

Stardate 70604.2
USS Dauntless NCC-75310
Federation Fifth Fleet Flagship

Fleet Captain Peter J. Koester, commanding officer of the Sovereign-class starship *USS Dauntless*, was walking down the corridor of his starship. The captain's dog-like pet Nanook walked beside him on a leash as the pair were heading toward the holodeck. The meeting of the fleet commanders the previous day was weighing on his mind, and he hoped a stroll through the woods might help clear his concerns.

As expected, the holodeck was already in use, the program name displayed on the screen indicating 'Kyler-12.' Koester smiled to himself, knowing his security chief had given a standing invitation to join her and her Great Dane on one of their daily romps through the forest scenery.

"Computer, request access to holodeck two," Koester announced to the control panel.

"Program complete. Enter when ready," the computer's feminine voice responded, and the heavy holodeck doors parted. Koester and Nanook quickly stepped inside, and as the doors shut and the scenery filled in behind them, the captain leaned down to remove the leash from Nanook's harness and allow him to run freely. He could hear the loud barking of Kainan, Commander Kyler Saya's large pet, off in the distance and Nanook took off in that direction, Koester leisurely strolling along behind. A few minutes later he caught up to where Kyler was standing at the edge of a clearing. Kainan and Nanook were already playing, chasing each other around the clearing and behind some of the trees along its edge.

"Afternoon, Captain," Kyler greeted. She was wearing the workout clothes she typically wore when using the holodeck with her pet, a sheen of sweat across the Bajoran/El-Aurian woman's young-looking face evidence that she and Kainan had been running prior to Nanook's arrival.

"Good afternoon, Saya," Koester replied informally. "I was hoping you and Kainan would be here today."

"Where else would we be after watch?" Kyler remarked with a smile as she wiped her brow with a towel hanging around her neck. "What brings you to my woods today?"

"Just wanted to relax and clear my mind," Koester replied.

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Vignette C – USS Dauntless

Fleet Captain Koester and Commander Kyler walked slowly along the path leading through the woods, their two pets preceding them. At one point a few minutes earlier, the large and muscular Kainan had pounced on top of Nanook, meant in a playful manner, but due to the size of the Dane it was enough to anger the much smaller Nanook slightly. The poofy-white dog like creature had transformed into his large, aggressive bear-like form and swiped at Kainan, knocking the Dane several meters before shrinking back to his typical form. The two pets were back to being best buddies as they ran through the trees, marking various tree trunks as they went.

"Ever have a situation when you need to encourage someone to do what's best for themselves, knowing that if they follow your advice it will complicate your own life?" Koester asked his security chief.

“Well, I try to encourage the Gunny to stop chewing on that old tobacco tube all the time, because I cannot stand the smell of it, but it wouldn’t really complicate my life if he ever got rid of it,” Kyler remarked. “What’s this about, Captain?”

“Starfleet is adding a few new starships and at least one – maybe two – new starbases to the Fifth Fleet AOR, and Admiral Fil wants some crew with experience in the fleet to consider transferring to those new commands,” Koester replied. “I think Monster... I think Commander Arbelo should consider submitting a request to become CO of one of the new ships. I’m just not sure if he thinks he’s ready. And even if he does, submits the request, and is approved, it means I have to start searching for a new first officer again.” Koester sighed, then said, “I hate to admit it, but I’ve gotten very comfortable with my crew as it currently exists. We all work well together. I hate to break up the family.”

“Captain, you have been concerned for your crew and their welfare since the day I first met you,” Kyler said. “You have encouraged each and every one of us to grow and improve. If it’s time for Commander Arbelo to move on to bigger and better things, and it sounds like you agree it is, then I’m sure you will find someone as equally qualified to fill his position. And once that person is there, you will likewise mentor them, tutor them, and help them to grow to be more than what they were when they arrive aboard the *Dauntless*.”

Koester smiled at his security chief, realizing she was right and that there was a lot of wisdom in someone who physically appeared so young. “Thank you, Saya,” he said finally. “I think I know what I need to do.”

