

Junior Officers

by [DSE Cascaddan](#)

A short Star Trek (original series era) story about junior officers, on their first deep space assignment, aboard the Saladin Class light destroyer USS Pontiac (NCC-532).

Billy Green was a nice guy, and a good Ensign, when he was not bored. Boredom was always his undoing. If he were to advance as a Starfleet officer, he would have to learn to do the dull jobs just as well as the interesting ones, without letting his mischievous nature get him into trouble. However, that particular piece of personal growth was not going to occur today.

Billy had just spent the day working with one of the enlisted engineering staff, checking the guidance and propulsion systems calibrations on the seventeen remaining photon torpedoes, in the magazine of the NCC-532, the Saladin class destroyer USS Pontiac. It would not even have been so bad, if he could have gotten in there with the tools and performed the delicate work himself. But as an officer, he was in charge of the stylus and pad for keeping track of the procedures. The engineering "rate" was the one who got to do the actual work.

And so, as it often did in such situations, Billy's mind began to wander. On his pad, while waiting for each step to be completed by engineman third class Tokman, Ensign Green began browsing other ship schematics. That is when the idea formed in his mind. Davis Charles!

Davis Charles was a junior grade lieutenant with a chip on his shoulder the size of a fleet commodore who just ate the captain of a destroyer for breakfast. A man, a self-absorbed idiot, with two first names! How good it would feel to cause LTJG Davy Chuck some humiliation. And he would be an easy target, being such an uptight person of utterly dependable, predictable, daily routine. Careful observation showed that Davy Chuck had a chocolate pudding for a snack, in the aft junior officers' ward room, every Tuesday and Thursday, from 1445 to 1450. Such observation would also show that the jerk had a ginger ale with dinner, every other day, on a two-week repeating cycle. What a total boob! Billy Green had often fantasized about putting something nasty in that ginger ale! But that would be far too simple to satisfy his need for prankster fame.

Lieutenant junior grade Peter Eldritch walked briskly and precisely through the corridors of the Pontiac, on his way to his stateroom, in "junior officer country" foreword of the centerline, right over the foreword, starboard phaser bank. A noisy billet, to be sure. He stared straight ahead and smiled at no one. This junior officer was having a very bad day.

In fact, by the time the board of inquiry were finished with him, he may no longer be a junior officer in Starfleet. What would life as a commercial freighter officer be like? At least gross incompetence did not preclude a captaincy in that service. And the pay was better. Of course, if he had not wanted this all of his life, he would not have put himself through the hell of the academy. And now that he had recently gotten his first promotion as a commissioned officer, it would be a real shame to have wrecked his career.

"Pete, why so glum?" His best friend was cheerful as always, passing him in the p-way. She was really more than a best friend. Sheila Endeggar was more like a sister to him. They had roomed together during their plebe year at the academy, and had been very close ever since.

"Come back to my cabin and I will tell you all about it."

"Can't. I have a date. That cute little botanist with the red hair. I thought she did not even know I exist, and just a few minutes ago, she came over to my work station, fondled me openly, and told me to come to her cabin, right after shift. Can it wait? I am afraid that she won't, and you may not see me until after my next duty shift, from the look in her eyes!"

"It will wait. I really need some time alone, anyway. And you will probably hear what happened before then."

"Oh no. That shaking I felt earlier? Was that you?"

"It was. Have fun. We'll talk after your workout."

"Calibration complete on 1185439/5, type 6 photon torpedo."

"Check. On to /6. Propulsion, detonation, and firing power off?"

"Check."

"Transport the weapon from the stack to the work bench." And endlessly on the procedures went. Billy noticed an interesting aspect of how several of the ships lesser life support functions interacted. He had always assumed that these systems were isolated, but it made sense that they would have crossover areas with each other and with more essential systems, so that in an emergency they could be used to bypass areas of other systems that had been damaged or destroyed. Interesting. It would also be possible to use them in ways never intended. Ways both mischievous and undetectable. Anonymous. A fine lesson in ships systems for the overbearing Davy Chuck!

After duty, Ensign Green dropped by one of the xenobiology labs to check on his favorite junior grade lieutenant. There was Davis Charles, sitting at a desk, buffing his shoes! What a fool! If the Captain walked in to find him engaging in such an inane activity, on duty, he would definitely be on hull fracture detail. Since he always did this at the same time, just before the end of his shift, after checking on the location of the senior officers, perhaps Green would have to arrange someday for him to be caught by the Skipper or XO. But that would be nothing compared to what he had planned for today.

