it happen. If we wait to be told what to do and only do as much as we're told, we'll fail."

Tracey nodded somberly, then added, "That's part of what it means to be in Starfleet."

"So I guess this means that now that we're all settled in, it's time for us to stop pussyfooting around. It's time to stop playing it safe and doing things the easy way." Lexi said firmly, then added, "We need to take things to the next level."

* * * * *

As the group left the mess hall, Xon quietly said, "If you will excuse me. I must make a subspace call for an unspecified amount of time."

"Is there a problem?" Tracey asked with concern.

"No. Not at all. I have mentioned previously that I attend a virtual class with my brother. The class will begin in one quarter of an hour." Xon said simply.

"Can we go with you?" Lexi asked hopefully.

"I believe that since you are an enrolled student, that you would be welcome to attend. But I should warn you that within the classroom, we are only permitted to speak Klingon." Xon said honestly.

"Oh. I guess that wouldn't work." Lexi said in a deflated tone.

"If you wish to contact Vincent, you may do so directly with a text message or a video." Xon said simply.

"I know that you said that it would be permitted by the school. But would you mind if one of us went with you?" Rocky asked cautiously.

"So long as all who attend behave in a manner befitting the Vulcan Academy of Science, I would have no objection." Xon said seriously.

"Then I'd like to go with you. I think it'd be nice to do something not work or school related for a little while." Rocky said honestly.

"Do you speak Klingon?" Xon asked as he looked down at Rocky nonjudgmentally.

"Yes. Although I haven't had much of a chance to use it since I learned it. I think a little practice would be good." Rocky said happily.

"Then we should go. Class will begin shortly and I typically prefer to have a time to converse with my brother before the class officially begins." Xon said seriously.

"Should I go somewhere else to give you privacy until the class starts?" Rocky asked slowly.

"That is not necessary. There are certain subjects I prefer not to discuss in the open classroom, but it is nothing of a personal or sensitive nature." Xon said simply.

"Oh, alright." Rocky said happily, then turned slightly before saying, *"I'll see you guys later in the conference room."*

"We'll see you there. Have fun." Tracey said for all of them, then watched as Xon and Rocky entered the waiting turbolift.

* * * * *

"When class begins, would you prefer to stream live video or use a static image as an avatar to represent you? If you choose to use an avatar, it will be necessary to establish it before joining the room." Xon asked impassively.

"Since I don't make facial expressions or gesture, I don't know if there would be any reason to stream." Rocky said frankly.

"I should mention that those who choose avatars are typically not included in discussions as frequently. Perhaps the instructor believes that they are obfuscating their presence to discourage their inclusion." Xon said speculatively.

"Then I'll stream. I don't want anyone to think that I don't want to participate." Rocky said decisively.

"I will set up a padd that will allow you to stream from your place on the floor." Xon said simply.

"I can do it if you need to set up your own." Rocky quickly responded.

"It is done." Xon said as he placed a padd on the floor, positioned so that the camera could easily see Rocky.

"Thank you. It will just take me a moment to link to the padd. Will you tell me what I need to do next?" Rocky asked hopefully.

"Yes. I will talk you through the connection process as I connect."

* * * * *

Tracey was surprised at how difficult it was not to ask RJ and Hart if they needed his help. In RJ's case, it was simply because Tracey knew that he had been struggling. Hart appeared to have an enormous amount of work to do. Although Hart wasn't showing any signs of being overwhelmed, the sheer volume of it made Tracey want to offer to ease Hart's burden.

Although Lexi had also been studying diligently, Tracey didn't get the sense that she needed any help at all. He didn't have any justification for his conclusion, since it was a feeling. In the end, no one asked him for his help and he knew better than to offer. But as a consequence of his attention focused on the others, Tracey didn't get as much of his own work done as he could have.

* * * * *

"Vincent told us to tell you 'hi' from him." Rocky said as he and Xon entered the conference room.

"Did you have a good visit?" Tracey asked curiously.

"We exchanged greetings, then attended our conversational Klingon class. There was little extraneous conversation beyond that." Xon stated impassively.

"They asked lots of questions about me during class and seemed to be interested in what I had to say. Everyone was very respectful." Rocky said happily.

"It was a classroom primarily of Vulcans. I would not expect them to behave otherwise." Xon said down to his companion.

"Since I tested as being able to speak Klingon adequately, if not proficiently, I don't know if I could officially join the class, but as long as no one is bothered by my attending, I think that I'll continue to go." Rocky said thoughtfully.

"I am under the impression that the instructor would appreciate more people with a better familiarity with the Klingon language to be attending the class. Many times my brother and the instructor carry the majority of the conversation due to the absence of others who are fluent." Xon said informatively.

"Is Vincent really that good?" Tracey asked curiously.

"Yes. He has stated that he was taught the vocabulary of the Klingon language via telepathy by his clan. He wishes to continue with the class to refine his application of the vocabulary. It appears that even for Humans, the nuance and inflection of the spoken Klingon language can pose a challenge to replicate." Xon said speculatively.

"It's hard for me to imagine a classroom full of Vulcans trying to learn such an expressive language." Tracey said thoughtfully, then added with a smile, "Especially since Vulcans aren't chatty people."

Before anyone else could respond, RJ said, in fairly passable Vulcan, "Language is more than vocabulary. It is an expression of culture that helps to define a people."

There was a long moment of silence before Tracey reluctantly asked, "Did you just say something about teacups?"

"That's one of the entry level exercises for the Vulcan language lessons on the ship's computer in the Clan version of the Starfleet Sim." Lexi said informatively.

