



SPARRING

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Settling in at Starfleet Academy wasn't as hard as he thought it would be for Elnor – at first. After all, for the young man raised by the Qowat Milat nuns to live a life of absolute candour, whilst also being trained to be a formidable warrior, his life before today had been one that had been highly regimented. Each day had been filled with routines of training, teaching and service. There had been very little time for pointless exercises, and when the nuns who raised you always expected an honest answer out of you, it never paid to get up to mischief.

Now Elnor was living on Earth, having to get used to the odd gravity and being surrounded by peoples of all different species and mindsets. There were few familiar faces, with only Admiral Picard and now Commander “Raffi” Musiker stopping by when their busy schedules allowed, which really wasn't very often. While the surrounds were unusual with its sterile hallways, muted colours and electronic everything, Elnor was nothing if not adaptable. He was confident he could adjust to the rigours of the education schedule, and he had no trouble with showing due respect to his elders.

The only real problem he was finding was making friends. Raffi had been clear to him from the start that the Academy would be full of type A personality people who would see his open character as arrogance.

“Elnor,” she had told him privately when she had dropped him off. “Sometimes it might simply be better to not say anything. Rather than give your opinion on everything, try to be select on what you offer. In the end, you might sound more wise and less like a wiseass.”

The Romulan man had given her a grateful smile and taken her advice to heart. In company, he had made a point of being quiet and unassuming, but in the end he had overheard others whispering why he always appeared so stoic?

Today's class on ethics had made his situation that much worse. The lecturer had decided to become topical and discuss the repealing of the ban on synthetic life. No sooner had the stately Vulcan woman finished her opening comments Elnor found himself wishing he was somewhere else entirely.

To his surprise, she had given a nutshell rundown of the events of the final day culminating in the showdown between Picard, the Starfleet vessels and the Tal Shiar fleet. However, he felt she was lacking in some pertinent details.

The lecturer was about to change the subject. "I would now like to discuss the events that precipitated the ban in the first place."

Always the one to fight the good fight, Elnor's hand shot up. "Excuse me."

Commander T'Mera's brown eyes narrowed as she focussed on his face, then brightened somewhat when she realised who was addressing her. Having not reviewed the list of those present before entering the class, she had no idea she was preaching to the choir. "Yes, Cadet Elnor. I believe you were present at the battle discussed. Do you have something you care to add?"

Elnor found his feet and noted every set of eyes in the large auditorium was focussed on him. "I believe your summary of the event mentioned missed the most important aspect."

T'Mera's upswept razor-sharp eyebrows shot up in surprise. "And that is?" she asked in challenge.

“The Admiral’s stand was important in every way, as was the part Starfleet played. However, you didn’t mention the part the synthetics played and their motivation behind their actions.”

The Commander shifted uncomfortably in place. In this she realised that her briefing was lacking. Her retelling was based on the official reports given by Starfleet and from the Admiral himself, and he had been cagey about what had taken place on the surface. So, very little had been recorded by those on the ground. Here, she had a golden opportunity to learn something new. While as a Vulcan, she practically salivated at the chance on offer for learning, it also chafed that her learning plan was being disrupted. All the same, she was a teacher first, so she beckoned him down. “Please, Cadet, come forward and share your insights.”

A little shyly, Elnor walked down the steps to the stage, ignoring the irritated and/or envious stares and joined the Commander, who had to look up a little at the younger man. At her subtle nod, he began speaking.

“Soji and her people were acting out of fear of annihilation. They had every right to live and be left alone. Ever since the Federation outlawed their right to exist, they had been treated like outliers, even criminals; hunted down and even exterminated if they were ever encountered.”

At this, T’Mera frowned. She thought the young man was acting a little too emotionally. “Surely you exaggerate, Cadet.”

Elnor never backed down from a challenge. He looked her in the eye and said: “Captain Rios told me that he and his old captain had once encountered some of Soji’s people, and under orders from Starfleet his captain killed them both.”

This comment brought a number of different responses from those present. There were gasps of horror from many, simple disbelief from some – Elnor noted there were even those who rolled their eyes. While their behaviour raised his ire it was at times like these that he reminded himself of a conversation he once had with Picard. The image of his wizened face came into his mind's eye telling him straight: "No matter how much some of these people might annoy you at times, Elnor, one day you will have to serve with them and depend on them for your very life. You cannot go around telling them: "choose to live" every time you have a difference of opinion!"