Billy Green departed as Lieutenant Charles glanced up. Damn! He had wanted to be certain the fool was on-track of his usual routine, but did not want to be in the man's thoughts right before the execution of this prank. Billy wanted complete anonymity, for this particular stunt. Oh well. Life is risk. Especially life in Starfleet. At least he was not a security "red shirt" with its inherent dangers. The worst that could come from this would be lifetime hull fracture detail.

With the daily routine of the hated officer proceeding expectedly, Green headed for an obscure compartment adjacent to the Jeffries tube entrance. There he borrowed a special kind of emergency engineering tricorder that was a very simple, reliable tool, for a great many functions. Most importantly, it would not record the identity or actions of its user, or even that it had been used at all. He tucked the device inside a generic tricorder case, so that it would not attract any attention. Every third or fourth officer on duty was carrying such a case, at any given time, with a wide variety of instruments inside.

Billy then proceeded to the starboard impulse engine spaces, which were nearly unmanned under their current status. He walked past an open hatch, within potential view of a rating who was manning a console. But the woman did not notice him, and continued her work, as he had expected. He entered a minor crawlspace, with access to various systems, between decks. It was tight in places, and never spacious enough to stand. It was uncomfortable and ugly, and quite an unpleasant place to be. And yet Billy Green had a huge smile on his face, and was afraid that he might start giggling like a deranged maniac if anyone saw him. Of course, barring damage to the ship, he would find no other person in here. His privacy was assured, unless something really bad happened.

Finally, just as his knees began to really hurt from the crawling, and as he was starting to feel the pain from banging his knuckles against a plate once, when he had slipped his grip on a handle, he arrived at the first important junction for the execution of his little plan. He triple-checked the flow pressures, directions, and contents of the materials in three different conduits to be certain that he would not cause any unintended consequences with the bypass that he had carefully plotted on his pad. Once he was absolutely certain of the correct valves, he changed the position of six valves, in particular order, and altered the flow of the three systems in ways that nobody would notice. He would reverse the process on his way back out, leaving no trace of what had been done.

Billy felt a maniacal villain laugh build inside of him, and let it out, at full volume. In these noisy recesses of the ship, someone would have had to be right next to him, to hear it at all, and even then they would have to take out the hearing protection plugs that Billy currently wore in each ear. Someday, he would tell this story to a group of off-duty junior officers, in a bar in San Francisco, when he was a senior officer. Preferably to junior officers under the command of Davy Chuck!

Green crawled on. His knees hurt more. His knuckles were sore. He even bumped his head, and could feel a knot growing there. But still he crawled through the dirty, noisy, hot and cold maze to his goal. The final six valves. He glanced at the archaic wrist chronometer his mother had given him as a graduation present, on the day he received his commission. He had been so proud at his coronation as a new ensign of Starfleet. And she had given him this beautiful antique and explained how he must wear it all the time, and wind it just a little bit every night, to keep it properly tensioned, and how he must check and set the time on it from a calibrated source every couple of weeks. He loved it dearly. It made him feel like a commando and a hotshot pilot, all in one. It told him that he had ten minutes until the event.

It took Billy five minutes to make his triple redundant check, as he had at the other junction, to turn the six valves in particular order, and then to turn the final, seventh valve to enable his revenge. He then flipped the relay that would disable the automatic response, requiring Davy Chuck to engage a manual momentary switch to activate the function.

This gave Green at least five minutes to sit and wonder if maybe this was a bit too childish and cruel, and maybe he should undo what he had done and get the hell out of there. But he had come so far, and done so much to plan and execute this, that his second thoughts were insufficient to overcome the momentum that he had built. The prank would take place.

Tara Sumatra reported to the Chief of the Boat. The pretty red-headed ensign wrapped twice, sharply on the hatch, in the traditional manner. When the response came from within, she entered the Chief's office.

"Hi, COB! The Captain sent me to report for hull fracture duty. I have not had it before, so I may need instruction on anything they did not teach us about it at the academy."