RJ smiled at Lexi, then said in English, "That's right. Even before I got my test results, I wanted to learn other languages... especially Vulcan."

"Do all of you speak Vulcan?" Tracey asked as he looked around the group.

"I mostly know phrases." Lexi immediately answered, then clarified, "If I need something, I can probably get across what it is, but I don't think that I could manage a conversation."

Tracey looked to Hart inquisitively and had to wait a moment for him to respond, "I don't speak *proper* Vulcan. I picked up the language while I was living on mercenary ships. I guess the best way to describe it would be '*gutter Vulcan*'."

"I cannot imagine such a thing." Xon said honestly.

Hart smirked at the response, then said in Vulcan, "The mercenaries and traders sometimes have to speak Vulcan to do their business, but they don't have to speak it well."

After a moment to process what he had heard, Xon slowly said in English, "I am not certain if it is your pronunciation or your inflection that sounds vaguely like Rihannsu."

"Wait. What's that?" Lexi quickly asked.

"The language of the Romulan people." Xon said simply.

"Yeah. I think the guys talked like that on purpose, just to be annoying." Hart said with a grin, then broke into a full smile before saying something else in a language that Xon didn't quite recognize.

Before Xon could formulate a question, RJ asked, "Was that Orion? Or Swedish?"

Hart laughed at the question, then answered, "It's Lower Orion. I never learned the formal level of Orion. But I'll admit that the person I learned it from was from one of the Earth's Nordic countries. So it's possible that there might be a little Swedish mixed in there too."

"How many languages do you speak?" Lexi asked Hart curiously.

"Eight. But when I went through the testing at the academy, they determined that I only spoke five of them well enough to be considered 'proficient'. I actually don't think that I speak *any* of them properly; just well enough to do what needs to be done." Hart said honestly.

"My level of discourse in Federation Standard and, of course, Vulcan, is such that I may confidently engage in conversation using all but the most technical and field specific terms. It is my intention to achieve at least the same level of competence in the Klingon language." Xon said seriously.

"I should probably try to do that too... being in communications and all." RJ said thoughtfully.

"You must have achieved an adequate level of proficiency to be accepted into the training program for communications." Xon said reasonably.

"I don't know about that. When I went into testing at the academy I got the feeling that they'd already decided where I was going to be placed. Just about all my practical tests had to do with communications." RJ said frankly.

"Remember that everything that you ever did on the Clan version of the Starfleet Sim is counted as part of your testing. If you did something really good when you were playing, they probably noticed it and decided to point you in the right direction to use your best talents." Lexi said seriously.

"I guess that makes sense. From what the Clan guys told me, the scenarios that I was getting when I'd play weren't really like anyone else's." RJ said thoughtfully.

"When we were welcomed aboard, the captain called you 'the arbiter' and said that you'd be getting some specialized training. This sounds like it's part of the same thing." Tracey supplied.

"Yeah. I was wondering about that. He hasn't said anything about it since then." RJ said frankly.

"I think he's probably waiting until you and Lieutenant Baz can get things worked out with your regular training before he piles more stuff on you." Tracey said honestly.

"Yeah." RJ confirmed with a sigh, then added, "And I'd better get to work on figuring out how to mix the principles of Visual Learning with the communications lessons if I'm ever going to be able to really take my station."

"You'd better get on it." Tracey agreed.

"Actually, I think that we all have things we should be working on." Rocky said simply.

"Right." Tracey said before turning his attention back to his studies.

* * * * *

Although they had worked together previously and sometimes helped each other, Tracey was surprised to find that their silent conference room seemed to be an inspirational atmosphere for studying. The energy in the room was a nearly tangible thing.

Lexi was the first of them to break the long silence, declaring that her work for the night was complete.

Within minutes, the others, including RJ, all reached good stopping points.

Tracey was understandably curious as to how RJ was faring with his studies, but he felt that it would be wrong for him to inquire. It was important for him to allow RJ the dignity of resolving his issues in his own way. The accomplishment would be that much more precious to RJ if he solved the mystery on his own.

* * * * *

As days passed, the cadet crew steadfastly maintained their focus on their duties. Although it took some time, Tracey was finally able to accept that all the cadets were capable of seeing to their own wellbeing and didn't need for him to be hovering over them.

After that, everything seemed to run smoothly both on the bridge and during their study sessions.

As promised, Hart had seen to the security station upgrade. Tracey noticed that he had asked one of the members of the security team to help him with one aspect of the retrofit, but regardless, Hart did the work himself and saw to it that it was done correctly.

* * * * *

Friday morning came much faster than Tracey could have imagined possible.

He had held himself back, thus far, by an act of sheer will.

But like it or not, they were scheduled to arrive at Tellar near the end of their shift and certain things could no longer be put off.

With more than a little reluctance, Tracey approached the communications station.

"Lieutenant Baz, could I speak with you for a few minutes?" Tracey asked seriously.

"What do you need?" Lieutenant Baz asked impatiently.

"To speak with you." Tracey said simply, then continued, "You can call in the backup crew or someone else from communications, if you need to. I'll wait.

Lieutenant Baz seemed to be about to bark a response, but must have thought better of it and said, "RJ can handle it for a few minutes."

"Good." Tracey said before turning and walking away from communications, not bothering to look back to confirm that Lieutenant Baz was following.

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"Conference room two." Tracey said to the ceiling of the lift.

"How long are you expecting this to take?" Lieutenant Baz asked cautiously.

"My best guess is between five minutes and three hours. It really depends on how many screaming matches we get into before it's all done." Tracey said frankly.

"I'll do my part to keep this as brief as possible." Lieutenant Baz said seriously as the lift door opened.

