

A dozen cadets had gathered in the main shuttlebay and milled about restlessly around the shuttlecraft *September 11*. Among them was Bolian science cadet Mortati, Tamurillian security cadet Der Boghossian, operations cadet Saldana and engineering cadet Faggio.

"I don't understand why I'm here!" Faggio whined to her friend and cabinmate Mortati. "This mission is supposed to be a biological survey. None of the engineering cadets are supposed to be here! I'm the only engineering cadet here!"

Omar Saldana leaned over toward Faggio with the same sneer he usually had on his lips and said, "Maybe this is payback for that shuttle you blew up?"

"That wasn't my fault!" Faggio cried, looking like she would break down into tears any second. "How was I to know when I shut down the shuttle's warp drive the Tavicite would blow it up?"

"Should have just let them throw it into the sun," Saldana remarked with an unkind smile. "We'd have gotten to starbase five days sooner."

"At least she wasn't stuck with photorp tube cleaning duty by pissing off the XO," Cadet Der Boghossian whispered to Saldana with a grin.

"That wasn't my fault, gnome..." Saldana started to say when he was interrupted by a loud voice from across the shuttlebay.

"ALRIGHT PEOPLE, LISTEN UP!"

All the cadets looked over toward the source of the loud voice. As the corridor door shut behind them, Gunnery Sergeant 'Olly' O'Laughlin walked over toward the *September 11*, four young children and Cadet William Hyland III close behind. As was usual, the Gunny was wearing a standard Starfleet Marine combat uniform with 20th century rank chevrons on the sleeves and a camouflage hat worn backward upon his thinning blonde hair.

"As y'all know, your final mission project before you all return to the Academy for the new semester will be a bio-survey of the unexplored planet Temecklia IV," O'Laughlin said. "I have been recruited to be your babysitter... I mean, supervisor. Midshipman Hyland here has been put in charge of the away team. Unless a real... heh, heh... emergency comes up, Mister Hyland is in charge."

O'Laughlin stepped to the side, pushing forward the four kids wearing Fleet Space Cadet uniforms.

"These are Fleet Space Cadets Doyle, Clark, Wilson and Koester. And yes, she is the captain's daughter, so treat them nice if you don't want photorp tube cleaning duty when we return. They will be joining us on the survey as part of a class project. Each of them has more time in space than any of you, so don't underestimate them. They are resources. As the Ferengi say, feel free to exploit them."

As both Gem Koester and Chance Wilson looked at O'Laughlin with unhappy expressions, the Gunny continued.

"To avoid confusion during this mission, all you Academy kids will be referred to as 'midshipman.' The FSC kids will be addressed as 'cadet.' Am I understood?"

As everyone nodded in agreement, O'Laughlin smiled, stuck his ever-present cigar stump between his teeth and said, "Alright! Load 'er up!"

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Dauntless*!

Star Trek: Dauntless

"Final Mission" By PJK

Captain's log, stardate 58450.0:

Our temporary assignment as the Academy training vessel is soon coming to an end. For the past six months we have trained, influenced, molded and shaped the next generation of Starfleet officers. I believe the crew of the Dauntless has done an exceptional job. But one final mission awaits.

Dauntless is currently in orbit of the fourth planet in the Temecklia system. Discovered during the Dominion War, it is only now, years later, that Starfleet can spare the resources to explore the planet. A hand-picked away team composed of both Academy midshipmen and our own vessel's Fleet Space Cadet Corps unit will perform the initial survey. We expect the mission to last three days.
Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

The shuttlecraft *September 11* moved slowly out of the main shuttlebay and turned toward the sphere of the planet far below. In the pilot's seat, Midshipman Hyland adjusted the small vessel's shields for atmospheric entry, then sat back to enjoy the ride.

"Why did we have to take a shuttlecraft?" asked Midshipman Saldana from the seat behind Hyland. "Why couldn't we just beam down like every other starship does?"

"Because not every away team can beam down to where they're going, and because it was easier to transport seventeen people all at once in a shuttle than to use multiple transporters," O'Laughlin answered as he polished his favorite compression rifle, Betty, annoyed with Saldana's constant complaints.

"Also, my daddy mentioned something about periodic ion interference that could disrupt the beam," Gem commented from the seat behind O'Laughlin.

"Great. The kid knows more than the away team leader," Saldana sneered.