"Well, sir, that would be just about everything. This is real space, not a simulator." He glared at her. "Here." He handed her a yellow record tape file. "Go into the briefing room next door and review this briefing I have prepared for hull fracture duty, and then proceed to the forward ventral air lock. Wait there

for Ensign Green. He is experienced at this, and will be your EVA buddy for your punishment duty, today. Don't do anything stupid, and don't assume that he won't do anything stupid. He is experienced at this precisely because he is such a screwup! Now get out of my sight... Sir!"

The COB could be a real SOB sometimes, but as senior enlisted man aboard, he was a more experienced spacer than even the Captain and XO. And he pretty much ate junior officers for a midnight snack. It was also rumored that he neither slept nor had he experienced childhood. It was said that he was hatched from a dragon's egg as a senior NCO with the stub of a cigar in his mouth, and would only die when called upon to act as a human warp plasma conduit, in an emergency in deep space. And he looked the part.

Peter returned to his stateroom, and changed out of his uniform. Seeing it hanging in the closet filled him with dread that shortly he might never be wearing it again. He had worked so hard and long to earn the right to wear that uniform. He was more proud of it than he could begin to say. He loved it more than he had ever loved any girl. He maybe even have loved it more than he loved his own parents, and he loved them very very much.

Where would he go, and what would he do if the board decided to take away his commission? To strip him of his rank and uniform, would strip him of the majority of his identity, and his purpose for being. He needed to get this off his mind.

Peter put on his physical training suit, and jogged toward the null-gee gymnasium. His favorite activity on the ship was limited to the times when they were not traveling at Warp, nor could begin to do so unexpectedly, for emergency reasons.

This was the only time the null-gee gymnasium was open for use, as it was located in the ship's warp drive nacelle. Anybody caught in there during the warping of spacetime, that allowed superluminal travel, would be instantly vaporized. The area was open now, since they were engaged in atmospheric operations, It would require several minutes of sub-light maneuvering before they could make warp. This would give warning time for people playing in the section to evacuate. Other than time in spaddock, it was exceedingly rare for the gym to be open for use.

So, wrecked career or not, Pete was headed for the playground! He especially liked the high delta-vee gymnastics course. It was a very strange race course, made up of a bunch of metal poles. Those highly adept at freefall operations, and not afraid to get banged up, would push off a bulkhead at the start of the course, as hard as their legs would allow. Then just before smashing into a highly padded bulkhead, the fool in question would grab a fixed pole and swing on it to change her or his direction of travel, letting go at just the right instant to send themselves rushing towards the next perilous turn.

A skilled practitioner could accelerate a little at each pole until reaching the fastest speed that the strength of their hands would allow them to make the next turn, without losing grip. At the final turn, the suicidal maniac in question would accelerate as much as they could, for the dash to the finish line. The finish line was not the usual imaginary one used in races on the surface of a planet. The finish line of this type of course was contact with an especially well-padded bulkhead, that usually stopped the sentient projectile without seriously injuring them.

On this day, Peter made two excellent flights through the course. On his first, he beat his best time by almost a tenth of a second. On his second circuit, he bested that time by a very little bit. His next two tries resulted in several crashes into poles from missed grabs, and poorly timed releases. Near the beginning of his fifth time through, he cracked a rib and sprained his left wrist, on the second turn. He was able to get himself to the edge of the null-gee zone, at the "top" of the Jeffries tube, but needed assistance from there to get to sick bay.

The looks he got from a nurse, an orderly, and the Doc, told Peter that the medical staff on duty had already heard about his screw-up on the bridge. And showing up with this damage from the freefall race course was almost too much to avoid teasing him about. The fact that nobody commented on it in any derogatory manner meant that they also knew how serious his mistake had been. It would have been the kind of gallows humor in which one never engages, in front of the condemned. No doubt they would have some really interesting comments, as soon as he left.

When Peter returned to his stateroom, he stripped naked and fell asleep sobbing. How could he have done this? How could his career be over already. What would he tell his parents? His mother may actually have been more proud of his commission than he was, as a retired Starfleet commander. How could this be happening. The sweet denial of unconsciousness was his only escape. And dealing with it any more would just be too much, right now. Sweet sleep and deeply disturbing dreams were his refuge.

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Green thought about how the timing of the actual event was somewhat uncertain. It was certain to be no earlier than he had planned, but he figured it could be any time up to ten minutes later. And so, Billy waited exactly eleven minutes after the initial event time, and returned the relay to its original position. He returned the six valves, in reverse order, to their proper settings. He crawled back to the first junction and quickly undid his work there, restoring the three systems to their prior states. He quickly crawled out, and headed down a certain passageway, looking for evidence of success.

