

A knock sounded at the dorm room door. The cadet inside paused from her packing and looked toward the door as she said, "Come in." The manual handle turned and the door opened into the room, revealing Midshipman Second Class Barbara Goff.

"You finished packing yet, Gem?" Goff asked.

"Almost done," Midshipman Second Class Gem C. Koester replied, folding her cadet dress uniform and stuffing it inside her duffle bag. "I can't wait to get back to the *Dauntless*!"

"You're positive we're going to the *Dauntless*?" Goff asked. "Where did you hear that?"

"I haven't heard anything official, but where else would they be sending us? There are too many cadets in the class to send to the *Bellerophon*, *Triton*, or especially the *Besiege*. And I know my Dad's been pulling to have our class come aboard for the training cruise."

"How do you know they're not going to split us up among all the ships of the Fifth Fleet?"

"They kept the entire class together when the *Dauntless* was designated the training vessel several years ago. I don't see why they would do things any different this year," Koester replied.

"Cool! Flagship of the Fifth Fleet. This is going to be so great!"

"I know. I thought maybe they were going to cancel or postpone the training cruise after the flight demo team accident. I'm glad they didn't. I can't wait to see Cassie and Nookie again."

"Well you better hurry and finish packing. The transports leave orbit in one hour and we need to be checked-in thirty minutes prior."

Koester folded two civilian outfits, one a set of casual clothes and the other a more formal dress, and placed them inside her duffle before closing and clasping the opening. "Done. Anything else I need I can just replicate when we get there," she said, pulling the duffle onto her shoulder. "Let's go."

Both cadets rushed out of the dorm room toward Goff's nearby room to retrieve her own duffle bag, then headed out to the tram station near the Golden Gate Bridge, where nearly two dozen shuttlecraft awaited the Academy Class of 2390.

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Starfleet Academy

"A Change in Perception" By PJK

"*Starbase 719*, this is the transport ship *Dyashio* on final approach to spacedock."

"Copy you, transport ship *Dyashio*," replied the voice of Captain Cathryn E. Pearson, the station's First Officer. "You are cleared to enter spacedock through Spacedoor 2 and moor in slip 2-Bravo. Stand by to transfer to automatic docking. And welcome to *Starbase 719*."

Down in the transport's recreation room, several of the cadets looked out the large window as the space ship dropped out of warp. The mushroom-shaped structure of the immense Federation starbase could be seen in the distance as the *Dyashio* maneuvered to line up with the spacedoors the ship would use to enter the vast spacedock section. Behind the *Dyashio*, the third of three transport vessels also dropped out of warp and maneuvered in behind the preceding two.

"That's *Starbase 719*," Gem Koester explained to the other cadets who had gathered near the window with her. "The Fifth Fleet's main operating base."

"I thought we were going to be training aboard one of the Fifth Fleet's starships," one of the male cadets, a Benzite named Munton, commented before taking a deep breath from the breather unit mounted on the chest of his uniform. "Why are we docking at a starbase?"

“Probably because they have one or more faster transports or cargo ships already heading to the starship we’re going to be training aboard, so it’s easier to transfer us all over instead of having the three transports that brought us out to the Typhon Sector continue on for several days or weeks more,” explained Koester who, having lived most of her life aboard the *USS Dauntless*, was more familiar with mundane Starfleet procedure than most cadets.

Minutes later, the *Dyashio* passed through the spacedoors of the starbase and docked at one of the slips near the station hub. As the mooring tractors took hold, a voice announced through the intercom, “All Midshipmen assemble in the recreation room in five minutes for port briefing. I repeat; all Midshipmen report to the recreation room in five minutes for port brief. That is all.”

“It’s going to get crowded in here,” Goff remarked to Koester. And true enough, in the next few minutes the rec room was standing room only as nearly a hundred Academy cadets crowded inside. Then, precisely five minutes after the intercom announcement, Lieutenant Michael Kerr, one of the cadet class advisors that was accompanying the trainees, stepped up to the front of the room.

“Cadets,” Kerr said. “We’ll be paying a brief visit to *Starbase 719* before continuing on to our assigned training vessel. We expect to be here for no more than 72 hours. Because our transports to the Typhon Sector are required elsewhere, it is essential you vacate the quarters you have used while aboard and transfer all your personal belongings to temporary quarters located within the spacedock section of the starbase. Make sure you receive your cabin assignment as you leave the ship. While we are here you are free to go on liberty, as long as you follow the established rules: All the base bars and any facilities where gambling of any kind is allowed – legal or illicit – are considered off limits, as are the residential quarters; You are not to go anywhere aboard the base that is considered restricted or authorized personnel only, including all science labs, research facilities, operations facilities, and Starbase Ops, unless accompanied by an authorized member of the station crew; And finally, you WILL have your combadges on you and activated at ALL times, in case we are required to recall you earlier than planned. Above all, comport yourselves as official representatives of Starfleet Academy with all that implies. Otherwise, have a good time and enjoy your visit to *Starbase 719*. Liberty is now authorized.”

A cheer arose among the cadets, and the recreation room cleared out in less than a third of the time it took to fill. Koester went immediately to the small cabin she had shared with three of her female classmates, re-packing the few items she had removed from her duffle bag during the trip to the Typhon Sector and heading toward the transport’s main airlock. Along the way she again ran into Cadet Goff.

“I wonder if they organized the cabin assignments aboard the base or if it’s first come first served?” the other cadet asked.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Koester replied as the pair neared the airlock where a short line had already formed, each cadet presenting their Starfleet identification card and receiving a room assignment. As Koester and her companion finally reached the officers at the door, they presented their IDs for scanning.

“Koester and Goff. You two will be assigned cabin 203-Alpha-11975.” The officer handed each cadet a printout and a pass card, then said, “Enjoy your stay on the base.”

Smiling both young women rushed through the airlock gangway and into the hub of the starbase. Goff paused to find where their new temporary quarters were located on a directory displayed in the embarkation area, but Koester merely pulled her along, already familiar with the layout of the station. Less than half an hour later, the pair had found their room – a sparse cabin with only two bunks, one above the other, built into one wall, two chairs, a small table and a replicator, located in the outer hull of spacedock with a view of the blackness of deep space through the relatively small window – and were back in the hub making their way toward the central turbolift network.

“What do you want to do first?” Goff asked as they paused in the entrance of the transport hub. “I’d like to head for the recreation area.”

“I need to get a few things out of the way,” Koester replied, moving over to a nearby LCARS panel and touching it. “Computer, what is the local time?”

“Station time is currently 1507 hours,” the computer’s feminine voice replied.

“Mid-afternoon already. She’s probably not on duty then,” Koester remarked.

“Who?” Goff asked. “Who’s not on duty?”

Koester touched the panel again and activated an intercom circuit. “Cadet Gem Koester to Commander Michelle Petersen.”

A few seconds passed before a woman’s voice responded, “Gem? Are you aboard the base?”