"Hold on. Sensors indicate there might be some turbulence ahead," Hyland called out as the shuttle entered the atmosphere. The shields blazed a dull red in the re-entry ionization, a sight Gem and her friend Kaycee Doyle in the next seat back always enjoyed.

"Everyone gather your gear," the Gunny said as the shuttle slowed and the glow outside the viewports subsided. "We'll be at the LZ in about five minutes."

The shuttle continued its decent, heading directly toward the planet's largest continent just north of the equator.

"Where do you want to set up a base camp, Sarge...", Hyland started to ask when suddenly an electrical surge like St Elmo's Fire crackled across the control panel and half the shuttle's instruments went dark.

"What just happened?" Hyland exclaimed as the shuttle started to roll to the right and the Academy midshipman struggled to maintain control.

"I dunno!" O'Laughlin yelled back, desperately trying to restore power and unsure he was not doing more harm than good as the crackle occurred again and all power died away.

Through the viewport the jungle canopy of the continent below moved toward the passengers of the *September 11* faster and faster.

"I can't restore power!" O'Laughlin yelled as one of the midshipmen near the back tried frantically to raise the *Dauntless* on her combadge.

"I've got no control!" Hyland reiterated.

Suddenly Gem jumped up from her seat behind the Gunny and landed on her knees near the console between Hyland and O'Laughlin. "My daddy showed me a trick once," she said as she tore the cover off the computer access and after quickly studying the chip configuration inside for a second, pulled out two of the isolinear chips, slamming one of them into the slot the other had occupied. Almost immediately the navigation console flashed to life.

"Hold on!" Hyland yelled as he pulled the shuttle out of its crash dive, skimming the upper branches of the jungle with its nacelles. Barely under control, the midshipman managed to land the shuttle intact in a nearby clearing. As the engines hummed down to standby, one by one the passengers began to breathe again.

"On the way back to the ship, remind me I need to pick up my stomach around 300 meters," the Gunny said, then enveloped Gem in a huge hug. "You earned a month's special privileges for that one, kiddo."

Once everyone had had a chance to calm down, Hyland stood up on shaky legs and started giving out assignments.

"I want one team of six to survey our perimeter, report back anything out of the ordinary you find. I need another team to survey the shuttle. Find out what systems we've got and what we've lost. Faggio, I'm putting you in charge of that. Everyone else, start setting up a survival shelter. Hopefully we won't be here long once the ship realizes we're not at the designated landing zone, but it doesn't hurt to play it safe."

Hyland looked at O'Laughlin to see if he had forgotten anything. The Gunny only nodded approvingly.

“We’ve still got a survey to conduct,” Hyland finished. “The sooner we’re set up, the sooner we can start and be done.”

* * * *

“Bridge to Captain Koester.”

Peter Koester looked up from the conversation he was having with Tanzia Gera, the Ship’s Counselor, in the 10-Forward lounge. He put his synthale down on the table and tapped his combadge.

“This is the captain. Go ahead Mister Fry.”

“Captain, we lost contact with the away team shortly after the shuttle entered the atmosphere. Lt M’nday believes it is due to the unusual ionic interference we detected earlier. The last message we received was badly garbled. The only word we could understand was, ‘...landing.’”

“Very well. Have M’nday and T’Pan see what they can do to break through the interference and contact the shuttle. In the meantime, scan the surface and see if you can locate their exact landing position.”

“Aye, sir. Bridge, out.”

* * * *

Two hours later, the perimeter of the encampment had been surveyed and a survival shelter attached to the side of the shuttlecraft had been erected.

“I’ve managed to get a few subsystems operational,” Midshipman Joellen Faggio reported to away team leader Hyland and supervisor O’Laughlin. “The replicator is running, so we won’t starve. And I’ve got Lemmons working on the subspace transceiver assembly. See if we can break through this damn interference.”

“Good work, Faggio,” Hyland remarked, then turned toward one of the nearby science cadets. “Pharge, what do we know about this planet?”

Midshipman Pharge from Bellatrix II consulted his tricorder.

“Orbital scans determined the planet’s surface to be 65% covered by water, most of it deep ocean. Some of it is smaller lakes and rivers as well. The remaining 35% is divided into two continental land masses, of which this one, the northern continent, is the larger. Plant and some small animal life detected. No signs of any intelligent civilization. Atmosphere is close to a text book example of class-M, 65% nitrogen, 20% oxygen, 7% carbon dioxide and the remainder trace gasses, perfectly capable of sustaining carbon-based life-forms, though apparently no one determined the ion interference was anywhere near as bad as we experienced.”