"We have a deal." Tracey said as he led the way off the lift.

* * * * *

As soon as they were alone in the conference room, Tracey asked, "Is RJ going to be ready to man the communications station when we leave Tellar?"

"I think so." Lieutenant Baz said regretfully.

"I need for you to *know* so."

"That's all I've got."

"Then we'll have to make it work. What do you need from me to help RJ be ready?"

"From what RJ's told me, you've encouraged him to take responsibility for adapting my training to be more accessible for him. I think that that is the greatest help that you could have given. He's shown marked improvement in the past few days."

"Is there anything else you can think of that I can do to help?"

"No. Not at this time."

"What about the retrofit of the communications station? Are you going to be able to get that done today?"

"I wasn't planning on it, but I suppose that this is as good a time as any to see if RJ can work on the circuitry in something other than a theoretical sense. He'll either sink or swim." Lieutenant Baz said seriously.

"RJ did really well on his engineering testing at the academy. I get the feeling that RJ is at his best under pressure and doing for himself. It's when he's counting on someone else to help him that he tends to abdicate his responsibilities."

After a moment to consider, Lieutenant Baz slowly nodded, then said, "He should be made aware of his pattern of behavior."

"Let's get him comfortable manning his station before we throw too much more at him."

"Yes. That might be best." Lieutenant Baz agreed.

"Good. Then the only other thing that we need to discuss is how we're going to get along with each other."

"I think you made it clear that when it comes to the cadets, you expect to be in charge. Since the captain seems to agree with you, at least for the moment, I suppose that I'll have to follow your lead."

"I don't want to be at odds with you. There's no reason that we can't work together to help RJ."

"I agree in principle but try to keep in mind that a team needs a leader. If we start behaving like we're both trying to take control of RJ's training, it's going to be sending mixed signals. This is Starfleet. We can't seem ambiguous about who's in charge."

Tracey thought about that for a moment, then said, "If you can tell me your vision of how you'd like for things to unfold in RJ's training, I'll do my best to support you and encourage things to go in that direction. As long as it's working, you'll have my complete support."

"Thank you, Tracey. I think with the way things have progressed, that will be the most productive way to proceed."

* * * * *

Good to his word, just after returning to the bridge, Lieutenant Baz spent a few minutes talking with RJ before turning him loose on doing the retrofit on the communications station. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Baz went to an auxiliary station and took over the routine operations of communications.

Tracey was surprised and pleased to see the way that RJ confidently did the work.

Once the retrofit was completed, Rocky was called over to test the system. Tracey held his breath as he watched from a distance, but was happy to find that RJ's work was done right the first time. There wasn't any need for recalibration.

Tracey caught Lieutenant Baz' eye and could see his pride in RJ's achievement.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Sturgill, pay close attention as we approach the Tel star system. Although I'm certain that you've studied about this and done drills, nothing can compare to the real thing." Captain Gravf said seriously.

"Yes sir." Tracey responded smartly.

"I don't know if you're aware, but the Tel solar system is surrounded by a debris field at the very edge of the gravitational influence of the local star."

"Is that like the Oort cloud in the Sol system?"

"Yes. Although a bit more dense."

"So, are we going to drop out of subspace once we're inside the cloud?" Tracey asked curiously.

"That is usually left to the captain's discretion. Arguments can be made for supporting either decision."

"What do you like to do?"

"It really depends on the crew that I'm running with. I make the choice that is of most benefit to the most people."

"What are you planning to do with *this* crew?" Tracey asked cautiously.

"That's what we're going to decide right now." Captain Gravf said simply and waited for Tracey's reaction.

"If we come out of warp outside the Oort cloud, then we'll have to pay close attention to the ice and debris. Helm, navigation and sciences will

have to be on alert in case there's anything in our path that might be large enough to penetrate our shields. Since we have a crew that's in training, it's probably best for us to come out of warp outside the Oort cloud so that they can have that experience." Tracey said thoughtfully.

Captain Gravf smiled, then said, "It's good to know that you aren't automatically choosing the easier path for the cadets."

"If we wanted the easy path, we could have stayed on Earth and practiced on simulators." Tracey said frankly.

"Do you think that you'll be up to the task of keeping your crew calm and focused?" Captain Gravf asked curiously.

"I'm sure that all of them already know what to expect. I doubt that they'll need for me to hold their hands through this. But if they *do* need something, I'll be there for them." Tracey assured him.

* * * * *

Tracey went back to his auxiliary station and did his best to be aware of every detail of what he was going to need to do when they finally arrived. At the same time, he also tried to maintain constant awareness of what was going on at every one of the bridge stations.

He knew that they were almost at the Tel solar system and that soon 'his' cadets would be asked to perform a maneuver that, while not necessarily dangerous, might be potentially challenging.

"Mentors. Please step away from your stations. Allow the cadets to take us in." Captain Gravf announced without prelude.

There were a few surprised looks from some of the mentors. It was obvious that they weren't expecting the order. But one by one, they each took a few steps back to watch their students from a respectable distance.

"Lieutenant Sturgill, you have command." Captain Gravf said as he made a show of logging off his chair console.

Tracey walked to stand beside the command chair and logged in, then firmly said, "Navigation. We're going to drop out of warp thirty-six thousand kilometers from the outer edge of the Tel system's Oort cloud."

There was a long silent moment, then Rocky responded, "*Yes, sir. Thirty-six thousand kilometers.*"

Once he had received the response, Tracey called out, "Helm, be prepared for evasive."

"Aye, sir." Lexi said confidently.

"Security, I need phasers on standby, in case we need to clear our path." Tracey said as he glanced in that direction.