At a certain point in his walk along this p-way, he noticed a low muttering of voices. He came around the bend and saw several people standing around a man, drenched head-to-toe in foul brown gunk, standing tall at attention before the Captain! "Mr. Charles! You are out of uniform!"

That was when Davy Chuck locked eyes with Ensign Billy Green, standing there looking stupid. That was also when Billy Green realized that he had red knuckles on one hand, a suspicious bump on the front of his head, probably a small, jagged hole in the knee of his uniform trousers, and was noticeably dusty and unusually sweaty for the carefully controlled climate of the areas around the junior officer quarters. Next time he should wear coveralls, and have a clean uniform to change into, afterwards.

"Him!" LTJG Davis Charles, shouted in a voice pitched only slightly below that of a little girl, on the verge of tears. "Ensign Green did this to me!" Everyone in the p-way, except for Green and Charles could see that the Captain was having a terrible time keeping herself from smiling, and laughing out loud.

Instead, she turned to Billy and asked, "Ensign, is this toilet malfunction of your design and/or execution?"

Billy could immediately hear his own voice in his mind, mingled with those of all the other midshipmen of his class, chanting over and over, in the rain, at night, standing at attention in the quadrangle in front of his freshman barracks, "We will not lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate among us anyone who does."

His plan had always been that nobody would ever think to ask him if he had done it, let alone his captain. And of course, there would never be the slightest option in his mind of failing to answer a direct question from her with other than complete candor. "Yes, Sir. I found a way to bypass part of the high-pressure air system through one of the backup conduits to vent into the outboard toilet in the deck three, aft junior officer's head, delta."

"So, if I go in there right now and flush it, I will be hit with a geyser of effluent?"

"No, sir. I then returned all the valves and the flushing relay to their original positions. The entire system should be functioning normally now."

"And who helped you in this?"

"Nobody, sir. I acted alone."

"Then how did you know which toilet to effect, and when to make the change, and change back?"

"Sir, Lieutenant Charles has very predictable habits." It was becoming very difficult, even with his fear in this situation, to keep from smiling, but Billy knew that he would be twice as cooked if he did, and so he fought the evil, proud grin with all his might. "I knew that he would use the particular toilet in question immediately after the end of his shift, and even what route he would take there. I had to guess at how long it would take him, and leave a buffer in case of constipation from his twice-a-week chocolate pudding." The grin was really trying to get out. He became afraid that he might actually pee himself in front of his commanding officer, from trying to hold in the smile.

"Well, Ensign, when I read your detailed report on the alterations you made to the ships systems, and your logic and research behind them, I will decide whether to congratulate you on your knowledge of the maze." She then turned to Charles, "Lieutenant, you will shower and change, and report to my quarters, fresh as a daisy, in one hour. You are dismissed."

"Yes, sir." Davy Chuck looked dismayed. It was clear that he was in trouble, but he did not understand why. It would be a long, miserable hour for him, even if he had not needed to remove several kilograms of human waste from his body and destroy this uniform.

She then turned back to Green. "Ensign, you will report to my quarters in thirty minutes." She strode off, muttering under her breath about "colorful" junior officers.

"Yes, sir." And so Billy Green developed a small and fanatical following of those who also loathed LTJG Davis Charles, and earned the nickname Davy Chuck Flusher, or more often, just Flusher. It is also how he came to become the long-term hull fracture repair officer.

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Ensign Tara Sumatra got to the specified airlock and waited. And waited. And waited. Just as she was about to use the intercom system to find out where Green was, he strolled in. "Hi, Tara."

"Hi, Billy. What did you do to get this assignment?"

"You haven't heard? A minor practical joke. And if the person in question had a sense of humor, and could take a little joke, I would not be here. The Doc says that I get in trouble when I am bored, and so I should not be allowed to get bored. And the Captain agreed and put me on long-term additional duty as hull fracture repair officer. As though I am not likely to get bored, doing this! You?"

"I would rather not say." She quickly changed the subject. "So, what is this work like?"

"It is the perfect combination of tedious and dangerous. A big part of the danger is because it is so boring that people tend to let their focus drop, and do something stupid. So, I assume the COB shoved his condescending little briefing up your nose before sending you down here?" She nodded assent. "Cool. Let's suit up." And so they proceeded to put on their personal life support system suits, in preparation for EVA work. The extra-vehicular activity, or "spacewalk" suits were bulky, uncomfortable, and generally a pain to use. And so they checked each other out, as they went, to guarantee that they were safe and properly donned.