“Yeah, I am. And I have one of my classmates with me,” the cadet replied. “Are you busy right now?”

“I’m in my office in Ops. Come on up and meet me here.”

“On our way.”

Koester deactivated the intercom and started toward one of the large main transport hub turbolifts.

“Where are we going?” Goff asked, looking slightly nervous.

“Up to Ops,” Koester replied as the pair stepped into the large turbolift before addressing the computer control. “Level 51.”

“Ops?! But you heard Lieutenant Kerr! We’re not supposed to go to Ops!”

“We’re not supposed to go to Ops unless accompanied by an authorized member of the crew. My step-mother is the station’s Chief of Security.”

“Your step-mom is one of the base officers?”

“Yup,” Koester replied.

Minutes later, one of the regular turbolifts opened into Ops lower level and the two cadets, both standing out in their almost entirely blue Academy cadet uniforms, stepped out.

“Can I help you?” the Marine sergeant standing next to the turbolift bank menacingly asked the two young women.

“It’s okay, Sergeant,” Captain Pearson said as she walked over from the master systems display in the center of the room and greeted Cadet Koester. “Welcome back, Gem.”

“Thanks, Captain Pearson,” Koester said before introducing her classmate. “Michelle said she’s up in her office?”

“She’s waiting for you and your friend. Go right on up.”

The two cadets boarded the nearby lift platform and rode it up to the upper level. Goff was wide-eyed as she looked over the rail at the operations center below – officers sitting at the consoles or moving between stations, keeping the station running smoothly – then rushed to join Koester as the other cadet pressed the door chime next to the security chief’s office door. “Come,” a voice inside called out.

The two cadets entered the small office, somewhat larger than the temporary quarters they had been assigned, which contained a desk, a visitor chair, a small blue couch along the left wall, a plant in one corner, and the station’s chief of security sitting in a slightly larger second chair behind her desk. Commander Peterson stood up to greet her two visitors, then returned to her chair to finish her work.

“I just need to complete this monthly security review report and route it to Captain Pearson, Colonel McIntrye, and Admiral Raijeh for review,” Petersen said.

“Mack’s not aboard the *Dauntless* anymore?” Koester asked, surprised.

“No. Admiral Raijeh requested him to take over the station’s Marine contingent after Major Novikov was killed during the Kairn occupation last year. Your father was sorry to lose him.”

“I almost thought of him as a part of the *Dauntless* herself. He and the Gunny were there since the day she was launched,” Koester explained to her classmate.

“I’m almost done here. Then I’ll treat you two to dinner in the Lodge.”

“Great. I could use some food that hasn’t been replicated by a sub-standard piece of...” Goff loudly cleared her throat, interrupting Koester’s sentence. “...Equipment,” she finally finished. “Speaking of Dad, have you heard anything from him lately?”

“Not recently. Last I heard the *Dauntless* was exploring in Sector 50101. I’m sure he’ll be calling soon. He usually doesn’t go more than a week or two without a communiqué,” Petersen replied. “You didn’t speak with him before you left Earth?”

“Not since before our class found out we were coming out here for our training cruise,” Koester replied. “I was hoping either you or he could confirm we’re going aboard the *Dauntless*.”

“I’m not privy to that kind of information, but if Starfleet sent your entire class all the way out here to the AOR, I don’t see why they wouldn’t be using the fleet flagship as the training vessel.”

“That’s what I thought too,” Koester said just as Petersen saved her file and touched the ‘send’ command.

“Finished,” the security chief remarked. “Come on, let’s go hit the Lodge.”

The two cadets followed Petersen out the door and down the stairs in front of the first officer’s wooden office doors, skirting around the security and tactical consoles to the turbolift bank.

“I’m taking the cadets to an early dinner, Cathryn. Consider me off-duty unless an emergency occurs.”

“If the Kairn or Tholians attack, we’ll hold them off until you finish your meal, Michelle,” Pearson replied with a grin, then addressed Cadet Koester and her classmate. “Enjoy your dinner. And your stay on the base.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Koester replied just before the turbolift doors snapped shut.

Minutes later the three women entered the station recreation area, passing several cafés and shops that now seemed filled with other Academy cadets, heading down one of the side corridors toward the Bastogne Lodge. As they neared the main entrance, Goff paused – almost as if captured in a tractor beam.

“What’s wrong?” Commander Petersen asked.

“We can’t go in there,” Goff remarked as she read the sign hanging above the door.

“Why not?”

“It’s off limits to us cadets.”

“You can’t have dinner in the Lodge because it’s off limits?” Petersen asked Koester, slightly confused.

“Our class advisor told us all station bars were off limits,” Koester explained, looking back at Goff with an expression that bordered between anxiety at breaking a specific rule and defiance from having spent time in the Lodge on several occasions prior to entering the Academy.

“Who is your class advisor?” Petersen asked.

“Lieutenant Kerr,” Koester replied.

“Okay, first of all, the Lodge isn’t just a bar. Second, I outrank Lieutenant Kerr and I’m authorizing you to have dinner with me in there, so if Lieutenant Kerr has a problem with that he can come see me about it before you all depart the station.”

Satisfied, Cadet Koester smiled and entered the Lodge, followed by Petersen. Cadet Goff paused for a few seconds more, finally making up her mind and following the other two women inside. She found Koester standing and looking at a word literally scratched into the metal of one wall just inside the door.

“‘Nuts!’? What does that mean?” she asked Koester.

“I’m not sure. It wasn’t here the last time I visited during my freshman year. But like most of the décor in here, it probably has something to do with a war they fought on Earth about four hundred years ago.”

* * * *

Three days later, the Academy cadets were loaded into the cramped confines of two transport vessels – both smaller than the three ships that had carried the class out to *Starbase 719* – and the converted cargo bay of the cargo carrier *Erstwhile*. Cadet Koester was among the almost fifty cadets assigned to the *Erstwhile* for the week-long final leg of their journey to their training vessel.

With no recreation facility to speak of and little privacy as bunks had merely been set up in rows in the cargo bay, most of the cadets riding aboard the *Erstwhile* spent their time either sleeping, reading, catching up on some class work they were behind on, or – for the more ambitious among them – learning some of how the privately-owned cargo ship operated and was maintained. Cadets Koester and Goff were among the latter group.

The *Erstwhile*’s engineer – who seemed quite happy to have an audience – was attempting to explain to four of the cadets in the cramped constraints of the engineering space how the ship had been modified; warp drive and alien weapons systems having been installed during the Dominion War a decade earlier.

“So what did you do after we had dinner in the Lodge?” Goff asked Koester as the *Erstwhile* engineer traced plasma conduits to show how the power transfer system functioned.

“First I had to spend some unpleasant time with Lieutenant Kerr,” Koester explained. “Cadet Russo apparently saw the two of us ‘sneaking into one of the station bars,’ as he described it, and I had to do some explaining to keep us from being expelled from the Academy. I finally managed to talk him into allowing me to contact my step-mother so she could tell him she invited us in there. But I think Lieutenant Kerr is holding a bit of a grudge now, so try and avoid him during the training cruise as much as you can.”