After pressing a few buttons on his console, Hart responded, "Phasers standing by."

"Sciences, be prepared to scan for potential threats." Tracey said as he glanced at the captain's chair console to get a sense of how close they were to dropping out of warp.

"Aye, sir." Xon said impassively.

There was a long moment of silence as everyone waited.

Captain Gravf stood from the command chair and gestured for Tracey to take his place.

Without taking his eyes off the chair console, Tracey sat down and watched their progress.

As soon as they were within range, Tracey said, "Helm. Take us out of warp."

"Aye, sir." Lexi responded immediately.

"Ahead one quarter impulse." Tracey said seriously.

"Ahead one quarter." Lexi parroted as she worked her controls.

The main viewscreen was filled with a slight haze that didn't really show much of anything.

When he noticed, Tracey quickly said, "Tactical on main screen."

"Yes, sir." Xon responded as the screen changed.

Suddenly hundreds of little multicolored specks filled the screen. Tracey knew that each and every one of them were traveling at a different speed and trajectory. There were three that appeared to be slightly larger than the others and each of them had a tactical readout showing their size, density and composition.

"Xon, are you seeing anything that we should be worried about?" Tracey asked as he noticed a trickle of sweat falling down his spine.

"No, sir." Xon answered calmly.

"Status of deflector shields." Tracey called out.

"Deflectors are at optimum." Xon responded informatively, then added, "Entering Oort cloud in three... two... one."

"Main screen to forward view." Tracey said as he glanced at his chair console screen for a moment.

The view on the main screen was like a small scale fireworks show as small bits of rock and ice impacted the shields and were obliterated.

After a moment of watching the spectacle, Tracey finally said, "Navigation, project course to Tellar."

"Standard approach course projected and laid in." Rocky said professionally.

"Maintain course and speed." Tracey said for form's sake.

"Aye, sir." Lexi automatically responded.

Tracey looked around the bridge and couldn't help but feel a swell of pride for 'his' crew and their performance.

"RJ, contact Tellar Main and request approach trajectory." Tracey said firmly.

Unfortunately, the look of terror in RJ's eyes wasn't completely unexpected. However, it only took RJ a moment to regain his emotional control and respond, "Yes, sir."

Tracey watched as RJ performed his duty, occasionally glancing to Lieutenant Baz, either seeking confirmation that he was doing the right thing, or perhaps seeking reassurance.

After less than a minute, RJ finally announced, "Approach trajectory received."

Tracey looked over the information before saying, "Rocky, adjust your course to Tellar Main's approach vector and put us into a parking orbit."

"*Aren't we going to dock at Tellar Main?*" Rocky asked with surprise.

"No. Not yet. Maybe they have to clear other traffic first. We've been instructed to wait." Tracey responded as he glanced at the response that RJ had received to verify his understanding.

"*Aye, sir. Course set and laid in.*" Rocky said professionally.

"Lexi, you good?" Tracey asked as he glanced in her direction.

"Real good." Lexi said with a grin, then thought to add, "Sir."

The next few minutes were a blur of anxiety and determination as each of the cadets performed, for the first time, one of the most common and basic maneuvers in Starfleet history.

* * * * *

As soon as the ship was in a stable orbit, holding the position that they were instructed by Tellar Main, Tracey was at a loss as to what he should do next.

"Mentors, I will expect your evaluations by the end of the day. You may relieve your trainees, or not, as you see fit." Captain Gravf said as he walked up beside the command chair and waited for Tracey to notice.

When Tracey did, he logged off the chair console and said, "I stand relieved."

"I have command." Captain Gravf said simply as he took the vacated seat.

* * * * *

Although the remainder of the shift was a mixture of tension and restrained jubilation, nothing of note happened. The ship remained in a parking orbit until the second shift arrived to take their stations.

As all of them were in the process of relinquishing their stations, the captain announced, "Cadets and mentors. The admiral has scheduled a reception for our esteemed guests at 20:00. You are all expected to attend. Dress is formal. Dismissed."

* * * * *

As soon as all the cadets were alone on the lift, Lexi said, "Aww, man! I was wanting to dock the ship."

"*Maybe next time.*" Rocky said from her side.

"Maybe it's best that you didn't get to. I think we just got a dose of reality." RJ said thoughtfully.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lexi asked curiously.

"*Please enter or state destination.*" The lift's computer voice said formally.

"Lift, hold." Tracey said before looking to RJ with question.

"Everything doesn't always go the way we want it to and sometimes there's a lot of hurry up and wait." RJ said seriously.

"I guess so. It just would've been nice if I'd really been able to dock the ship. I've been wanting to do that since forever." Lexi groused.

"Chances are that you'll be able to do the docking maneuver when we reach the Vega Colony. *We're* going to be the bridge crew for the whole trip." Tracey said seriously.

"Actually, there is a one in three chance that Lexi won't be the one to dock the ship, depending on which shift is on duty when we arrive." Xon said informatively.

"Not necessarily." Tracey said before Lexi could respond. "If we really wanted to, we could probably *tweak* our course and speed to change those odds quite a bit."

"Could you really do that?" Lexi asked with surprise.

"When the captain's put me in command, he hasn't been telling me what to do each step of the way. He tells me the outcome he expects and leaves me to do it. So, unless he orders me to do things a certain way, I can probably work it out so that we will arrive at Vega during the first shift." Tracey said frankly.

"Do we not have a timetable that we are required to conform to?" Xon asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I've seen our orders. We're supposed to get them there by a certain date and time. There's nothing that says we can't get them there a little bit earlier." Tracey said seriously, then looked upward and said, "Lift, resume."