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When fully suited up, Billy Green began explaining to Tara, "I am sorry if some of this is redundant, but it is important that you not be caught off guard by anything that you have not thought about since hearing it in a classroom at the academy."

He pointed at the inner air lock door, in the deck, at their feet. "The air lock that we are using today passes not just through the hull, but through the artificial gravity plating for this part of the ship, as well. And so as we step into it, we will pass through the field effect and into null-gee. This will be disorienting. It will also seem like it is sucking you in. In reality, it is more like the ship is pushing you out. Every part of you that is "above" the gravity plating threshold is being pushed in the "down" direction, into the airlock, where there is no up or down sensation. Enter feet first, so you will not experience the disorientation until your head passes in, last."

With that said, Green opened the hatch and made a little summersault forward and entered the lock head-first, using his hands to stop his momentum against the bulkhead on the other side. He then gently pushed himself to float aft, and stopped "above" the outer hatch. Tara followed, feet-first and damped herself with her legs, as Billy had with his hands. She used too much force, still used to the one gee field of the ship, and bounced back up. Her head stuck back through the inner hatch, into gravity, before the field pushed her back more gently into the airlock. She made a gagging sound in her microphone, and nearly vomited from the two rapid transitions of her head, back and forth, between gravity and none.

"Are you okay, Tara?" She was facing him and made the mistake of nodding. Once again, she had to fight her gag reflex. She had never had this much trouble in null-gee training at the academy. Of course, it was just that entry and bounce that had messed her up. She would be fine. She just needed to gather control over her stomach, for a moment. Thank goodness that it had been so long since she finished breakfast and reported to the COB. The old hurry-up-and-wait did occasionally have its benefits.

"I just need a minute. Go ahead and cycle the lock. I will be fine." So, Green closed the inner hatch and performed a slow, maximum efficiency cycle, pumping most of the air into holding tanks for repressurizing the lock, when they came back in. Then he released the last tiny bit of atmosphere as waste pressure, vented into space. The whole thing took about three minutes, and it was clear from the expression on her face by then, that the other ensign was ready to go EVA without blowing chunks in her suit.

"Feeling better, I see. We are lucky today. We are on ventral duty. I hate working "on top", on the dorsal hull surface. Some people prefer it, because it is one gee, same as in the ship. But because of that, you have work on your hands and knees the whole time. Either that, or lie prone, as I usually do. Of course, some people have trouble with keeping their face that close to the work, but I prefer it to being on my knees. I just hate that!"

"We will use our suit thrusters at their lowest setting to move about very slowly, and stabilize ourselves a comfortable distance from the work surface. We will use the self-attaching model of the fracture tool, so that we do not push ourselves away from the ship, as we work. You have to really piss off the Skipper to get assigned this duty and be required to use the non-self-attaching model!"

"What about tethers?"

"Only cadets use those, or if there is some additional hazard. Since we are not in warp, nor under acceleration, we will be fine with just our suit thrusters. Do you remember a couple of weeks ago, when we took that minor phaser hit, from a little scout vessel?"

"Sure, but that would not have pierced the deflectors at lowest power."

"The deflectors were not engaged. It seemed to be a friendly little ship, in distress. I was on the bridge. The Captain actually laughed when it fired at us. He had the CHENG use a tractor beam to smash the ship's tiny

phaser port before grabbing the thing, so it could not try to get away. Then the Skipper actually laughed AT the pilot of the scout, over an open comm channel! It was all very funny, on the bridge, but now the annoying part falls to us."

"We get to repair the minor hull damage from the phaser hit?"

"YOU get to repair the minor hull damage from the phaser hit. I will float nearby on "fire watch" duty. Which of course, given our lack of pressure has nothing to do with any danger of actual fire. The area is about a half meter across. The weapon was not even focused properly. But the whole area will be crisscrossed with microscopic fissures. You are lucky. It is a visibly darkened area, so it will be easier to keep track of where you are. Also, since there are so many of them, so close together, you should be able to see a visible difference in the area you have covered, from the area still needing to be done. We will paint it next time out here, after all the fractures have been repaired."