“Thanks for the advice,” Goff said. “I guess that would explain why I was picked to clean the head after dinner the last few days.”

“After speaking with Kerr, I visited a few of the starbase crew I know,” Koester continued to explain. “I made a point of getting together with Colonel McIntyre. He’s the one that taught me to be a pilot you know. He took me for a tour of the outside of the base aboard one of the Marine Peregrines, then let me fly it for a while. Fastest ship I’ve piloted so far! What about you? Did you do anything interesting?”

“Nothing as exciting as flying a Marine fighter craft,” Goff replied. “Mostly just hung around the recreation area. Did some window shopping. Spent a few hours in the holosuites. Truthfully, I was looking forward to leaving after the second day there.”

Both cadets briefly returned their attention on the engineer, who was still babbling on about his systems like some proud tour guide. “...And as you can imagine, it took a great deal of re-design to fit a class-9 warp drive into the existing spaceframe of the *Erstwhile*. That was the main reason Captain Okona hired me to first oversee the installation of the drive units, then continue on as the ship’s engineer in case the usually incompatible systems needed nurse-maiding...”

Goff sighed before asking, “How much longer before we reach the training vessel? I don’t think I can take much more of being cooped up in this tiny flying roach-trap.”

“I think we’re rendezvousing with the *Dauntless* tomorrow morning,” Koester replied. “I heard the helmsman verifying the interception course when I was touring the bridge earlier.”

“They let you on the bridge?!?” Goff asked, sounding jealous.

“Mister Westwell does if you ask nice enough, promise to only spend a few minutes there, and not bother the captain if he’s on the bridge.”

“Was he?”

“Captain Okona? Yeah. He was sitting in the command chair with one leg over the arm of the chair looking as bored as we feel. I got the feeling he doesn’t enjoy being a taxi service.”

“What was he like?”

“He was dressed like a pirate.”

“What?”

“Have you ever seen pictures of stereotypical 18th century pirates, with the poofy shirts and tall boots and all that?” Koester asked.

“Yeah, I think so.”

“He was dressed like that. All he was missing was the eye patch. I don’t know what my ‘sister’ saw in him.”

“What do you mean?” Goff asked. “I thought you were an only child? What do you mean, sister?”

“It’s complicated. Remind me to tell you about my half-Romulan brother some afternoon,” Koester said. “And don’t you remember meeting Cassie when she was still at the Academy during our first year. She wrote me a few letters last year during the Kairn War and told me she was dating Captain Okona for a while. I never could understand her taste in men.”

As Goff looked at Koester, unsure what to think about what she had just been told, the *Erstwhile*’s engineer loudly said, “Okay, now who wants to crawl out into the port nacelle with me to see the modifications I had to make to get the drive units to function correctly once they were installed. I can only take one or two of you, so don’t fight.”

“I think I’m going to head back to my bunk and get some sleep. Tomorrow can’t come soon enough,” Koester remarked.

“I’m with you,” Goff agreed as both girls left the engineering space.

* * * *

*Cadet's log, stardate 66044.7; Midshipman Second Class Gem C. Koester recording:
Today's the day the *Erstwhile* and the other two transport ships rendezvous with the
Dauntless. I can't wait. Maybe by tonight I'll be sleeping in my old bed again?*

All the cadets could feel the *Erstwhile* drop out of warp. Unlike the transport that had brought them to the starbase, the cargo bay had no windows looking out into space, so it was hard to tell how close they were to disembarking.

Nearly half an hour after dropping out of warp, Lieutenant Kerr entered the cargo bay, followed closely by all the cadets who had been elsewhere on the vessel. He waited until everyone was inside and quieted down before addressing the cadets.

"In about five minutes we will start separating you into groups of four and sending you to the *Erstwhile*'s transporter room to be beamed aboard the training vessel. As you can imagine, with a small ship like this, transporting all forty six of you plus your personal belongings is going to take some time. Captain Okona has informed me it will probably take one to two minutes between energization cycles, so be patient. You're all going to get there. When I call your name, grab your duffle bag and proceed to the transporter room. First up: Barry, Cox, Peters, T'Siorbas."

Koester and Goff remained near their side-by-side bunks, waiting for their names to be called. Koester was a bit surprised that the names were not being called in alphabetical order. In between each four name group, Lieutenant Kerr moved around the cargo bay, making sure personal items were not accidentally being left behind and that the bay was as clean – if not cleaner – as when the cadets arrived aboard the ship. Finally, his path brought him close to Koester and Goff.

"You may as well sit down and get comfortable," he said to the pair with a cruel smile. "You're going to be here a while still."

"Sir?" Goff asked.

"I made sure the two of you will be the last to beam over to the training ship. Sure, it will probably mean you'll have last choice of berthing assignment, but that way you can't sneak off to the bar behind my back again."

Koester and her classmate exchanged looks, and it seemed Goff was about to ask a question or make a comment when a subtle shake of Koester's head told her not to bother.

"I'll have to make sure the ship's first officer is aware of your reputations when we arrive aboard. He might have some extra work that needs doing over the next few weeks." Kerr then smiled his unpleasant smile again and walked away, calling off the next four names on the list. "Walker, Brooks, Muratore, Joyce... Transporter room!"

"I thought you said your step-mom took care of everything?" Goff complained.

"Maybe Lieutenant Kerr didn't like having someone go over his head?" Koester remarked. "Either way, don't worry too much. I know Commander Arbelo, the *Dauntless*' first officer, really well. He won't hold what happened aboard the station against us."

"I hope you're right this time."

It was nearly fifteen minutes later and Koester and Goff were the only two remaining cadets in the cargo bay. As the bay had emptied out, Kerr had ordered the pair to start moving the empty bunks against the bulkhead to clear out as much space in the bay as possible for the *Erstwhile*'s return trip to base. Finally, after the last bunk had been dragged across the deck, Kerr said, "Koester! Goff! Why aren't you in the transporter room? Do you want to remain here?"

"No sir!" both cadets replied, quickly grabbing their gear and rushing toward the *Erstwhile*'s transporter room. Moments later they were on the transport pad, duffle bags in hand, with Lieutenant Kerr standing between them.

“Give our thanks and appreciation to Captain Okona,” Kerr told First Mate Westwell, the man operating the control console. “Energize.”

Koester felt the annular confinement field grab hold of her as the older transporter started disassembling her molecular structure. The scenery of the *Erstwhile*’s small transporter room faded behind a golden sparkle, only to be replaced a moment later by a silver-blue sparkle that resolved into the transporter room of a Federation starship.

The young cadet was about to start moving off the transport platform when she realized something was wrong. Instead of the grey walls she remembered, the walls were painted a dark sea-green, and instead of the transparent aluminum encased control booth, the transporter operator stood behind a free-standing control console of an older design.