One of the cadets who often liked to challenge Elnor in class, and often in a less-than-friendly manner, a young male from Alpha Centauri, said: "You've been drinking too much Romulan ale, Elnor!"

Elnor's fingers twitched upward toward his shoulder to where he used to keep his favourite blade. However, he forced himself to still his arm.

To his delight, a raven-haired woman named Agape Stavros came to his defence. She had been sitting behind the Centauran and, without hesitation, leaned forward and smacked him over the back of the head. "*Chazos*," she said, reproving. "He is Qowat Milat. He couldn't lie to you about something as simple as the time of day."

T'Mera was reminded of this as she looked up at the Cadet. Their way was absolute candour. He had been raised in it and probably knew no other way. He was so open that he would probably strain something if he *tried* to lie. This gave added weight to his claim about the fate of the synthetics under Captain Rios' former commander. She would not admit it in

front of others openly, but the notion horrified her. She had committed her life to service in Starfleet, and for some to be operating within its ranks to perpetrate such an abominable exercise was unconscionable. “If indeed the synthetics were treated in such a way, I can understand their reluctance to put their faith in Starfleet or the UFP.”

The handsome young Romulan shifted on his feet and continued. “Soji and her sisters, along with Doctor Soong had every reason to believe that there was no hope, knowing that the Romulan fleet was coming to wipe them out of existence. I can tell you that I was scared. Even when Seven of Nine and her Borg Cube fell from the sky, there wasn’t enough firepower to fight off their fleet. So, they built the Beacon, hoping that the synthetic lifeforms from the other realm would be able to save them.” He paused for a moment, then finished with: “Admiral Picard helped Soji see reason and destroy it before the lifeforms could come through and do any damage.” He then drew a deep breath and finished resolutely. “What I can tell you is that they had every right to be afraid. The people of the Federation had treated their people badly because of what the Zhat Vash did at Mars, when they reprogrammed the simple artificial lifeforms that were used as slave labour there to kill.”

Ignoring the wave of uncomfortable looks in the room, Elnor went on. “People like Data’s brother, B4, were then disassembled and packed away, and the only hope for some kind of legacy for Commander Data was for people to do it in secret, even after he fought for, and gave his life for, this very Federation. The synthetic’s right to life – their right to exist was taken away from them with the stroke of a key. Nobody should have that right. It is a crime against sentience.”

His charge crackled across the room. Absolute candour had its price, and Elnor was about to pay it.

"Now, hold on!" the Centauran, Cadet Valerio, cried. "If it's us or them, I'll vote for us every time!"

T'Mera could see where this was going, and it could degenerate fast. However, before she could settle things down, Elnor replied: "Are you suggesting genocide is a suitable solution?"

There was silence in the hall as no-one could answer his charge. T'Mera took advantage of the silence and stoically bowed to Elnor, who politely in replied in kind and took this as his leave before returning to his seat. As he did so, there were few who met his gaze, except Agape Stavros, who found herself fascinated about this man who could not lie.

Later that day, Elnor decided to take some of his leisure time doing the one thing that usually calmed his nerves: combat training. He had some holodeck privileges owed to him, so he changed into his Qowat Milat fighting outfit, took his favourite sword and showed up at his scheduled time. However, when he found himself standing in front of the control panel, he discovered he was uncertain what program to run.

"Computer, what kinds of Romulan combat training programs do you know?" he asked.

Its reply was immediate. "None available."

Elnor pursed his lips in annoyance. "What do you have available?"

"There are over ten thousand training programs on file."

Elnor recoiled slightly. How was he supposed to find something to suit him in that great pile? He considered his own

skills and decided to narrow it all the way down. After all, he only had so much time available. "Computer, give me Starfleet's greatest swordsman captain to spar with and give us a starship cargo hold to practice in." Keep it simple, he thought.

"Program ready." The doors slid open, and Elnor stepped through.

He found himself in a reasonably large cargo hold that was mostly open space, but that had hanging nets around the edges and some large crates here and there. To his surprise, a tall woman with honey-blonde hair wearing an old-fashioned maroon Starfleet uniform from the late twenty-third century watched him, sizing him up.

Again, she surprised him as her uniform dated her somewhat. "Qowat Milat, if my guess is right. I didn't know they were taking in men these days."