"Please enter or state destination." The lift's computer voice repeated.

"Oh, yeah." Tracey grinned, then replied, "Mess Hall."

* * * * *

"Formal uniforms." RJ said with disgust.

"This is another part of our job. If you're going to be in Starfleet, you'll be expected to act as a diplomat to represent Starfleet and the Federation." Tracey said as he led the way through the serving line.

"I might need some help with that. We didn't do a lot of formal functions at the trailer park." RJ said, revealing his nervousness.

"It is better to be thought of as a fool than to open your mouth and confirm it." Rocky said in a computerized voice that was unusually free from inflection.

"What?!" RJ yelled, fairly certain that he'd just been insulted.

"If you're not comfortable in a formal situation, your best bet is to keep quiet. People will make assumptions based on your silence, and that will usually work in your favor." Rocky stated simply.

The group made their food selections, then found a table where they could all sit together.

"But what if someone asks me something?" RJ asked thoughtfully.

"Answer them." Tracey said, then added, "Just resist the urge to tell long convoluted stories and don't try to impress them by pretending to be something that you aren't. You're a Starfleet ensign. That's all they really need to know about you."

"*Cadet* ensign." RJ quietly corrected.

"In case you didn't notice, our formal uniforms are standard issue officers uniforms. At a diplomatic function, you'll be expected to behave like any other ensign; no better, no worse." Tracey said frankly.

"But how do I act like an ensign?" RJ asked nervously.

"You're just another one of the bridge officers, so just try to act like one of the mentors... except for Lieutenant Fister... don't act like that." Tracey added with a slight grimace.

RJ thought about it for a moment, then quietly asked, "Should we do something to try and help him?"

"I don't know how much help we'll be, but if any of us see him having trouble, we should probably try to jump in and bail him out. This is probably going to be a lot worse for him than it is for us." Tracey said gravely.

"Maybe I should stick close to him." Lexi said reluctantly.

"I don't know what the admiral has in mind, but at most formal functions that I've been to, they actively try to keep people who work together from congregating, so that they'll be more likely to circulate and meet new people." Tracey said frankly.

"Do you think that the rest of us should take turns watching out for Lieutenant Fister?" Rocky asked curiously.

"No. I'm pretty sure that he wouldn't appreciate that." Tracey said immediately, then added more slowly, "Let's just keep an eye on him and if any of us see him having trouble, we can step in and do our best to help him out."

"Tellarites have a reputation for being rude and argumentative. Maybe he'll fit in with them." Hart said thoughtfully.

Tracey smiled at the suggestion, then said, "I hadn't thought of that. I guess our alternate plan might be to try and act *more* like Lieutenant Fister."

"I cannot foresee that going well." Xon said seriously.

"There's something else you should probably know about Tellarites..." Hart reluctantly interjected.

"What's that?" Tracey asked curiously.

"Well, in Tellarite society, it's kind of a... I don't know, a thing. I guess that for Tellarite females, clothing is kind of optional." Hart stammered.

"They go around naked?" Lexi asked in astonishment.

"Not all of them, but sometimes, yeah." Hart said uncomfortably.

"The majority of the people we'll be picking up are women." Tracey said into the silence that followed.

"I believe that it is becoming an accepted custom for Tellarite women of a certain academic or professional standing to consistently wear clothing. My research on the subject suggests that currently, public nudity is looked upon as being somewhat 'common'." Rocky said informatively.

"I hope so, because once you've seen that... it really sticks with you." Hart said before pushing his unfinished plate of food away.

"Coffelt is fairly distant from Tellar, so I haven't run into that. But there have been Knorran customs and behaviors that Humans weren't comfortable with. My mom always told me that if something like that happened at one of our formal functions that I was supposed to explain that we have a different custom or whatever and then discuss it with them, if they're comfortable talking about it." Tracey said thoughtfully.

"If you can't manage that, then just try not to stare... or giggle." RJ said with a smile.

"Pointing should probably be discouraged, as well." Xon added in an almost playful tone.

"I'll just be proud of myself if I can keep from blowing chunks." Hart said frankly.

There were a few indulgent smiles from around the mess hall as other diners noticed the laughter coming from the cadet table.

* * * * *

"It feels wrong not to be studying." RJ said honestly.

"I know. But just when we started getting into it, we'd have to stop and go to the reception." Tracey said honestly.

"Yeah." RJ agreed, then reiterated, "It just feels weird."

"Why don't you take a few minutes to write to your boyfriend? I bet that he'd be happy to get an unexpected message from you." Tracey suggested.

"I don't know what I'd tell him that I didn't tell him last time." RJ said frankly.

"Tell him about doing the retrofit on the communications station today. That was kind of a big thing." Tracey said with a smile.

"I don't want to bore him with a bunch of technical stuff that he doesn't understand." RJ said reluctantly.

"If you share what excites you, he'll be excited for you. Even if he doesn't understand, it'll make him feel good that you're including him in this part of your life." Tracey said honestly.

"Yeah. You're probably right. I'm not really good at this whole boyfriend thing. I guess that I'm always worried that Loi's going to find someone who's better and who's... you know, there with him and stuff." RJ said anxiously.

"If you share your life with him, that's a lot less likely to happen. Distancing yourself from him is probably the thing most likely to push him away." Tracey said imploringly.

"I got it. Thanks, Tracey."

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"So, we just put on these different jackets and that means that we're dressed up?" RJ asked incredulously.

"Are you complaining?" Tracey asked curiously.

"No. I just had the feeling that to get dressed for something that's as big a deal as this is supposed to be, that it'd take us a lot longer."