“Wait a second,” Koester said, mainly to herself. “This doesn’t look like the *Dauntless*. At least, not how I remember it being.”

The chief petty officer behind the control console stepped around and greeted the newest arrivals. “Welcome aboard the starship *Sarek*,” he said. “Cadets, please report to the 9/10-Forward lounge for your cabin assignment. Lieutenant Kerr, our first officer, Commander A-ZuRQuIL would like to see you as soon as possible in the main briefing lounge on deck 1.”

A stunned look covered Koester’s face, one that prompted a renewed smile on Kerr’s lips before he acknowledged the transporter chief and headed out into the corridor.

“You told me we were going to the *Dauntless*!” Goff said to Koester accusingly.

“I thought we were!” Koester exclaimed back. “Everyone I spoke to said we were going to the *Dauntless*! At least... they all thought we would probably be going to the *Dauntless*.” She then turned to the transporter chief. “Excuse me, Chief, but I have a question. Did they send the cadets on the other transports to other starships in the Fifth Fleet?”

“As far as I’m aware, the entire Class of ’90 was sent here to the *Sarek*, Cadet,” the chief replied. “Easier to make sure everyone gets the same training experiences if everyone is in the same place. In fact, I need you to clear the room, since I need to start beaming the cadets from the *Cassandra* aboard.”

Both cadets rushed out of the transporter room. They could hear the transporter start to hum to life almost as soon as the door closed behind them.

“What now?” Goff asked.

“We follow the signs,” Koester replied, pointing at the indication leading toward the 9/10-Forward lounge displayed on the corridor LCARS panel directly across from the transporter room entrance. “Then we figure out what’s going on once we get our cabin assignment.”

* * * *

All the cadets were berthed four to a cabin, each cabin containing two sets of bunk beds and little else. After receiving their room assignment and dropping off their personal belongings, Koester and Goff made their way to the *Sarek*’s main shuttlebay, where a brief orientation would occur.

Kerr and his two fellow class advisors had the cadets line up in ranks of twenty across, shortest to tallest, which placed Cadet Koester – at just under 150 centimeters – in the very front rank. The mixture was colorful, as nearly half the cadets wore the deep red cadet uniforms of the Academy command college while the rest was almost evenly distributed between the mustard gold of the operations and support services and – to a slightly lesser extent – the royal blue of sciences and pre-med.

After several minutes of standing at parade rest, the doors to one side of the shuttlebay opened and two officers – one a nearly 2.2 meter tall Capellan warrior wearing a skirt-like skant uniform variant with a sash of blue feathers across his chest, the other an Andorian man – walked in.

“Cadet corps!” Kerr said loudly. “Atten-SHUN!”

The entire class of cadets snapped to attention in unison. The Capellan and Andorian officers moved near the center of the front rank and turned to face the cadets.

“At ease,” the Capellan man ordered, prompting the cadets to return to parade rest. He then continued, “My name is Commander A-ZuRQuIL. I am the first officer of the *USS Sarek* as well as her security chief, and for the next five months I will be your Executive Officer. To my left is Lieutenant T’Reth, our ship’s chief of operations. Together, we will brief you on what you can expect in the next five months, what we will expect of you, and how your class and my crew will be working closely together.”

For the next half hour, A-ZuRQuIL explained the history of the *USS Sarek*, where – by deck and section – each important location or vital piece of equipment was located, and the process by which each cadet would be introduced to the watch they would eventually be standing, how they would be trained to stand such a watch under instruction, and how by half-way through the scheduled training cruise they would be expected to actually be manning their respective watches as if regular members of the crew, under the supervision of the normal assigned watch-stander.

“Are there any questions?” he finally asked.

One of the young cadets in the front rank snapped to attention before saying, “Sir?”

A-ZuRQuIL walked over to stand directly in front of the cadet in question, looking down at her as he asked, “And you are?”

“Midshipmen Second Class Gem C. Koester, Sciences College, sir.”

“Koester? Any relation to Fleet Captain Peter Koester?” A-ZuRQuIL asked.

“He’s my father, sir.”

A-ZuRQuIL exchanged a silent look with Lieutenant T’Reth before saying, “Welcome aboard the *Sarek*, Cadet. What’s your question?”

“Will there be opportunities for the members of the Cadet Corps to participate in away missions or cross-divisional training while aboard, sir?”

“You’re a real go-getter, Cadet. Much like your father from my understanding,” A-ZuRQuIL remarked, a subtle smile creasing his lips. “To answer your question, there may be opportunities for the cadets to cross-train or participate in away missions, but it is entirely dependant on non-interference in normal ship’s operations. We’ll try and fit in extra duties for those cadets that are interested in participating where and when we can, but I make no promises. Thank you for the question, Cadet. Any other questions?”

As A-ZuRQuIL walked away and Cadet Koester resumed her parade rest stance, she noticed out of the corner of her eye Lieutenant Kerr appear at the end of the rank, looking at her sternly. She did not know whether to inwardly groan or smile.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 66096.6:

The Sarek has entered the 1757 Aurigae system, a binary star system with a g-type yellow star with a single class-H planet orbiting an M-type red giant. We are here to place a modified science probe in the L-1 Lagrange point between the two stars and monitor them over the next several months. I think it will be an excellent learning opportunity for our visiting Starfleet Academy cadets, particularly those attached to the Sciences Division, who will be working closely with our two Romulan mission specialists in charge of this experiment. Hopefully this mission will be less dangerous than our recent encounter with the Kolban and the Reapers.

Parker, out.

On the bridge of the *USS Sarek*, Cadets Gem Koester and Barbara Goff sat at the starboard side science consoles above the ramp that connected the upper and lower bridge levels. Standing behind the pair were Karondar and Tehanu, a pair of Romulan fraternal twins that had defected to the Federation while still in their teens, working

closely with the *Sarek*'s current chief science officer – Lt Commander Jo Ann Tredworth – since their defection. The two civilian scientists, officially listed as mission specialists in the starship's crew manifest, were responsible for the creation of the science probe that would monitor the binary stars for the next several months, trying to determine if, like the binary system in the Kavis Alpha sector, the 1757 Aurigae pair also exhibited periodic energy bursts on a predictable schedule.

"Mister Karondar, what is the primary power source of the probe?" Goff asked as she continued to load the programming into the device by way of the Sciences II console. "I briefly looked over the construction and modification diagrams for your stellar probe, but I did not see any conventional matter/anti-matter converter or fusion reactor."

"Quite perceptive of you, Cadet," Karondar replied, sounding very Vulcan in his formality and tone, he and his sister having lived and trained on Vulcan following their defection from the Romulan Star Empire almost twenty years earlier. "Tehanu and I developed a power source for the probe based on typical Romulan design."

"Romulan design?" Koester asked. "You mean you're using an artificial quantum singularity?"