Hyland nodded and was about to assign a new job to Pharge when a voice yelled out of the shuttlecraft.

“I’ve got it! I’ve got it! I’ve... oh, damn!”

Hyland exchanged looks of confusion with Gunny O’Laughlin before both of them climbed into the shuttle. Inside, sitting on the deck by one of the open console panels, was Midshipman Lemmons, who had been assigned to help Faggio repair the shuttlecraft’s radio system, being aided by Space Cadet Chris Clark.

“I thought I had it, Mister Hyland,” Lemmons said. “I’ve managed to repair the transceiver enough to receive transmissions. We just heard the *Dauntless* trying to contact us. Unfortunately, we still can’t transmit. I think our signals are bouncing off something in the atmosphere.”

Hyland hit his fist into the shuttlecraft bulkhead in frustration, then said, “Keep working on it.” As he and O’Laughlin turned to leave the shuttle they both heard a shout from outside. Both ran out to investigate.

At the edge of the clearing one midshipman was dragging an unconscious classmate into the camp. Several other midshipmen ran to assist and the unconscious boy was laid down on a blanket under the survival shelter.

“What happened?” Hyland asked as O’Laughlin dug out an emergency field medic kit and began to examine the boy.

“I’m not sure,” the midshipman who had dragged him over said. “We were patrolling in pairs like you ordered, scanning the vicinity with tricorders. I turned around for a moment to examine a small lizard we had discovered when I heard Chancy yelp and a quick thunk. When I turned back, he was on the ground with his head bleeding.”

“Mild concussion,” O’Laguhlin reported as he shot a hypospray into the midshipman’s neck, the proceeded to clean the wound on the boy’s head and cover it with a bandage. “He should be awake in a couple of hours. From the dirt and stuff around the wound, I’d guess he got hit by a fair-sized rock. Were you near any sorta hillside or something?”

“No, Sergeant. We were only a few meters into the jungle.” O’Laughlin and Hyland exchanged looks as Gem and Kaycee walked over.

“Ever have that spooky feeling like you were being watched?” Gem asked offhandedly.

“That’s just your imagination, Cadet,” Hyland said uncertainly, then said to O’Laughlin, “Maybe we should bring everyone back into the clearing?”

“Until we can re-establish comms with the *Dauntless*, that might be a good idea,” the Gunny agreed.

Hyland began passing the word for all the away team members to regroup at the shuttlecraft, then went back inside the vessel to check on the progress of fixing the transceiver. A blood-curdling scream quickly sent him running back outside again.

“What was that?” Hyland demanded to know.

“It came from bearing 232,” reported Der Boghossian, pointing his tricorder in the indicated direction before removing his phaser from its holster.

“Der Boghossian, Saldana, McShane, with me!” Hyland said, starting to lead the way into the thick jungle.

“Oh no, I’m not going out there. Especially not with the gnome!” Saldana said before trying to step away. Hyland moved to quickly block his classmate’s attempted departure.

“You’re a part of this away team and I’m in charge. I’m telling you to go out there, and you’re going to go.”

Saldana balled his right fist and looked as if he were contemplating striking Hyland, then quickly reconsidered.

“You wouldn’t be so tough if your daddy wasn’t an admiral,” Saldana said with a sneer before grabbing a phaser offered by McShane and walking toward the edge of the clearing. Hyland watched him walk away, his head shaking in frustration before leading the rest of the group toward the jungle.

About fifteen meters away from the clearing the team encountered one of the few midshipmen who had not made it back to the shuttle yet. He was covered with blood and his uniform hung in shreds.

“Johnston... Back there...,” the Academy cadet gasped before Hyland ordered McShane to carry him back to the shuttle. The away team leader then looked at Der Boghossian, who still held a tricorder. “Anything?” he asked.

“I’m registering a very faint life-form reading ten meters to the west. Nothing else,” the strong, stocky Tamurillian said.

The three midshipmen rushed through the thick undergrowth, Hyland in the lead, Saldana being prodded along by Der Boghossian, until they came upon a body. As they arrived at the scene, Der Boghossian had though he had seen something dart away into the jungle out of the corner of his eye just as they all saw Johnston.