Ensign Sumatra, fissure repair tool tethered to the chest of her EVA suit, thrustured very gently, parallel to the hull, in the direction of the minor phaser hit. She damped out her momentum at the edge of the burned paint area about thirty centimeters in front of her face. She unshipped the tool and attached it to the hull, just outside of the burn area. Watching the display, she moved it slowly toward the edge of the burn area until fissures began to show up. Then she began sealing them, carefully repairing these weakened areas of the hull, millimeter by millimeter, making them stronger than the hull had been previously.

It was said that the toughest ships in the fleet were the ones that had been in many battles, and had their hulls repaired like this, by hand, until they were a lattice of repaired fissures. And since the repairs were so much stronger than the original, they were the toughest hulls in the whole of Starfleet. Of course, given the nature of this particular hit, being so minor, and the fissures so very shallow, it would not significantly contribute to the increased strength of the Pontiac's hull.

After seventy-three minutes of this, Tara had worked her way into the denser, main area of the damage. She had also progressed into an understanding of why this was generally used as punishment duty, and why it would be so easy to let one's attention wander. In such a lack of attentiveness, poor work could result in the job needing to be done over.

Poor work always ended up with the poor worker in question increasing their own punishment duty time. In more serious cases, a lack of focused attention could result in a dangerous EVA incident or accident. Unlikely, but even possibly a fatality. Tara would not allow her mind to wander. She would not have any of these negative outcomes from her punishment duty. Punishment duty well performed was almost always redemption in the Commander's eyes.

At eighty-one minutes on the job, Sumatra came upon and began to repair a certain segment of fissure. This particular segment had been the victim of a millions-to-one improbable combination of spiked energy in that portion of the phaser beam that had struck it, and an odd crystalline reflection that had actually allowed the beam to penetrate the entire hull for a billionth of a second. The fracture was so small that it had not even been detected as a breach by the ships sensors, nor even allowed a detectable amount of atmosphere to leak out there. It had also nicked the surface of a very tough energy plasma conduit, inside the hull. This particular section of conduit had a tiny flaw, which had not been detected in its manufacture. A flaw so minor, that it would probably have served without a problem, well beyond the scrapping of the ship, someday. However, under these particular circumstances, it had weakened the conduit.

The flaw, damaged further by an incredibly tiny amount of phaser energy a couple of weeks before, ruptured just as she was working there. The conduit exploded pressurized plasma against the slightly weakened section of hull. Automatic valves made an emergency shutdown of the plasma conduit in less than one ten-thousandth of a second, or Tara Sumatra would have been killed by jet of the incredibly energetic material breaching the hull. As it was, the hull breached only internal atmosphere, blowing out into the vacuum of space.

The small hole, allowed a stream of ship's atmosphere to strike Tara in the face like a hammer. EVA suits of earlier materials would have breached, and killed her instantly, but the material of this helmet was strong enough to take the blow, and deform slightly. The helmet face slammed into her nose as though someone had just kicked her in the face with their heel. She blacked out for a fraction of a second and woke to the view of stars spinning around her, briefly, before being obscured by all the blood in her helmet.

The suit quickly and efficiently vacuumed up the excess blood, as the vessels in her nose began to seal from clotting. Nevertheless, it was some time before she could see well enough to view outside her helmet, around the blood that had stuck to the face plate, directly in front of her. Once again she could see stars spinning madly. Tara knew that it must mean that she was tumbling, although she felt as though she were completely stationary.

She then perceived noises in her ears. After another moment she realized that this must be the voice of Ensign Green, trying to determine how badly she was hurt. But the noises were mostly unintelligible. Sometimes she could make out a single word. "...did... sink... tum... help... rgidbtle..." Her suit communicator was obviously damaged.

Next she tried her suit thrusters. They seemed to be working correctly, and in a few seconds she had stopped the mad tumbling, and could see a small, but stable star field through the clear spot in the upper right corner of her helmet faceplate. She then made a slow three-hundred-sixty degree yaw to starboard. Not one glimpse of the ship. Then the same maneuver in positive pitch still failed to reveal the ship. Her view was such a small field that she could do this until she ran out of air, and never see it. She was not in any physical danger, but she knew that if she did not manage to get things under control well enough to show Green that she was fine, he would soon call the ship and have them beam her directly to sick bay. And that simply would not do.