"Well, your boots have to be shined and you need to have a decent haircut, but since we're so new on the ship, all that stuff is already taken care of." Tracey said frankly.

"Oh, yeah." RJ said absently, then walked into the bathroom.

Tracey automatically followed and stood at RJ's side, looking in the mirror to check their appearance.

After a long silent moment, RJ cautiously asked, "Am I good enough?"

"You wouldn't be here if you weren't." Tracey answered with a smile.

RJ rolled his eyes, then said in a patronizing tone, "I meant for the reception."

"I know what you meant. But I feel like it's my job to remind you that you were chosen for a reason. Starfleet doesn't invest their time and resources in things that aren't likely to pay off." Tracey said frankly.

"I never thought about it like that." RJ said with surprise.

"For being in communications, you sure seem to have trouble reading between the lines." Tracey chuckled.

"It's just so different from what I'm used to. I'm in the habit of holding myself back. I understand what you're telling me about being good enough. I really do. But there's something inside of me that makes me want to... I don't know... underachieve or something like that. It's what I'm used to. It's what I'm comfortable with." RJ said in frustration.

Tracey looked at RJ with surprise at the words and finally said, "You've already succeeded. You're here..."

"I know that! But the more I do, the more will be expected of me! I can't help but feel like I'm setting myself up for a fall... a *really* big fall!" RJ screamed before he'd realized that he was doing it.

After a moment to calm himself, RJ quietly continued, "Tracey, I'm not strong like you."

Without thought, Tracey pulled RJ into his arms and held him firmly before saying, "If you think that I'm strong, then trust me. In fact, don't just trust me, trust the team. If we see you falling, we'll either catch you or we'll all fall with you, together as a team... well, except for Hart, maybe."

RJ was caught off guard by Tracey's addendum and he couldn't restrain a laugh.

Tracey released RJ from the hug, then quietly said, "I've faced failure... the biggest failure possible. What I learned is that you have to keep going. You have to keep living. It's not until you give up and let it stop you that you've really failed."

"I just don't know how to keep from feeling this way." RJ reluctantly admitted.

"You can't." Tracey said simply, then explained, "Trying to push it down and make believe that it isn't there only makes it stronger. Feel it. Deal with it. Then move on."

RJ thought for a moment, then cautiously asked, "How do I do that?"

Tracey laughed at the question, then said, "You just did it. You gave it voice."

RJ looked at Tracey with confusion.

"You put your feelings into words and defined what's bothering you. That's the hardest part. Now that you've done that, you can decide what you need to do next." Tracey said with a smile.

Before RJ could respond, the other bathroom door opened and Hart walked in, carrying his formal uniform tunic over his arm.

"Something wrong?" Hart asked cautiously, sensing that RJ was having some sort of a problem.

"RJ was just saying that he's afraid of failure." Tracey said simply.

The look of betrayal on RJ's face accurately conveyed his surprise.

"Oh, that's right. You went to a regular school, didn't you?" Hart asked as he slipped off his cadet jacket.

"Yeah. So?" RJ answered cautiously.

Hart turned to RJ and looked him in the eyes before asking, "Did you ever fail?"

"Yeah. Sometimes, no matter how hard I worked and studied, I couldn't get an A. And sometimes I'd even get a C or D." RJ answered slowly.

"No. I'm talking about an F. A big fat **zero**. Have you ever tried your best and completely and utterly failed?" Hart asked seriously.

"Not really." RJ finally admitted.

"Okay. Have you ever run a race and come in last?" Hart continued.

"No." RJ said more easily.

"Who did?" Hart asked curiously, and seemed to be determinedly working toward some point, although neither RJ nor Tracey had a clue what it was.

"I don't know. I think when we were running track it was timed. So everyone who finished within the time limit was counted as passing and got an 'acceptable' grade. I think everyone else just stopped running when the time ran out, so no one really came in last." RJ said thoughtfully.

"So no one failed?" Hart asked seriously as he pulled on his formal uniform tunic and began to fasten it.

"I'm pretty sure that there were a few of the girls who sat out now and then because they weren't feeling well, so I guess *they* failed." RJ said uncertainly.

"They didn't try, so they didn't fail." Hart said simply, then continued, "I wasn't there, so I can't speak for you. But from what I've seen, it looks like a lot of schools are so worried that kids might get their precious little feelings hurt and not feel like they're the most special snowflakes in the universe that they never teach them how to deal with failure. If you never fail, then you never learn how to pick yourself up and overcome whatever knocked you on your ass to begin with."

"Have you ever failed?" RJ asked cautiously.

Hart grinned, then looked at himself in the mirror before turning and leaving the restroom.

"Do you remember what I was saying about Hart before?" Tracey asked in a leading tone.

"Yeah." RJ said numbly, still assimilating what Hart had just said.

"Forget it." Tracey said with a grin.

RJ absently nodded, then suddenly said, "I can't believe you told Hart about what we were talking about. I thought I could trust you."

"You *can* trust me." Tracey said simply, then explained, "But I don't have all the answers. I have a feeling that if all of us are going to get through this, we're going to have to help each other. I don't plan on telling everyone about the things you tell me, but I have no problem giving them an overview about what's going on with you, in case they might have some idea that I haven't thought of."

"Well, it looks like it worked out that way with Hart." RJ reluctantly conceded.

"Remember when Lexi helped Rocky solve that complex problem?" Tracey asked slowly.

"Yeah. I thought that was amazing." RJ admitted.

"We can only help each other if the team knows that someone is needing help. We're all in this together."

* * * * *

As per their earlier arrangement, all the cadets gathered in the hallway five minutes before they were scheduled to arrive at the reception on the recreation deck.