"That is correct," the female Romulan Tehanu replied. "We had the opportunity to study the engineering systems aboard the *UFNS Vedrex* the last time both ships were at *Starbase 719* together. Based on our observations, we designed a smaller yet equally as powerful power source for our stellar probe."

"What's an artificial quantum singularity?" Goff asked her classmate sitting at the next console.

"Don't you remember Professor O'Brien's Quantum Engineering class we took last semester?" Koester asked.

"Truthfully, a lot of Professor O'Brien's theorems went right over my head. I barely passed that class," Goff admitted.

"An artificial quantum singularity," explained Karondar, "is in essence a man-made miniature black hole. Its effects on space/time create a steady power supply that can be harnessed and used to power space vessels. In fact, it is one of the few generating sources that can supply enough power to keep a cloaking field operating for an indefinite period of time, which is why Romulan warbirds have employed them since the end of the 23rd century."

"They are often considered as safe and reliable as matter/anti-matter reactors," added Tehanu. "Their one drawback is, once activated, a quantum singularity cannot be shut down. According to our research, several of the earliest warbirds to employ a singularity power source were lost when containment failed and their own power source literally consumed the entire vessel."

"Sounds like a fun way to die," Goff said sarcastically.

"One of the reasons we will not be activating the power source aboard the stellar probe until just prior to launch," Karondar stated.

Koester turned her seat around to look at the Romulan man standing behind her.

"If it's so potentially dangerous, why not wait until the probe is in place to activate the power source?" she asked.

"Because, in order to survive the gravimetric stresses en route to and once in place in the L-1 Lagrange point, the probe requires shields capable of withstanding heat, radiation, and stress, and those shields will demand a great deal of power. Power that only the singularity can provide."

"Then why not immediately after launch?" Goff asked.

"Certain tests must be conducted to ascertain shield and power level statuses," Tehanu answered. "If we launched the probe and then determined the power source was not providing all the power required, we would lose the probe and this opportunity to study the Aurigae binary system. The singularity must be activated before the probe leaves the ship."

As Tehanu was speaking, a thin Betazoid woman with strawberry blonde hair emerged from the doors leading to the briefing lounge aft of the bridge and approached the manned sciences consoles.

"Has the probe received its final programming, Karondar?" Lt Commander Jo Ann Tredworth, the starship's chief science officer asked.

"We are completing the final program uploads presently, Commander," Karondar stated. "Have you met Cadets Koester and Goff yet? They are aboard for their third-year training cruise."

“Yes, we met briefly when the class first came aboard,” Tredworth said, acknowledging the cadets. “Captain Parker would like us to have the probe ready for launch in the next six hours. Infrared telescopes have detected a series of sunspots developing on the face of Aurigae Alpha – the red giant – and she thinks this might be early indications that an eruption of solar flares is imminent. If we can get the probe into position prior to the flares erupting and still get the ship to minimum safe distance, we might gather more data than originally planned to help determine how these stars interact and how a class-H planet managed to form in this system and not be torn to pieces thousands or even millions of years ago.”

“We have several last minute systems checks to perform on the probe itself,” Karondar said as he started moving past Tredworth and toward the turbolift across the other side of the bridge. “Tehanu, continue uploading the programming. I will perform the on-site systems checks in the launch bay.”

“Understood,” Tehanu acknowledged as her brother entered the turbolift and she turned back to face the sciences consoles. “Cadets, upload programs Tehanu 6-alpha, 6-beta, 7-alpha, and Karondar 9-delta. Then run a level one diagnostic on the memory core and confirm all the necessary programs have been loaded and remain uncorrupted.”

The two Academy cadets acknowledged the order, then uploaded the final four programs into the stellar probe and ran the diagnostic, which took less than a minute to run.

“All systems indicate nominal, Miss Tehanu,” Koester reported.

“Very well. Thank you, Cadet,” Tehanu said before looking at Tredworth. “Commander, the programming is loaded and confirmed. All that remains is the final systems checks Karondar is performing presently and the activation of the probe’s on-board power supply.”

“Great. I’ll inform Captain Parker. I hope to have the power source activated within the hour and the probe launched by 1100 hours.”

“I believe we can meet those goals,” Tehanu confirmed.

* * * *

Down in the launch bay, Karondar was running a specially modified tricorder over the casing of the probe. Built from a modified class-4 solar probe, the device closely resembled a torpedo except in color – the casing a bright silver – and the writing on the casing in Standard, Vulcan, and Romulan scripts designating certain components and access covers on the probe. Karondar smiled slightly, something he rarely if ever did thanks in large part to the Vulcan training he and his sister received after their defection, and folded the tricorder. He then tapped the combadge attached to the chest of his clothing.

“Karondar to Tehanu.”

“Go ahead, Brother.”

“All probe systems confirmed nominal. All that awaits is the activation of the power source and the final system check.”

“Very well. I will inform Commander Tredworth and Captain Parker of our progress. Tehanu, out.”

* * * *

Back on the bridge of the *Sarek*, Captain Jo Ann Parker emerged from her ready room, followed closely by Commander Tredworth. As Tredworth walked up the ramp to join her mission specialist and the two cadets, Parker sat down in the center seat beneath the horseshoe-shaped tactical console.

“Captain, Commander, Karondar reports he has completed the system checks on the stellar probe. All we need do is activate the on-board power generator and perform the final system check and we will be ready for launch,” Tehanu reported.

“Very good,” Parker said. “Helm, take us to within one kilometer of the L-1 Lagrange point.” She then addressed the security chief and first officer, who was standing almost directly behind her. “Quil, raise shields.”

“Shields raised,” A-ZuRQuIL reported.

“Course to the L-1 point computed and laid in,” Lt Commander Christopher Huff stated. “Proceeding at half-impulse.”

The *Sarek* started moving toward a point in between the two stars, which were a little over a billion kilometers apart. The Lagrange point where Tredworth wanted to place the stellar probe was actually closer to the smaller G-type yellow star than to the red giant due to the red star’s larger mass.

“Hull temperature is increasing slightly,” reported Lieutenant T’Reth from the ops console. “Nothing to be concerned about.”

“Steady as she goes,” Parker ordered.

A little more than an hour later, Huff announced, “Approaching one kilometer from L-1 Lagrange point.”

“Very well,” Parker said. “All stop.”

“Answering all stop,” the helmsman acknowledged.

Parker then looked over at Tredworth, who along with Tehanu was now supervising the two cadets sitting at the consoles. “Commander, you may activate your probe and load it into the launch tube.”

“Aye, Captain,” Tredworth replied. She then activated her combadge and said, “Bridge to launch bay.”

“Launch bay. Karondar,” came the immediate reply.

“Karondar, stand by and monitor the stellar probe. We are about to activate the on-board power generator,” Tredworth advised.

“Understood,” Karondar replied. “I will comply.”

Tredworth then looked at Tehanu and said, “You may activate the probe’s quantum singularity core.”