She rolled ninety degrees to port and began the full yaw again, when she caught glimpse of the ship. She stopped sharply, increased her thrust setting to a more definitive level, and set out in the general direction of the ship. She then spotted Billy starting to reach for the side of his helmet, and then stop. This was a common involuntary gesture of those recently trained in EVA, when they used the suit communicator, even though no such motion was required. She realized that she had saved herself from the humiliation of rescue, just at the last possible moment.

Tara cancelled her motion relative to the ship, about two meters from the hull, near Billy Green. He then looked into her face plate and moved her around until he was gazing in through the small clear spot. The shock on his face told her that she must look pretty bad, but she grinned at him hugely and winked, and she could see him laugh. He then guided her into the airlock, and used the stored air from its prior evacuation to mostly repressurize it, topping off the volume with a little extra from inside the ship. He popped the inner hatch and guided her hands onto the gravity deck, just through the hatch. He helped lift her feet as she hauled herself out onto the deck. She greatly appreciated that he did not unship the hoist to lift her into the gravity field. He quickly hopped onto the deck beside her, sealed the hatch, and took off her helmet.

"How are you doing, Tara?"

"Suit comm is busted. So is my nose. How badly did I screw up?"

"As far as I can tell, you did nothing wrong. Heck, the tool you were using should not be capable of breaching the hull like that, under any circumstance. Something went wrong, with no help from you. You are either incredibly lucky or incredibly unlucky, depending on how you look at it. Maybe both. And you did a great job of rescuing yourself. I was about to have you beamed to sickbay."

"I know. I am glad I managed to recover in time to not have to go through all of that!"

"You will have to go down and be checked out and fixed up, anyway."

"Yes, but under my own power."

"You can walk, then?"

"I can."

When Peter awoke, the light at his console was blinking. He dropped into the chair and hit the switch, still feeling terribly, but much better than before he had dozed off.

"Lieutenant Junior Grade Peter James Eldritch is hereby ordered to report, this date, to a board of inquiry in the aft ward room at 1350 hours, USS Pontiac. Commander Deborah McGowan, presiding."

That was it. He would press his dress uniform and shine his shoes. It may be the last time he would wear a Starfleet uniform. He wished that he could stop thinking that. And yet, there it was. When he took off his coveralls, before going to injure himself in the gym, that may have been his last time in the common duty uniform that everyone usually wore while at space, on a light destroyer. He would polish his only medal, so it gleamed for the occasion. He had won it while asleep, for simply being on board when something interesting had happened. It was a unit citation that was given to every single member of the crew, even though only a handful of people had anything at all to do with earning it.

At the appointed time, he stepped forward at attention and knocked sharply, twice on the hatch to the ward room. A clear, but muffled voice came through the door, "Enter!" Four dour-faced senior officers sat at a long, thin table, with their backs to an interior bulkhead, facing an otherwise empty room, except for a single chair, out in the middle of the remaining space.

Peter stepped smartly to the side of the chair and announced loudly, while staring straight ahead at full attention, "Lieutenant Junior Grade Peter James Eldritch, reporting as directed, Sirs!"

"Have a seat, Lieutenant."

"Yes, Sir!"

"The particulars have already been read into the record," the commander commented, to nobody in particular.

Peter sat at attention, and the older women and man let him, as they perused some papers for a few minutes, not saying a word. He felt like he might wet himself or throw up at any instant, and was amazed that he seemed to be managing to not sweat through his beautiful uniform, just yet. Finally, the presiding chair told him to sit at ease. Peter folded his hands in his lap and he relaxed very slightly. "Thank you, Sir."

"Well, Peter, you poked the dog good and hard, didn't you?"

"Yes, Sir."

"The board have a few questions for you."

"Yes, Sir."

"Glenn?" She turned and looked at the XO. He nodded back to her curtly, frowning.

"Mr. Eldritch?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Tell us, in your own words, what events led you to be here, in this room, facing this board."

Once, in an entertainment holo, Peter had seen a fictional account of a board of inquiry, like this one. The hero in the story had told a tale filled with adjectives and "loaded language" to impress the officers that he had not really messed up at all, but had actually saved the day. But this was reality, and Starfleet officers and cadets do not lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate amongst them any who do. The only exception to the honor code was in dealing with combatant enemies and engaging in diplomatic activity. A board of inquiry was not considered diplomatic activity. Only the precise, unadorned truth would do.