“My God!” Hyland croaked as he fully realized what he was seeing. The young midshipman’s body had been sliced and shredded as if attacked by some wild predator. What little of his face remained was largely unrecognizable.

“Is he still alive?” Saldana asked, nervously searching around the surrounding jungle for any sign of what had attacked Johnston, but in actuality was merely trying to avoid looking at the mangled body.

“No,” Der Boghossian replied. “And I doubt we could have saved him even if we had gotten here sooner. The wounds are too extensive.”

Der Boghossian moved closer to where Saldana stood looking into the jungle and noticed blood drops on some of the plant leaves and on the ground.

“Mister Hyland, look! A trail of blood!”

Der Boghossian pulled out his phaser again and moved to follow the trail Saldana had failed to see even though he had been staring right at it, until Hyland reached out to hold the stocky Tamurillian back with a hand on his shoulder.

“I don’t want anyone going off on their own,” Hyland said as he removed his Academy uniform jacket. “Let’s just get Johnston back to the camp and we’ll figure out our next move from there.”

“Oh, brilliant, Admiral Hyland,” Saldana said, finally turning back around as Hyland placed the jacket over Johnston’s mutilated face.

“Saldana, just shut up and help us carry him.”

As the three midshipmen lifted the body of their murdered comrade, and started back toward the shuttle, no one noticed the pair of bright yellow eyes that watched them from the underbrush.

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“What happened?” O’Laughlin asked as the three midshipmen carried Johnston’s body into the clearing and placed it, face still covered by Hyland’s jacket, under the shelter.

“There was nothing we could do for him,” Hyland remarked. “Is everyone else accounted for? Any progress on contacting the ship?”

“No luck,” the Gunny grumbled. “And yes, everyone is in camp. What do you think could have done that to the midshipman? Sliced him up that way?”

“It looks like maybe some wild animal, but...,” Hyland started to say until the rhythmic sound of drums was heard deep in the jungle.

“I thought the preliminary scans didn’t detect any signs of intelligence, Gunny?”

“That’s what I heard during the brief,” O’Laughlin replied, bringing Betty up into a ready-arms position.

The Academy midshipmen and O’Laughlin watched with building terror as the plants and trees closest to the edge of the clearing rustled with movement and Gunny quickly ordered the four Fleet Space Cadets back into the safety of the shuttlecraft with the two injured midshipmen.

“Look!” Faggio said a moment later, pointing the hand phaser she was holding toward where a pair of bushes parted. Eventually a humanoid shape just over a meter tall emerged from the jungle, as green as the surrounding leaves and almost impossible to see against the background behind it. The figure waved its arms in the air, then tossed a pair of rake-like bamboo tools to the ground at its feet while it shouted in an unrecognizable tongue.

“What is it saying?” O’Laughlin asked while keeping the being in the crosshairs of his rifle sight.

“Faggio,” Hyland hissed. “Do we have a UT on board?”

“What’s a UT?” Saldana asked, looking like he would either open fire on the Temecklian or try to hide inside the shuttlecraft with the teenage Fleet Cadets. A moment later, Faggio returned from inside the shuttle with a short, thin metal cylinder.

“This is,” Hyland answered, taking the object as he put his own phaser down and motioned for Faggio and Der Boghossian to slowly follow him. “A universal translator. Maybe it’ll help us to communicate with whatever that is?”

“You want to talk to it?” Saldana almost shouted. “It killed Johnston! It attacked Molloy! It’ll kill you too! Just shoot it!”

“And do you really think we’ll be able to shoot all of them before a good number of us are overrun, Midshipman?” O’Laughlin asked as he lowered Betty. Saldana was about to ask what the Gunny meant when he finally noticed that beings similar to the first one that had entered the clearing, perhaps as many as a hundred of them, surrounded the encampment.

“We’re done for,” Saldana remarked.

Hyland tucked the translator into his waistband, then slowly started walking toward the first being at the edge of the clearing with arms wide open. As he and the other two midshipmen moved closer, Hyland could finally see the being himself was not really as green as the jungle but covered head to toe in leaves and twigs, a near perfect camouflage. Hyland could also now see the two rake-like bamboo tools were sharpened to four knife-like points on each tool, and the tips were covered in human blood.

“I hope I’m not making a mistake,” Hyland whispered to his companions.

“Yeah, me too,” Faggio remarked back.