* * * *

Later that evening, Koester was sitting in his ready room. He was reviewing the service record of ‘Arbelo, Setton To’Lock, Commander, Starfleet’ on his monitor screen. It was certain the man had not experienced a typical career in Starfleet. Assigned to the original *USS Arcturus* as a communications officer in 2286, he was one of the crewmembers aboard when the ship was thrust forward in time nearly 80 years. Underwent re-training as an operations officer at Starfleet Academy for six months in 2367-68, including a temporary assignment to the *Enterprise-D* during the Klingon civil war. Reassigned back to the *Arcturus* for a year-long training cruise before he and his shipmates were transferred to the *Arcturus-A* in 2369. Less than a year later he was requested by then-Captain Kalin Kale to join the *USS Sarek* on a decade-long mission to explore the Gamma Quadrant that was cut to only two years due to the brief war that erupted between the Federation and the Klingon Empire and the subsequent emergence of the Dominion as an adversary in the Gamma Quadrant. Reassigned to the *USS Proxima* just prior to the outbreak of the Dominion War and thought lost with the ship following the Battle of Tyra in 2375, when he was actually captured by the Dominion and held as a prisoner of war for eight years before being rescued on the Cardassian planet of Almatha by the *USS Dauntless* in 2383. Most starship captains would have considered Arbelo damaged goods, not willing to let him resume his duties within Starfleet. Koester was not a typical starship captain. Arbelo had proven a good and capable officer, rising to Chief Operations Officer and then First Officer aboard the *Dauntless* in turn. Now it was time to let him progress even further.

Koester’s musings were interrupted by the door chime. “Come,” he said.

The ready room door swished open to admit Commander Setton To’Lock Arbelo – called Monster by his friends and shipmates due to his mixed heritage of Terran, Vulcan, and Efrosian that gave the man a tan – almost copper color – to his skin, semi-pointed earlobes, and the ability to adapt to almost any climate extremes.

“I just finished my tour of the decks, Skipper,” Arbelo said in his smooth tone of voice. “I was about to head down to 10-Forward to grab a bite to eat. Is there anything else you needed of me?”

“Actually, Monster, there is,” Koester said, gesturing toward one of the chairs opposite him. “Have a seat.”

Arbelo sat down in the offered chair, a look of mild curiosity on his face.

“I don’t know how to really explain what I’m about to say to you, so I’m just going to come right out and say it,” Koester began, causing some slight concern in Arbelo. “Several new ships in need of captains will be assigned to the Fifth Fleet in the coming months. I highly recommend you submit an application for one of those commands.”

“Trying to get rid of me, Skipper?” Arbelo asked with an amused tone.

“Truthfully, Monster, I wish I could have you by my side for the rest of my Starfleet career,” Koester replied. “But you deserve to move up. I think you’re ready. And opportunities like this don’t come along all too often.”

“You’re serious!” Arbelo remarked, suddenly realizing his commanding officer was not making a joke. “You really think I would make a good captain?”

“Among the best, Exec,” Koester agreed.

“I... I think I need to think about this for a little while,” Arbelo remarked, clearly shocked.

Koester handed his first officer an isolinear optical chip and said, “Of course, but don’t wait too long. I would hate to see you miss out on this opportunity. But if you do decide to submit your application, append the file on that chip to it. It’s my endorsement of your qualifications and abilities.”

“I... I don’t know what to say, Skipper,” Arbelo said as he accepted the chip.

“I think ‘Thank you’ would be appropriate,” Koester half-joked.

“Thank you, Skipper. I’ll make my decision in the next day or so and let you know how it goes.”

“That’s all I can ask, Exec,” Koester replied with a smile.

* * * *

A few hours later, Arbelo was on the holodeck with the starship’s assistant chief engineer, Amanda Windsor. The pair was walking slowly along a boardwalk along the ocean as a moon rose over the water in a cloudless, star-filled sky. The pair had been conversing, though Windsor had noticed Arbelo was not as talkative as he usually was when they shared holodeck time together.

“Something on your mind, Set?” Windsor asked. “Something going on between you and Annika?”

Arbelo came around a little bit at the mention of his daughter. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m not the best of company tonight. Just a lot on my mind.”

“Something going on with the ship?” Windsor asked with concern.

“No... Well, yes. And no. Mostly no.”