"Sir, during my previous shift at the helm, the ship encountered a small, rocky object, which somehow came through the navigational deflector shields, causing serious damage to the navigational sensor array. This damage included a rupture to the hull, necessitating our entry into the atmosphere of a nearby M class planet for repairs. It also included the disabling of the high-gain mass sensor array which allow for precise instrumentation of the ship's angle of attack on entry into the atmosphere.

I detected this damage and reported it to the watch officer. She instructed me to slave the navigational foreword sensing gear to the computer in a downward-looking alignment, to do the job of angle of attack sensor.

I negligently slaved this sensor as an angle of entry indicator, instead. The angle of attack required for our entry is much greater than the angle of entry itself, and so my error caused us to enter the atmosphere much too steeply for our speed.

The watch officer ordered full military power on the impulse engines and a missed approach to atmospheric interface. Had she not reacted as quickly as she did, my error would have caused serious damage to, or possibly even the complete destruction of the Pontiac and her entire crew. Once the ship was safe, I was replaced at my station and dismissed from the bridge and all further duty until the determination of this board."

Peter desperately wished that there were something to say to mitigate his guilt, and that such a comment were permissible, but neither situation existed. This was the way that things were done in Starfleet, and his statement was all that was supported by the events.

"Do you have anything else to add?"

"No, Sir."

"Return to your quarters and remain there until you are called upon to return to this chamber."

"Yes, Sir."

Peter marched straight to his stateroom, again looking ahead and failing to acknowledge anyone that he passed. When his hatch closed, he sat in his desk chair and just stared off into space. He felt terribly sick to his stomach, and only just managed to avoid throwing up, mostly out of fear that he would be called at just that instant to hear the verdict while wearing a dress uniform covered in vomit. Also, he had not eaten in quite some time, so there was not much of anything to bring up.

After about eight weeks sitting there, or maybe it was only a few minutes, he really could not be sure, a knock came at his door. Not now! He loved her dearly, but he could just not face his friend while waiting for his verdict. He did not respond and the knock came again. "Enter," he said weakly.

"Thank you, Peter," the commander said, as she walked in and sat on his bed. He was so confused by this that he could not even respond. His face must have shown the fact that this was so thoroughly outside of anything he had expected, that he still did not realize what was going on. And so she spoke quickly, "If you were being "drummed out," you would have been called back for a formal reading of the findings. The fact that I am here in your quarters, if you were not scared beyond all reason, would tell you that you are still an officer of this ship."

She smiled, and he gasped slightly, involuntarily, while trying to keep from sobbing again, this time in relief. "So, just between us, completely informally, why did you screw up so badly, Peter?"

He took a moment to compose himself, and took a deep breath and partially let it out, slowly, before responding. "Well, Skipper, I let myself get a little panicky. This was the first real emergency I have had, at the helm, and I choked." It was clear from his expression that he was terribly ashamed of himself, for this greatest of piloting sins.

"Nobody likes to admit to it, Pete, but many of us have had it happen, our first time facing real danger. And unfortunately some never survive to tell about it. Most of those of us who do, then go on to never make that mistake again. Nor do we generally admit to it. And nobody can tell how they will react to the first time until they face it."

"Are you saying that you did, Sir?"

"Not me. I am your captain. I am not human. And more importantly, I am flawlessly inhuman. I am perfect. I do not make mistakes. And do not forget that mister." She smiled and winked at him, and the sense of relief flooded over him again.

"Thank you, Sir."

"You're welcome, youngster. Of course, you have double-shifts for a month and you are "in hack" for your next time in port. So you will not have time to crack any more ribs at PT or act as wing man for that horny, philandering best friend of yours, for a while. By the way, you might let her know that the minute her libido causes a problem on my ship, I am going to put her pretty little butt in a sling!"

But overall, you are good. I am not going to put anything derogatory in your "jacket" so it will not hurt your chances for promotion. Of course, this is a one-time break. Next time you face the elephant, I expect complete calm and precision. I may even have to arrange a visit to the Neutral Zone during your next few weeks of constant bridge duty. Oh, and I almost forgot, you are on hull fracture detail, twice a week, for the next two months."

"Yes, Sir."

"I can't recall seeing anyone smile so much over this amount of punishment duty. I will leave you now. Get something to eat. You are due on the bridge in less than an hour. And not in your dress uniform, if you please."

Thank you for reading. :)

If you wish to comment or question, please feel free to send me a polite email at danielc@danielc.com or to [CDR Dan](#).