She sounded amused to Elnor, but he got the suspicion she was not to be trifled with. At her belt hung a bone-handled hilt with a gold-coloured guard, but curiously, no blade. Where was it? Who was this woman?

"I am Cadet Elnor, Captain," he said, introducing himself. "I was raised by the Qowat Milat, and Admiral Picard sponsored my entrance into the Academy." He gave her a polite nod. "I was looking for someone to spar with and the computer gave me you."

The captain scowled. She spoke, and sarcasm dripped from every word. "I'm a simulacrum, great! Never had much time for them. What do you want from this glorified lightbulb?"

Elnor was a bit put off by this woman's attitude. It was unexpected. "As I said, I was hoping to have someone to spar with."

The Captain looked back at him with her green-eyed gaze as if he was transparent, her head tilted to one side. "I'm sure that's all you're here for." She gave him a cheeky grin. "Fine. Do you want me to go easy on you or not?"

The Romulan's eyebrows shot up in surprise. Surely the female was joking. Did she not know of their reputation? He shook his head. "No," he said. "I am just glad you're a hologram."

The Captain smiled wickedly. "Just keep telling yourself that, kid."

On unspoken agreement, the two gave one another room to prepare. Elnor unsheathed his blade and held it over his right shoulder, relishing the feel of its weight in his hands, the leather grips between his fingers. He felt his heartbeat quicken. He was ready for the fight. He never felt more alive than at these moments.

Opposite him, he watched as the Captain took the hilt from her belt and in one smooth motion a shining, silver blade slid out of the guard. It reminded him of a human weapon he had once been shown by Picard – a katana, if he remembered rightly. She took up a stance not unlike his own and said: "*en garde*."

She moved first and Elnor was surprised. He had no idea a human could move so fast. The Captain had him on the back foot from the start, deflecting her attacks from all quarters. He was beginning to doubt the wisdom of his request. Perhaps he had, as the humans said, bitten off more than he could chew.

The air rang with the sound of steel on steel as the Captain chased the younger man around the room, giving him a lesson he would not soon forget. Elnor found the cargo

containers useful cover, but the Captain gave him no quarter and, even though she was clearly at least twenty-five years his senior, she was at the peak of fitness as she vaulted over them and pummelled him even more with her blade, then surprised him by sending him flying into one of the nets with a well-placed front kick to the chest.

Elnor flailed there for a moment, and he was worried she would come after him and finish him off. However, she just stood there and gave him a cheeky smile.

“That’s what you get for underestimating me.” She held up her sword, triggered a button on the hilt and the blade slid inside. “I’ll let you gather your wits, then come and talk to me.”

As Elnor put together the remnants of his pride, he watched as this relic of the past glided forward and lowered herself effortlessly into a seated position, cross-legged with her eyes closed, as if pondering the universe. She didn’t move or seem interested in him, so Elnor took a deep breath, laid aside his sword and extricated himself from the netting. Once on his feet, he slid his sword back into its sheath and stepped over to the floor a few feet opposite the Captain. “May I join you?” he asked politely.

Without opening her eyes, she nodded, and Elnor sat, mimicking her stance. He waited patiently for a couple of minutes before her eyes popped open and she gave him one of the most intense gazes he had ever seen.

“Did you learn anything?” she asked baldly.

Elnor considered the question honestly. “That I can be overconfident.”

“Yes, you can,” she said. “As a cadet, I would have thought you would have realised by now that you still have a lot to learn.”

The young man sighed. “Yes and no. I thought that, when it came to hand-to-hand combat, that there were few who could best me.”

The Captain nodded. “If you’re going to survive in Starfleet, son, you’re going to have to learn that there’s always someone who can best you. There’s the guy with the bigger ship, the faster ship, the better armed ship, etc. And the worst one of all – the guy who’s smarter than you. He’s the one you have to worry about most.”

Elnor nodded.

“Skill is a good thing, as is training, which I can see you’ve had a lot of. So have I. I’ve also had a lot of life experience, which is where I have the edge – never mind the captain’s bars on my shoulder have a bit to say.”

He gave her a smile that said a lot. Elnor liked this captain; she had a teacher’s manner. She was friendly and liked passing on her knowledge and didn’t mind the odd bit of humour along the way, even though he didn’t understand it all.

“Thank you, Captain,” he said, politely. “Would you be willing to teach me some of what you know?”

The woman opposite him gave him an annoyed scowl. “I’m a toaster. What choice do I get?”