“Very well, Commander,” Tehanu said. The Romulan woman then said to Cadet Koester, “I need your station, Cadet.”

Koester got up from the seat, jumping down to the ramp below where she could still see what was happening as Tehanu replaced her at Sciences I. The mission specialist entered a series of commands into the console, then – with finger poised above the enter button – announced, “System is ready and standing by. We are prepared to activate the artificial quantum singularity aboard the stellar probe.”

Tredworth glanced at Captain Parker, who nodded silently back. The science officer then turned back to Tehanu and said, “You may activate the singularity.”

Tehanu’s hand moved, pressing the enter button. In the launch bay, Karondar’s tricorder immediately registered the creation of a new black hole in the galaxy only atoms in diameter. Seconds later, the probe’s systems came to life. Again, Karondar briefly smiled.

“Quantum singularity has been active...,” Tehanu started to report when the entire *Sarek* shuddered.

“What was that?” Goff asked from the seat next to Tehanu.

“I’m not...,” Tehanu started to say when the starship started vibrating, then shaking violently.

“What’s happening?” Parker demanded to know.

“I’m not sure,” Tredworth replied, grasping onto a console to keep from being flung to the lower deck below. “Investigating.”

“Captain!” T’Reth called out. “Extensive solar flares have broken out across the surface of Aurigae Alpha!”

“That shouldn’t be affecting us,” the captain stated as she gripped the arms of the command chair for dear life. “At least not until the ionized particles reach our location, and that should take at least thirty to forty minutes!”

“Captain, I’m detecting a rift forming in subspace in the vicinity of the *Sarek*,” A-ZuRQuIL announced.

“Confirmed,” Tredworth said, glancing over her shoulder at the captain while leaning into and holding on tightly to the Sciences I console. “A subspace rift has opened between us and the L-1 point.”

“Can we maneuver away from it?” Parker asked both her science officer and her helmsman.

“The rift is composed of some form of superstring material,” Tehanu explained. “The *Sarek* is caught in its matrix. We cannot maneuver.”

As the starship continued to shake violently, Captain Parker looked over at Tredworth, who had replaced Goff in the seat at Sciences II. Both young cadets had descended from the ramp, bracing themselves against the bottom of the horseshoe in hopes the trembling would soon stop.

“What happens if we cannot break away from this rift?” the captain asked.

Tehanu turned her seat around to face the captain and, near-expressionlessly, stated, “It is likely, due to the gravimetric pull of the binary stars and our proximity to both, the *Sarek* will literally be torn in two.”

* * * *

Red lights flashed on every deck and the alert klaxon sounded throughout the ship. Hundreds of people; crew members, civilians, and Academy cadets, rushed to either man alert stations or try and reach a relatively safe location. It was as people rushed back and forth that the distortions were first noticed.

“Receiving a new report, deck 25, section 10,” stated T’Reth. “As crazy as it sounds, the corridor at that location has extended at least twenty meters and the diameter decreased by half.”

“Receiving similar reports from decks 9, 12, 27, 28, and 32, Captain,” A-ZuRQuIL added. “It almost sounds like the ship is being stretched and folded like taffy.”

“Side effect of the rift we’re caught in,” Tredworth announced.

“Are we in danger of losing structural integrity?” Parker wanted to know.

“I don’t believe so. The effect is similar to the optical illusion caused by a curved fun-house mirror,” the science officer replied. “It looks strange, but from what I can tell the ship is completely intact. It may eventually weaken our structural frame members if it continues for an extended period of time. However, that is not our most pressing problem.”

“What is?” Parker asked uncomfortably as she watched the deck of the bridge begin to undulate against the bottom of the viewscreen like waves against a shore.

“The rift and the gravimetric flux it is generating has apparently caused stellar flares to erupt from both Aurigae Alpha and Aurigae Beta,” Tehanu reported. “Both flares contain approximately 6×10^{25} joules of energy – nearly one-sixth each star’s total output per second – and will converge on our location in less than thirty minutes.”

“And what will happen when the flares converge on us?” Parker asked.

“With the distortions we’re experiencing, it will be like two opposing waves striking an unprotected sand castle at the same time,” the Romulan woman replied. “The *Sarek* and everyone aboard will be obliterated.”

“Captain, I’m receiving reports of sections in both the primary hull and engineering hull losing power,” T’Reth reported.

“What’s causing it?” the captain asked.

“Apparently the subspace distortions are causing power transfer conduits to become so thin, the eletro-plasma is being bottlenecked. Commander Gomez has already had to reduce the warp core output by fifty percent or risk blowing out conduits in populated areas of the ship. The power losses are also affecting our shield grid, life support, and gravity systems.”

“Captain, we need more power to maintain our shields,” warned A-ZuRQuIL. “Without them, the radiation and heat from our proximity to the two stars will cook us all for sure.”

“Can we re-route the power through un-congested conduits?” Parker asked, frustrated that her concentration was being divided by more than one crisis.

“Negative,” T’Reth replied. “Commander Gomez reports her crews have started laying flexible temporary power conduits through some corridors to restore power to sections that have been cut off, but many of those corridors are now getting too small to allow for full grown adults to make it through with the equipment they require.”

Parker looked around the bridge, feeling the need to lash out at something to dispel her sense of helplessness, when her eyes settled on the two girls sitting on the still surging deck holding on to the frame of the horseshoe.

“The cadets,” she said.

“Excuse me, Captain?” A-ZuRQuIL asked, confused.

“The cadets! Have any cadet, especially those majoring in engineering, under the height of 175 centimeters report to Commander Gomez and assist in routing the necessary temporary power conduits.”

Cadet Koester had looked over at the captain when she had heard her speak. She now noticed the captain's eyes staring at her. Koester turned to her significantly taller classmate and said, "I'm going to go and see if I can help with the conduits." She then carefully stood up and made her way toward the forward turbolift, disappearing inside.

"Okay, now that we have one crisis solved, how do we get out of the way of the next one?" the captain asked.

"I'm not sure," Tredworth replied. "We're still caught firmly in the rift by the subspace superstring material. I can't begin to guess how we can seal the rift because I'm not even sure what caused the rift in the first place."

"Isn't it obvious?"

No one seemed quite sure where the question had originated at first. Finally Tredworth turned her chair, noticing the young Cadet Goff standing back on the ramp beneath her again.

"Isn't what obvious?" the science officer asked.

"That this rift we're caught in was created by the stellar probe," Goff answered.

"How is that possible? We haven't even launched the probe yet. And no other probes in the past have ever caused rifts like this. It has to have something to do with the stellar activity we're witnessing, and we just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time," Tredworth explained.

"We're in the wrong place, that's for sure," Goff said as she grabbed onto the section of deck above the ramp where the science consoles were located as the floor beneath her feet buckled briefly again. "Too close to the zone of gravity equilibrium denoted by the Lagrange point. But we caused this rift, not the stars themselves."

"And how did we do that, Cadet?" Tehanu asked.