“Could you possibly be any more confusing?” Windsor asked with a smirk. “I think I understood about half of that.”

“The Skipper and I had a little meeting today. He said Starfleet will be assigning several new starships to the fleet, and wants crewmembers with experience in the Fifth Fleet AOR to man key positions aboard those ships.”

“He thinks you should become XO aboard another starship?” Windsor asked, not liking the direction the conversation had taken.

“Actually, he thinks I should be captain of one of those ships,” Arbelo replied.

“Oh, Setton! Congratulations!” Windsor exclaimed. She had been upset at the idea of Arbelo leaving the *Dauntless*, but if he could receive a promotion to captain along with it, she was elated and could only encourage the move.

“So, you think it’s a good idea?”

“Of course! I think you would make a great captain!”

“And you wouldn’t be sad to see me go?”

“Oh, Set! Of course I would be sad if you left the *Dauntless*! But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t advance in your career! Look at how far you’ve come since your rescue from Almatha! Now just imagine... Captain Setton To’Lock Arbelo...” Windsor paused and put her hands on Arbelo’s broad shoulders. “How often is a chance like this going to come along?”

“I suppose you’re right,” Arbelo conceded. “I guess I need to go talk to Annika about this, just to get her feelings on the subject.” He then looked off down the length of the boardwalk and said, “Computer. Arch.” Immediately the holodeck control arch and door appeared about a meter away. “Goodnight, Amanda,” Arbelo added, giving the engineer a quick kiss on the cheek before exiting the holodeck.

Windsor watched Arbelo leave, her forced smile slipping as he disappeared around the corner. Finally, after taking a deep breath, she ordered, "Computer. End program." As the seaside scenery evaporated around her, she followed out into the corridor and headed toward her quarters.

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Halfway through Alpha Shift two mornings later, the Captain's Yeoman appeared out of the turbolift with a padd in hand. Fleet Captain Koester was standing at Mission Ops, talking with the starship's Chief of the Boat Pono R. Kyman.

"Captain, important communique from Starfleet Command," she announced, walking over and handing Koester the padd. He thanked her before starting to read the message. After several sentences, he looked back up again.

"Yeoman, please have Commander Arbelo report to the bridge."

"Aye, sir," the yeoman replied, turning around and re-entering the turbolift.

"Something wrong, Skipper?" Kyman asked in curiosity.

"You could say that, COB," Koester replied with a sigh. "Looks like I have to start looking for a new Exec again."

"Oh?" the El-Aurian Chief Petty Officer remarked, his eyebrows going up in surprise. A moment later, the turbolift opened and Arbelo stepped out, looking around before seeing Koester standing to his left.

"You wanted to see me, Skipper?" he asked.

"Yes, Commander. Apparently, congratulations are in order." Koester handed the padd to his first officer.

"What's this?" Arbelo asked.

"Your new orders. You are to report to the grounds of Starfleet Academy in San Francisco no later than three weeks from today to report to PCO school. If you pass – and I have no doubt that you will – you'll be in line for your own command."

Koester offered his hand in congratulations, and a small round of applause went up around the watchstanders on the bridge. Arbelo looked both mortified and proud at the same time as he returned the captain's handshake. Koester then added, "You don't have much time to get back to Earth. I recommend you get packed and prepare to depart as soon as possible."

"It'll take me no more than an hour," Arbelo replied. Then a thought suddenly occurred to him. "Annika! Is she coming with me?"

"Exec... I mean, Commander," Koester said, correcting himself. "Your daughter is one of my science officers. She can't simply leave on a whim. But finish your PCO training and when you get back out here with your own starship, we can talk about crew transfers. Assuming you want your daughter serving in your chain of command. Just between you and me, I sleep better knowing Carrie is looking out for my daughter Gem aboard the *Belle* than I would if she were here in my crew."

"I guess I have some things to think about," Arbelo said before heading back to the lift. "And I have some packing to do!"

Once the turbolift door swished shut behind the now-former first officer, Koester turned to Kyman. "COB, spread the word. Sideboys and crew on hand for Commander Arbelo's departure, main shuttlebay, ninety minutes."

"Aye, Skipper," Kyman replied, already turning to enter the directive into his console. "Crew and sideboys, ninety minutes."