Elnor blinked. His thoughts immediately went back to the discussion of the morning, and he wondered what level of sentience this program had. Was this a true representation of the original person it was based upon? Was this something new? All the same, he felt uncomfortable not giving this digital person

the dignity of choice. "You may be a hologram, Captain, but I am a firm believer in the right of artificial lifeforms to self-determination."

The Captain blinked. "Is that what I am? Am I a lifeform, simply because you told the computer to conjure me up? Interesting. All the same, you did ask me a question. I should dignify it with an answer." She gave him a polite smile, and Elnor wasn't quite certain it was genuine. "Fine, I will train you." Quietly, she added, "I can't help wondering what Mum and Dad would say about this." She sighed. "Anyhow, enough about me." She gave him another of her piercing gazes. "How about you tell me what you really came here for?"

Once again, the Captain seemed to be asking him a question he didn't know he was asking. "What do you mean?"

His nemesis shook her head. "Nobody comes looking for a fight like that just for the sheer fun of it."

Elnor gave her a shrug. "I do."

The Captain looked at him slyly. "For people with a reputation for candour, you're not being all that honest with me. Tell me what happened this morning before you came here."

"I was involved in a discussion over the rights of artificial lifeforms to exist and have not only rights, but to self-determination."

The Captain's eyebrows shot up. "Things have changed a lot since I helmed a starship, that's for sure! What's been going on in the world in the last ... hang on, what year is this anyway?"

"2401."

"OMG. I have been gone a long time. Can you fill me in on what's been going on in the meantime?"

Ever helpful, Elnor spoke up for the computer interface. "Computer, allow access for the Captain to research the historical archives for the last one hundred and fifty years."

The Captain's eyes glazed over momentarily as her mind was filled with information. Her mouth very quickly formed an "O" as her eyes became saucers. After a minute, she sighed, took a moment, then wiped away a tear that had formed in the corner of her eye. Elnor was too polite to ask, and she was not about to share. "Okay," she said, sucking in a breath. "A lot *has* happened." She looked Elnor in the eye. "Including the supernova that took out Eisn." She put out her hand and touched his arm tenderly. "I am so sorry about what happened to your people. I have always had the greatest admiration for the Rihannsu."

Elnor was more than surprised. Here was a Starfleet captain way out of time that seemed to have more regard for his people than most today. Never mind she was using a term for his people he had not heard in years. He hadn't felt this level of respect for a long time. "You honour me, Captain."

The Captain tapped her teeth as she thought. "I'm beginning to see what brought you here. There aren't many Romulans in Starfleet, are there? Sa'avik was the first, but she was only half-Romulan."

Elnor didn't know Sa'avik, but he trusted Picard when he had said Elnor was the first full-blood Romulan. "I am alone."

"Gotcha. So, you're the only Romulan alone in a sea of people who, until recently, considered your people enemies. That's gotta be a bit uncomfortable for you sometimes."

"It is. Not everyone makes me feel welcome." Elnor squirmed a little in place and the Captain picked up on it.

"I can see that, and you don't have to be an Einstein to figure out that would happen. In the early days of the Federation, one of the biggest hurdles we had was getting the Andorians and the Vulcans to stop shooting at each other long enough to realise who the *real* enemies actually were. It will take time, and you will need a lot of courage, but eventually you'll prove to them that you're exactly what you've shown yourself to be – a man willing to put his life on the line in the service of others."

Elnor wondered just how much the Captain had accessed in her deep dive into the historical archives.

"The biggest hurdle you've got is putting aside your own disappointment in the Federation and how they've treated your people."

The younger man flinched. This was not what he was expecting from a sparring session. "I'm sorry?"

"The reason you're so invested in saving the artificial lifeforms and giving them a future – I think – is that you were helpless to do anything to change the outcome for the Rihannsu. The Federation made promises, the Zhat Vash, may they be cursed, bugged them up, and the Federation reneged on those promises, leaving so many to die and the rest to eke out whatever meagre existence they could wherever they could find it. That gave rise to all kind of little tin-pot tyrants popping up here and there. No, the Federation failed your people bigtime." With all sincerity she added, "I'm sorry."

Her earnestness was such that Elnor felt his eyes moisten. He had forgotten he was addressing a hologram. "Thank you, Captain."