"Didn't you tell me the power source for the probe was an artificially created black hole?"

"In essence, yes," Tehanu replied. "But the Romulans have been employing such cores for decades – perhaps even longer – with no similar effects on the fabric of space."

"How often do Romulan warbirds approach the Lagrange points between binary stars? Particularly stars as relatively close as this pair?"

Tehanu and Tredworth exchanged looks, realizing they did not know the answer to the cadet's question.

"Can we shut down the probe's core, just to test the cadet's theory?" Captain Parker asked.

"Negative, Captain," Tehanu stated. "As mentioned earlier, once a quantum singularity is activated, there is no possible way to shut it down. It will eventually collapse on its own, but it will take years before that happens. It is one of the reasons Romulans continue to employ older vessels that the Federation or Klingons would have decommissioned decades earlier. There is no completely safe method for disposing of such a power core other than sending it into a spacial anomaly such as a pulsar or quasar or very stable main sequence star."

"Well, then can we just eject the probe? Fling it into one of the stars so it will be destroyed?"

"Considering the distortions the *Sarek* has been experiencing, we may not be able to load the probe into a launch tube and eject it," Tehanu said, getting out of the chair and jumping down to the deck below, landing hard as the deck rippled unpredictably. "Cadet Goff, please accompany me. Your smaller stature may prove useful in helping to ejecting the probe."

Cadet Goff fell into step behind Tehanu, and both entered the forward turbolift. A moment later the frustrated sounding voice of Lt Commander Sonia Gomez, the *Sarek*'s chief engineer, sounded from the intercom.

"Bridge, this is engineering."

"Go ahead, Commander," the captain replied.

"Captain, we're starting to see some structural defects in the hull frame members being caused by these distortions. I have several dozen cadets trying to shore up the framework – literally trying to pull the ship back together – but I don't know how much more she can take. The *Sarek*'s not exactly a young girl anymore."

"Understood, Commander. We're working on solving the cause of the rift and the accompanying distortions. Just hold her together a while longer."

"I'll do my best," Gomez replied before closing the circuit.

* * * *

Cadet Gem Koester had helped route and connect two temporary conduits, crawling through openings that seemed no wider than half a meter in what had originally been full open corridors at least two meters wide and three meters tall and doubling back when they curved like cooked spaghetti. Now she and several of her classmates were being asked to connect thick wire cables to various areas at opposite ends of several decks in an effort to hold the ship together.

“First the Kolban, now this! Nothing like this happened when the cadet class came aboard the *Dauntless* for their training cruise seven years ago,” she complained to Munton, who was helping her carry a heavy bight of the cable to connect to a far bulkhead.

“This is one of the reasons the Academy sends us out on front line starships for our training cruise instead of old ships designated solely for the purpose like the old *Republic* more than a century ago,” Munton said as he took another breath from his breather unit. “So we can get a taste of what real space exploration is about. Were you aware that close to ten percent of each third year class resigns from Starfleet Academy following their training cruise, up from less than three percent when the *Republic* was the designated training ship and cruises lasted only six weeks, never leaving Sector 001?”

“Fascinating,” Koester said. “Now help me pull this cable, will you!”

* * * *

Several minutes after leaving the bridge, Tehanu and Goff finally reached the launch bay located at the lower end of the dorsal section that connected the main saucer hull to the engineering and star drive section of the Galaxy-class starship. The pair had to abandon the turbolift network in the vicinity of the ship’s battle bridge, as the twisting of the ship blocked several turbolift tubes, leaving the mission specialist and cadet to navigate through wildly bending Jefferies tubes and corridors to reach Karondar’s location. Once they arrived, they found the Romulan man using an anti-grav and trying to single-handedly wrestle the probe onto the loader track that would normally lead straight into the launch tube but – thanks to the subspace distortion – looked more like a miniature model of an amusement park roller coaster.

“Cadet, grab several anti-grav units from the locker in the corner,” Tehanu told Goff, pointing in the direction of a storage locker behind a rack of sleek black photon torpedo casings that swayed like vertical waves. She then rushed over to help her brother before he wound up crushing himself under the probe.

“Do we know what is causing this?” Karondar asked as he and his sister lifted the end of the probe and lined it back up on the table where it had been modified.

“Not exactly,” Tehanu answered, “though we are working on the theory that the probe’s energy core is the cause and – as a result – are attempting to eject it from the ship.”

“The quantum singularity? Fascinating. That thought would not have occurred to me.”

“It did not occur to Commander Tredworth or myself either,” Tehanu admitted as Goff rushed back with two more anti-gravity lifting devices in her arms. “Cadet Goff suggested it.”

All three attached a lifting device to the casing of the stellar probe and activated them. The lifting devices made the probe lighter but not entirely weightless, so the three struggled to move it as close to the launch tube breech door as possible before placing it down on the loading track and deactivating the anti-gravs. Karondar then activated the automated loading device, which carried the probe into the launch tube and closed and sealed the inner door.

“Launch bay to bridge,” Tehanu said after tapping her combadge. “The probe is loaded in Tube 1 and ready to fire in all respects.”

On the bridge, a smile appeared on Captain Parker’s face for the first time since the crisis had begun.

“Quil, aim the probe at the center of Aurigae Alpha,” she ordered.

“It’s difficult under the present circumstances, Captain,” A-ZuRQuIL responded.

“I’ll settle for close enough that gravity takes over,” the captain added.

“I... think... I... have it!” the first officer and security chief finally proclaimed. “Launching probe!”

The modified probe launched from the forward tube of the *Sarek* like a photon torpedo, streaking away and curving toward the larger of the two stars. If there had been any doubt that the probe was the cause of their dilemma, it was dispelled when the subspace rift moved away from the starship and briefly followed the departing probe – one end still anchored to the Lagrange point, the other tied to the probe core – until it was sufficiently past the influence of the combined gravitational pull. Once the probe passed sufficiently beyond the equilibrium point, the rift started to slowly heal itself.

“It’s working, Captain!” Tredworth exclaimed. “Subspace rift is resealing. The distortion field is collapsing.”

“How long until we can escape from the vicinity of the rift?”

“It will be at least several more minutes,” the science officer replied.

Already, the deck of the bridge had stopped rippling, and on the main viewscreen, the probe could be seen closely approaching the red giant until it disappeared into the flaring surface.

“Probe has entered the star’s photosphere,” reported T’Reth. Several seconds later he added, “The probe has been destroyed.”

As the operations officer was speaking, an extreme flare erupted from the surface of the star, moving at close to the speed of light. It looped around, extending almost half the distance between the star’s surface and the *Sarek* before returning back to the star like a magnetic field line.

“Quil, please tell me we’re back to full power on the shields?” Parker asked.

“Commander Gomez just reported the temporary conduits have relieved the pressure on the EPS transfer system and she is in the process of bringing the core back up to full power. The Capellan’s fingers danced across the tactical console face as he re-routed commands and tapped power reserves. “Shields... back to full strength!”