Halfway between the shuttle and the strange visitor, Hyland ordered Der Boghossian to wait where he was and keep Faggio and himself covered. He then continued forward slowly, Faggio a couple of steps behind him. Finally they were within five meters of the being, who looked at them with wide, golden eyes.

“We mean you no harm,” Hyland said, figuring it was as good a conversation starter as he could think of.

The being again spoke in his gibberish. It took some time for the universal translator to interpret the new syntax, but eventually it worked.

“You are the gods who are not gods who fell from the sky,” the small being said. Hyland looked at Faggio, still unsure of the translator was working correctly. “You fell from the sky and destroyed the alter of ancestors,” the being continued.

“We almost crashed,” Hyland said. “Our vessel... Our flying machine was out of control.”

“You disturbed the alter of ancestors. You must go now,” the being said, again waving its arms in the air.

Again holding his arms wide open, Hyland tried to explain, “Our vessel is disabled. We cannot leave.”

Hyland’s response appeared to anger the Temecklian, and by extension, his entire tribe. More of the native Temecklians appeared around the clearing and beat their own bamboo claws against wood and leather shields as tall as they were.

“You must go gods who are not gods!”

“Why do you call us gods and then say we aren’t gods?” Faggio asked with caution.

“We see you fall from the sky,” the being said. “We see you emerge from the house that fell from the sky. We decide you must be gods who visit our ancestors, but you bleed.” The Temecklian held out his hands, still covered in Midshipman Johnston’s blood as proof.

“What does he mean when he keeps talking about his ancestors?” Hyland asked.

“Oh my...,” Faggio exclaimed as a sudden thought hit her. She slowly turned around and pulled out her tricorder, scanning the clearing.

“I’m reading a stone structure at the center of the clearing, crushed under the shuttlecraft. And... Oh no! Now that I have adjusted the tricorder to register the native Temecklians, I’m detecting bodies... Dozens of bodies! We... We landed on a burial ground!”

“Oh my God!” Hyland whispered. “No wonder they’re angry at us. But what do we do?”

“You must go!” the native again insisted.

“How do we explain it’s just not that simple?” Hyland agonized.

Before Faggio could comment, the sound of a transporter beam filled the clearing. Half the native Temecklians fled back into the surrounding jungle at the noise. Those that remained raised their weapons and poised as if to attack. The beam began to coalesce near the shuttlecraft, fluctuated, faded, grew stronger, then faded again.

“Someone from the ship,” one midshipman remarked. “They’re having trouble materializing.”

“They’ll never make it!” exclaimed another. Meanwhile the remaining natives, including the spokesman near Hyland, all took a step closer.

Finally, the hum grew louder and six figures materialized. O’Laughlin almost laughed out loud as he recognized Major Sean McIntyre and the members of Alpha Squad, all dressed in full battle armor and carrying compression rifles like his own Betty. Immediately, the squad’s corporal started setting up transport enhancers around the entire group of midshipmen while McIntyre contacted the ship.

“McIntyre to *Dauntless*. The Hazard Team arrived safely. And the situation is about what we figured. Gunny just can’t keep himself out of trouble.”

O’Laughlin gave his commanding officer a sarcastic smile and asked, “I assume you have a plan?”

“Once we realized what the atmosphere’s ionization had probably done to the shuttlecraft, the Hazard Team volunteered to beam down and attempt a rescue,” the Major said, warily eyeing the Temecklians surrounding the clearing. “We’re beaming the kids out of here with the help of the pattern enhancers. And Private Jonn is carrying a modification that Lt Dar quickly slapped together to enable the shuttle to operate in the ionization we detected. What made the natives so restless?”

“We landed on their graveyard,” O’Laughlin answered, prompting McIntyre to quickly look down at his feet before the Gunny said in a slightly louder voice, “Alright, everyone, gather around the shelter. You too, Hyland.”

As the midshipmen and Space Cadets helped their two injured comrades out of the shuttle and all gathered inside the area surrounded by the pattern enhancers the Hazard Team had set up, Hyland stuck behind, moving toward where the squad had gathered.

“I’d rather finish out this mission aboard the shuttlecraft like I started, sir,” he said.

“You apparently misunderstood me, Cadet,” McIntyre said, aiming his rifle at a Temecklian who boldly stepped closer to the group. “I’m not giving you a choice. You **will** beam back!”

Hyland seemed on the verge of protest before thinking better of it, dejectedly answering, “Aye, sir,” as he joined his fellow Academy classmates.