"This is gonna suck." Lexi said simply.

"Yeah. Probably." Hart agreed.

"It's part of the job." Tracey told the group half-heartedly.

"Can't we just retrofit some more bridge stations or something?" RJ asked hopefully.

"*I don't have access to the auxiliary stations.*" Rocky supplied.

"Yeah! I bet if we all worked together, we could get *all* the stations on the bridge done tonight." Lexi said hopefully.

"Meanwhile, back in the real world, we *have to* go to this thing." Tracey said firmly.

"Any last words of advice?" Hart asked cautiously.

"Remember what we learned about Tellarites, about their culture and customs. Don't expect them to be as reasonable as Captain Gravf. We're going to be representing Starfleet, the Federation and the Copernicus. Don't let their attitudes draw you into behaving badly." Tracey said seriously as he looked around the group.

No one responded, so Tracey continued, "And also remember that if any of them cause you too much trouble, tell Hart so that he can deal with it."

Looks of surprise went around the group and it was RJ who was finally able to ask, "What?"

Before Tracey could tell them that it was just a joke, Hart quietly said, "Be sure to give me enough time to make it look like an accident."

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Tracey led the group of cadets, dressed in their formal uniforms, off the turbolift and onto the recreation deck.

"Exactly on time, I like that." Captain Gravf said from nearby.

Tracey gave a slight smile and a nod at the acknowledgement.

"Cadets, I would like to present my lovely wife, Grmch and my youngest son, Tobar." Captain Gravf said proudly.

Tracey felt that he should say something, but was truly at a loss for words at the sight of the short, hairy, morbidly obese, woman-ish being beside the captain and the slightly less hairy, grinning piggish boy beside her.

"These are the cadets that I've been telling you about." Captain Gravf said to his family, then turned to Tracey and said, "Lieutenant Sturgill, would you like to introduce the cadet crew?"

"Of course, sir." Tracey said smartly, then looked to Grmch and said, "I'm learning command from Captain Gravf, I am Lieutenant Tracey Sturgill and I'm from the Coffelt colony. Next, I'd like to present my first officer and science officer, Ensign Xon of Vulcan. At his side is my chief of security,

Ensign Hart Korrigon from the New Hope colony. Standing behind Xon and Hart is my chief of communications, Robert Parker Junior from Earth."

"There's no way I'm going to be able to remember all your names." Grmch said in a flustered voice.

Tracey smiled warmly at her and said, "We don't expect you to remember the names of a bunch of alien creatures. In fact, we don't even expect you to be able to tell us apart. If you want to know who any of us are, please feel free to ask. We won't be offended."

"Thank you very much." Grmch said with surprise, then added, "To be honest, I never have been able to distinguish one human from another."

"I've heard that a lot at the Coffelt Colony." Tracey assured her, then continued, "That being said, I think that you'll probably be able to remember my navigator, Ensign Rock from Janus VI."

As Tracey gestured toward the pile of rocks at their feet, Grmch and Tobar both seemed to be confused.

"You may call me Rocky, if that's easier for you." Rocky said seriously.

"What *are* you?" Tobar asked in wonder.

"I am a Horta. Once the introductions are done, perhaps we can talk more and I'll answer any questions that you have." Rocky said pleasantly.

"Yeah!" Tobar said excitedly.

"Last, but certainly not least, is my Helmsman, Ensign Alexandra Gelt from Earth." Tracey said as he indicated Lexi.

"A girl?! On the helm?!" Tobar barked.

"Oh. This should be good." RJ whispered to Hart with a grin.

"Yeah. A girl on the helm." Lexi said contritely, then continued, "When you're done talking with Rocky, I can tell you about all kinds of things that girls can do."

"Why don't you go and get yourselves some refreshments? Our honored guests will be arriving shortly, once they've had a few minutes to freshen up." Captain Gravf suggested.

"Yes, sir." Tracey answered for all of them, then led the way to a buffet table in the center of the massive hall.

Tobar looked up at his father with wide, hopeful eyes.

"Would you like to go with the cadets?" Captain Gravf asked his son in a leading tone.

"I want some of that food." Tobar answered honestly.

Captain Gravf smiled at the response, then said, "I've told the cadets to expect you to be tagging along with them on this voyage. Go and join them if you like."

"Is that little Human girl really your helmsman?" Tobar asked cautiously.

"Yes. But I suppose that you'll be able to see that for yourself in the morning if you'd like to join me on the bridge and see what it is that I do while I'm away from you and your mother." Captain Gravf said to his son with a grin.

"But you said that I can have some of that food. Right?" Tobar asked to confirm.

"Yes. Go ahead." Captain Gravf chuckled, then placed a hand on his wife's shoulder as he watched his son scamper away.

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As the cadets approached the buffet table, Lexi suddenly asked, "What are you doing here, Alonzo?"

Crewman August smiled at her and said, "I'm in ship's services, so one of my duties is to act as an usher, porter or waiter when the situation calls for it."

"How's your writing going?" RJ asked curiously.

"Slowly." He said frankly, then explained, "I have a full-time job. Factor in time to eat and sleep and it doesn't leave much time for writing."

"Let us know if there's anything we can do to help you." Tracey said sincerely.

Crewman August chuckled, then said, "That's just the way it is. If I had all the time in the universe to write, then I'd have nothing to write about. It's all about maintaining a balance."

Before any of them could say more, Tobar arrived and started heaping food on a plate.

After seeing that he wasn't going to slow down, Tracey cautiously told him, "You can come back for more as many times as you like."

"Really?" Tobar asked happily.