* * * *

Almost an hour and a half later, the crew were gathered in the main shuttlebay, milling around and talking. At the center of the shuttlebay sat the runabout *Merrimack*, a red carpet about three meters in length leading to the ship's hatch.

The door leading into the shuttlebay opened, and Chief Kyman came rushing in. "He's about thirty seconds behind me!" the COB announced. Immediately the entire crew present formed up into ranks along one side of the bay. Nine of the crewmembers present were wearing their dress uniforms. Four of them were Starfleet Marines in full Dress Blues, including Gunnery Sergeant Christopher O'Laughlin and 1st Lieutenant Jeong-Hwan. The other five were starship Division Officers – Commander Alasdair Wallace of Sciences, Commander Kyler Saya of Security, Commander Jeff Bloom of Engineering, and Lt Commander Thomas Riker of Operations – and Fleet Captain Koester, all wearing their Dress Whites. They formed two lines along the edge of the red carpet leading to the hatch of the runabout.

No sooner had everyone gotten into place when the door whirred open again and Commander Arbelo walked in with Commander Amanda Windsor and Lieutenant Annika Arbelo-Eeta, the former carrying Arbelo's duffle bag. They all stopped suddenly when Arbelo noticed everyone gathered.

"Attention on deck!" Kyman called out, and the entire crew snapped to attention. Then a smile formed on Arbelo's lips as he approached Fleet Captain Koester.

"You didn't need to go to all this trouble, Skipper," he said.

"You deserve a proper send-off, Commander," Koester replied. "Good luck, Monster. And be sure to let me know if there is anything I can do to help while you're on Earth."

"I will, Skipper. Thank you." Arbelo then hugged his daughter Annika, followed by another – slightly more lingering – hug of Amanda Windsor before he addressed the crew. "Crew of the Federation starship *USS Dauntless*; It has been my privilege to have served with you for ten years, the last seven as your executive officer. I can only hope whatever crew I serve with in the future is half the crew you all have been. Thank you."

The crew slowly began to applaud. Arbelo then offered one final handshake to Koester before grabbing his duffle from Windsor and rushing through the *Merrimack's* hatch, hoping no one noticed the wetness forming at the corners of his eyes.

The sideboys in dress uniform stepped away from the small starship as its engines hummed to life and the main shuttlebay door rolled up out of the way. Within seconds, the *Merrimack* departed and turned in the direction of Earth so many light years away. Koester nodded subtly toward his COB.

"Crew! Dismissed!" Kyman ordered, and everyone started filing out of the shuttlebay, back to wherever they needed to be or whatever they needed to do. Koester lingered in the shuttlebay, watching the main door slowly lower back down and allowing the majority of the crew to leave before he started toward the door to the corridor. A moment later, Commander Kyler fell into step beside him.

"Kainan and I are heading to the holodeck around 1600 hours, Skipper. Would you and Nanook be interested in joining us?" she asked.

"I think we just might, Commander. Thank you," Koester replied, though his face still looked stoic.

"Any idea who we're getting for a new XO?" Kyler asked as they walked. "Does Starfleet just assign us one, or do you get some input into the choice?"

"I actually have a lot of input into the choice, Saya," Koester said. "Though I suppose if I couldn't come to a decision, Starfleet would step in and assign someone to fill the billet."

"What do you mean, if you couldn't come to a decision?"

"I have no clue who I want as my next Exec right now. I would prefer to promote a member of the crew, but the most obvious choices, Commanders Bloom and Wallace, have made it known they prefer to remain in their current duties. But I don't know how long Admiral Fil will let me get away without a first officer."

"That's kind of silly," Kyler remarked. "I would jump at the chance to step into a role with more challenges and responsibility. Not being willing to grow in your career is what causes some Starfleet officers to be stuck in the same assignments for decade after decade. It just doesn't seem right."

Suddenly Koester stopped short in the middle of the corridor, a look of deliberation on his face. Another crewmember almost bumped right into Kyler when she stopped to see if something was wrong.

“Is everything okay, Captain?” she asked.

“Yes, Commander. I think it is,” Koester replied, before adding, “Tell me... How do you look in red?”

To Be Continued...