“McIntyre to *Dauntless*. Away team is in position. Energize.” Seconds later, the entire away team of midshipmen and cadets, including the body of Midshipman Johnston, dematerialized, causing another dozen of the natives to flee back into the jungle in fright.

“You ready, Jonn?” the Major asked. Without another word, Pvt Jonn went to work, installing compensators on the shuttlecraft’s impulse engines and navigational console. When he was done, the squad gathered up the pattern enhancers and loaded them aboard the small vessel.

“After you, Gunny,” McIntyre said with a gesture toward the *September 11*. Quickly the entire Hazard Team was aboard. The Major took one last look toward the Temecklians, who had moved closer again, before shutting the hatch. Within moments, the shuttlecraft took off skyward, watched by the natives until it was no longer visible.

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Captain's log, stardate 58452.7:

We are thankful to have our away team of Academy cadets back aboard the Dauntless, with the regrettable death of Midshipman Johnston the only unfortunate casualty.

Based on the tricorder readings gathered during the mission, our anthropologists surmise the natives of Temecklia IV, having evolved in the jungles and ionized atmosphere of the planet, have developed a natural sensor blindness, which is why initial sensor scans could not detect them. The planet now falls under the protection of the Prime Directive.

The Dauntless is now en route to Earth, where our midshipmen will disembark to resume their classes at the Academy.

Koester, commanding Dauntless, out.

Captain Koester was strolling the decks, his nightly tour of the ship before turning in, when he came across William Hyland III sitting alone in one of the small lounges where a corridor simply ended. The cadet was silently staring out of the window at the stars streaking past and did not hear the captain approach.

"Mind if I join you?" Koester asked.

Hyland sprang to his feet the instant he realized who it was standing behind him, then invited the captain to sit down.

"Something on your mind?" Koester asked the upset looking midshipman.

Hyland returned to staring out the window as he said, "Just thinking about all my mistakes."

"What mistakes, specifically?"

Hyland turned to look at Koester, his eyes almost wide in shock.

"Captain, I was in charge of that away team, and a fellow cadet is dead!"

"Yes. I know. It is always tragic when someone under your command dies, especially someone so young with so much future potential, but what mistake did **you** make that killed him?" Koester moved closer to the Academy cadet, placing a hand reassuringly on Hyland's shoulder. "Will, you did everything you could with the knowledge you had on-hand. If anyone is responsible for Midshipman Johnston's death, it's me, for sending you all down there in a shuttle unprepared for the conditions you faced."

"But I landed that shuttle on that spot! That's what got Johnston killed," Hyland said.

"I read your report. I read Gunnery Sergeant O'Laughlin's report. You did everything by the book," the captain reiterated. "Yes, you landed the shuttle there, but if you hadn't, then what? Most likely the entire away team would have been killed when you crashed. I don't know too many pilots, experienced or otherwise, who could have brought that shuttle down in one piece. Sometimes, when you're in command, you face a situation where you aren't just given all the true facts straight away. And sometimes not knowing all those facts may get one of your people injured, or killed. It's regrettable but it's something you have to deal with in this job you're training for. If you don't have the guts for it, then quit!"

Hyland's shocked expression returned as he actually considered for a moment the prospect of leaving Starfleet before Koester continued.

"Personally, I happen to think you will make a damn fine officer. You just have to learn not to beat yourself up over every situation beyond your control."

Koester stood, offering his hand to Hyland as the cadet stood as well.

"I just think you should know, I'm submitting your name for a commendation for your actions during the away team. You deserve it. There are many people who wouldn't have kept the level head you did down there. Some of them will fortunately be weeded out long before they ever face a situation like you already have. Don't get me wrong, I'm not telling you to ignore your feelings when and if anyone under your command becomes a casualty. You're not a robot. You just have to keep one important fact in mind... You didn't just lose one member of your team today. You helped keep alive and rescue sixteen others. Plus now we know a lot more about Temecklia IV than we did yesterday. Be proud of that."

Hyland smiled slightly as he returned the captain's handshake, saying, "Thank you, sir."

Koester nodded before adding, "Now if you will excuse me, I have an evaluation report to the Academy Commandant and a letter of condolence to write before I turn in."

Hyland nodded good night, and as he watched the captain walk away around a corner before returning his gaze out the window, he realized he felt just a little better than before.

The End