"If we run out of food, it's my job to bring more." Crewman August told Tobar seriously.

"That's your job? We eat as much food as we want and you just keep bringing it?" Tobar asked with delight.

"Yes. Tonight, that's my one and only job." Crewman August confirmed.

"I didn't know anyone had a job like that. Maybe Starfleet isn't so bad." Tobar said before carrying his heavily laden plate to a table so that he could start eating.

"Can I get you anything, Rocky?" Lexi asked as the cadet crew made their final selections from the buffet.

"No. Thank you. But if none of you are opposed to the idea, I believe that I would very much like to spend some time speaking with Tobar. I can't quantify what it is, but something about him intrigues me." Rocky said seriously.

"Yeah. I think the captain would like it if we let him hang out with us." Tracey said frankly.

"There's Admiral Hanson." Lexi said as she stepped away from the buffet.

"Then our honored guests can't be too far behind." Tracey reasoned, then quickly added, "Let's go ahead and eat what we can while we have the chance. It's possible that we won't have time to do anything but talk the rest of the night."

Rather than answer verbally, the other cadets made their way to the table that Tobar had chosen.

* * * * *

"Here you are!" Admiral Hanson said delightedly as she approached the cadets' table.

All the cadets immediately stood to attention.

Approaching with the admiral was a Tellarite woman who was both shorter and wider than Captain Gravf's wife. One notable characteristic was that her beige facial hair had obviously been trimmed, almost sculpted, to give her a somewhat stylized appearance.

Tobar was surprised when the cadets all got to their feet and, after a moment of hesitation, he stood with them.

"Cadets, I'm pleased to introduce Dr. Frurthurs jav Trallv, the head researcher of the team who have made an incredible breakthrough that will be heralded throughout the Federation." Admiral Hanson enthused.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Dr. Trallv. We're honored to have you aboard." Tracey said diplomatically.

"Am I to understand that these children are members of the crew?" Dr. Trallv asked with surprise.

"Yes. These are the best and brightest of the up and coming generation." Admiral Hanson said proudly.

"So, is this some sort of a field trip, so that they can experience what it's like to really be on a starship?" Dr. Trallv asked the admiral slowly.

Admiral Hanson looked at Tracey expectantly, silently asking him to explain.

"My crew and I will be manning the bridge stations and conducting you to the Vega colony." Tracey said carefully.

Dr. Trallv was speechless as she looked at the group of children before her.

"You'll be able to speak more later. Just now I'd like to introduce you to Captain Gravf's wife. I just know that you two will get along." Admiral Hanson said as she gestured for Dr. Trallv to walk with her.

As the admiral walked away, the entire group sat down and began eating again.

"Well, that wasn't so bad." Lexi finally said.

"Let's see if you still think so after thirty or so times of doing that." Tracey said frankly.

* * * * *

"Would you mind if I joined you for a few minutes?" A woman's voice asked hopefully.

Tracey was surprised to see Ensign Lord looking at him expectantly.

"Please do." Tracey quickly said, then thought to add, "Ensign Lord, this is Tobar. He's Captain Gravf's son."

"It's nice to meet you, Tobar. Your father is a good man. I have a great deal of respect for him." Ensign Lord said warmly.

"But you're a Human." Tobar said in confusion.

"A person's species doesn't matter to me. What's important to me is what kind of a person they are. Your father is one of the best people that I know. And I wouldn't feel one bit different about him if he were a Human or a Klingon." Ensign Lord said seriously.

"I think that all of us feel just about the same way about the captain. He's *our* captain. His species doesn't make one bit of difference to any of us." Tracey said frankly.

"I thought my father was telling stories when he said that working in the Federation made everyone equal." Tobar said slowly.

"There are still plenty of people out there who don't like other species, and some of them are even in Starfleet. But if you're stuck serving with someone like that, you'll never trust them, especially if you're from one of the species that they don't like. So people like that usually won't become captains or admirals because no one wants to follow their vision." Ensign Lord said seriously.

"Hatred of people who are different will always be there." Hart said simply, then explained, "If the day ever comes when you can honestly say that all species are treated equally and behave equally, then you need to pull your head out of your ass and take a long hard look at reality."

"Hart's our little ray of sunshine." Tracey said to Tobar with a grin.

"You don't believe in equal rights?" Lexi asked in astonishment.

"That's legal stuff. That's a whole different thing." Hart quickly explained.

Lexi nodded that she understood.

"True equality exists at the lowest common denominator and nowhere else. All the species are different. It's not some made up prejudice, we're all different biologically and culturally." Hart said firmly.

"Are you saying that you don't like Tobar because he's a Tellarite?" Tracey asked cautiously, not really believing that that was what he was saying.

"No. I'm sure that Tobar's fine. What I'm saying is that *pretending* that the Federation has made everyone equal is a dangerous lie. We need to admit that we're all different and each of us needs to use our differences to work on being the best people that we can be. If we stop trying to be better than we are, both individually and collectively, we'll all suffer for it.

Sameness and mediocrity is what causes civilizations to fall." Hart said with absolute conviction.

"Excuse me, but I am intrigued by one point you made. You said that equality exists at the lowest common denominator. Could you, perhaps, provide some supporting evidence for that claim?" Xon asked cautiously.

"Cattle being led to the slaughter are all equal. No individual is better or worse than another. In a forest of trees it doesn't matter if one tree is centuries old or if another is barely more than a sapling. When that forest is clear cut, they're all just wood. When everyone is equal, they're seen as having only the value of what they have in common. In our case, we're all meat." Hart finished gravely.

"I'm not." Rocky immediately interjected.

"Except Rocky." Hart conceded with a smile down at him.