The relief on the captain’s face was palpable, particularly when, only seconds later, the charged ionized particles from the enormous flare struck the *Sarek*, knocking the starship sideways. The *Sarek* was pushed directly toward the smaller yellow star until it encountered the ionized particle wave that had erupted from the g-type star almost half an hour earlier. Protected by its strengthened shields, the starship was flung sideways yet again, propelled along on a perpendicular course by the converging waves of ionized particles.

“The stellar flares are pushing us out of the system,” Huff announced as he tried to compensate for the unexpected movement of the ship. “I’ve got no real helm control. It’s like being a sailboat caught in a tidal wave!”

“Just ride with the flow,” the captain suggested. “Like a surfer.”

The helmsman managed to turn the *Sarek* around to ride with the particle flow, then commented, “It’s been a while since I tried surfing on the holodeck. I’m a little rusty.”

“You’re doing great,” Parker said with a smile.

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 66099.4:

Damage control procedures continue, and sickbay reports there were several injuries – all minor and mainly caused when turbolifts came to sudden halts at right-angle turns in the turbolift network – while we were caught in the subspace rift. The rift itself sealed over the course of almost six hours after we were knocked away by the sudden stellar flare caused presumably by the destruction of the probe’s artificial quantum singularity. The 1757 Aurigae system appears to have returned to normal, and so has routine operations aboard the Sarek.

If these first missions are any indication, the future of Starfleet is in good hands, as the Cadet Class of 2390 ably proved themselves during our two most recent adventures. I look forward to having them aboard for the next several months.

Parker, out.

Cadets Goff, Koester, Brooks, and Munton were sitting at one of the tables in the deck 10 level of 9/10-Forward, playing one of the strategy games located there. As they played, Captain Parker and Lt Commander Sonia Gomez entered the lounge and walked over to the bar, each ordering a drink.

“The subspace distortions caused some minor structural issues because of the bending and twisting the ship experienced,” Gomez was telling the captain as they sipped their drinks.

“Will it be an issue that requires us to return to spacedock for repairs?” Parker asked with concern. “If so, we’ll probably have to transfer the class of cadets to one of the other Fifth Fleet vessels. Not a whole lot they can learn while a ship sits in drydock.”

“My staff and I should be able to handle the necessary repairs,” Gomez assured. “We just need to make sure the *Sarek* gets a good overhaul during the next scheduled visit to spacedock.”

As the captain and her chief engineer continued to discuss the ship’s status by the bar, Lieutenant Kerr entered the lounge. He looked around the room, finally seeing the three cadets sitting at the far table between the windows and the starboard ramp leading to the lounge on deck 9, and stormed over to confront them.

“Koester! Goff! Munton! Brooks! What in hell are you doing in here?! This is a CREW lounge, not some rec room back in your dormitory building. I thought I told you all – especially YOU Koester – not to...”

“Is there a problem, Commander?” a voice said behind Kerr. The class advisor turned around to find himself face to face with Captain Parker. The surprise on his face was visible only momentarily.

“I’m sorry, Captain. I don’t mean to make a scene, but these cadets were told they were not allowed to be in here, and again they’re flaunting the rules.”

“Why aren’t they allowing in 9/10-Forward?” the captain asked out of curiosity.

“Because they’re just cadets, sir. This is a lounge for the enjoyment and relaxation of the crew. They need to learn...”

“Commander, correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t the purpose of this training cruise to familiarize the cadets with the normal operations of an active duty front-line starship? Aren’t they learning the ship’s systems and proper watch-standing techniques, and will hopefully soon be actually standing duty watches aboard the *Sarek*?”

“Yes, Captain,” Kerr replied.

“On top of that, you need to take into account that this ship would probably not have survived its most recent mission had it not been for the fact the cadets were aboard to help literally hold this ship together, don’t you agree?”

Kerr seemed to hesitate momentarily before finally saying, “Of course, ma’am.”

The Captain smiled warmly, almost like a mother would a favored child, then said, “Of course, you’re right, Lieutenant. This lounge is strictly for the use and enjoyment of the crew.” Kerr seemed a little more sure of himself for a second until Parker added, “And as far as I’m concerned, for the period of time their class is assigned to my vessel, your cadets ARE members of my crew, with all the privileges accorded such an assignment, which means they have every right to make use of 9/10-Forward and any other recreational facility aboard the *Sarek*. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes, sir,” Kerr reluctantly responded.

“Good. Now, you’re dismissed, Lieutenant.”

Kerr briefly snapped to attention, then nodded and hurried toward the lounge door. Parker looked at the four cadets sitting over the game and said, “I think that should take care of that problem, but if the Lieutenant insists on being such a stickler, talk to Mister A-ZuRQuIL about it. I’m sure either Quil or Commander Kyler can put the Lieutenant in his proper place.”

“Thank... uh... thank you, Captain,” Koester replied for the cadets.

After a brief smile and a nod, the captain returned to the bar to continue her conversation with Commander Gomez. At that same moment, the lounge doors opened once again and Tehanu and Lt Commander Tredworth walked in, walking directly over to the four cadets and pulling over chairs to join them at their table.

“It was amazing!” Tehanu stated without preamble.

“What was amazing, Miss Tehanu?” Goff asked.

“The data! We’ll be analyzing it for weeks... perhaps months!” the Romulan woman answered.

“Um... What data?” Koester asked.

As Goff, Koester, Brooks, and Munton exchanged puzzled looks, Tredworth explained, “The stellar probe. All its sensor systems were active when it was launched into Aurigae Alpha. And because of the power supplied by the singularity core, it managed to survive and transmit its data from much deeper inside the star than has ever been accomplished before. When we returned to the bridge after the ship was pushed out of the system, we realized we have giga-quads of data we never dreamed about from that probe’s plunge into the star stored in the computer memory.”

“So the entire mission wasn’t wasted?” Goff asked with hope.

“Far from it, Cadet,” Tredworth replied with a smile. “It may not have been exactly what we came out here to study in the beginning, but there’s enough data there to not only justify the *Sarek* coming to 1757 Aurigae, but – with a little modification to the design – continue with similar star-plunging experiments using singularity core powered probes at other stars in our galaxy! It’s truly quite exciting.”

“So I guess the Captain isn’t the only officer on board who is glad our Academy class is here for its training cruise?” Koester remarked.

“Are you kidding?” Tredworth replied. “I wish I could keep you guys here permanently instead of just for the next five months!”

Tehanu signaled to the bartender behind the bar for a round of drinks at the table. A few minutes later one of the waiters arrived with six glasses; non-synthetic drinks for the four cadets who, whether of age or not, were required by Academy regulations not to imbibe hard liquor and two Bajoran ales, which Tredworth favored. All six clinked glasses before toasting to the training cruise’s success.

“To the rest of the cruise being quieter and significantly less exciting,” Munton added before taking a deep breath from his breather unit.

The End