"I can see you have good friends, and you must lean on them and remember they are the example of the Federation you want to keep in mind. The galaxy is full of *ryakna*, and they wear all different kinds of faces."

Elnor chuffed at her use of the Romulan word for "garbage" and he considered researching this lady's record on his own time in his quarters later. It was clear he hadn't just looked up a captain with good fighting skills. She had certainly been around in her time. "Yes, ma'am."

As the Captain paused, he took a moment to consider her words. Yes, the Federation had failed his people in the past, but there had been changes both for his people *and* for the synthetics in recent times, and he had been feeling a greater sense of acceptance in the fleet since his adventures with Picard, Seven of Nine and Commander Musiker. His part in both the dramas with the synths and the Borg had garnered him a fair amount of respect, and he wondered if that, alone, was getting him through. Would that goodwill eventually wear off?

The Captain could see all of these thoughts playing on his face and that final note of doubt in his eyes was what she was looking for. "One thing you have to know, Elnor," she told him, firmly. "Because of your example, *you will not be the only Romulan in Starfleet for long*. You will inspire others of the Rihannsu to join, and the more voices of your kind there are, the more you can make a difference for your people. However, ..." the Captain paused and she knew she had Elnor's complete attention. "... when you serve on a Starfleet vessel, the men and women who serve with you should have your *first* loyalty. Your sword should defend them before all others, the Rihannsu come second – always – no matter how you feel. Your shipmates will

be your comrades in arms, and if you are as lucky as me, they will become like family. So, you need to get this out of your system now. Do you understand me?"

Taking a deep breath, Elnor again nodded his understanding. Still, there was much to think about. "Yes, Captain. I understand. I appreciate your candour and the time you have taken to have teach me."

His new mentor gave him a slight smile as she rolled her eyes. "I don't know. I'm going to disappear as soon as you walk out those doors. Time is *very* relative."

Elnor felt terrible for her, and it was written all over his face. "I am so sorry, Captain. I will make certain to save this program and everything in it. If you please, I really would like to return so we can spar again. I would appreciate you teaching me some more of your techniques. It is not only your skill with a blade I appreciate. You are very wise."

The Captain brightened at that. The notion that there was some kind of future for her gave her something to look forward to, after all. It warmed her... artificial soul. "In that case, the toaster should introduce herself. I was... I am Captain Piper. I used to command the *USS Millennium*."

Once Elnor had left the holodeck, and carefully made certain he had saved the program, he made his way to the nearest Academy mess hall, seeing it was already nineteen hundred hours local time. While he hadn't worked nearly as hard as he had hoped, he was still hungry.

As he was want to do, he made a selection at the replimat and then found a seat by himself at a small table. It took

all of thirty seconds before he found he was no longer alone. Another cadet slid into the chair opposite.

He looked up into the curious eyes of Cadet Stavros, who seemed to be seeking his permission. Understanding, he gave her a slight grin and she took this as his OK. She sat down and she said without preamble: "You certainly know how to set the cat amongst the pigeons!"

The saying went straight over Elnor's head, and he looked at her blankly. "I'm sorry?" he said, in that oh-so-polite manner that reminded Agape of an upper-class Australian. She may have been of Greek heritage herself, but she had been raised in Melbourne.

She smiled, showing her full mouth of brilliant, white teeth. "It's another way of saying your statements lacked subtlety and you got everyone talking."

"That was not my intention. I merely wanted to clarify what I thought was an inadequately described situation."

Agape held up a hand. "You don't need to defend yourself to me, Elnor. I understand, and I agree with you totally. I just wonder how we're going to temper your manner of absolute candour so you can open your mouth without getting the whole room mad at you."

Elnor was honest, but also smart enough to catch the undercurrent of what she was saying. "Are you saying you want to be my friend?"

Stavros rolled her burrito, bit the end off of it and chewed, making Elnor wait for the answer, a twinkle in her eye the whole time. She finished her mouthful, then smiled and said: "Of course I do, dummy. You're one of the first totally honest guys I've ever met, and if I'm right, and I think I am, I don't think

you have a cruel bone in your body. Which means you're totally alright with me. Who knows? One day I might even marry you!"

Shocked at her forwardness, Elnor's eyebrows shot up, his eyes wide, but then he saw the mirth lines around her eyes and knew that Cadet Stavros was "pulling his leg", as Raffi called it. He thought back to the best way to make introductions Captain Rios had taught him, and he mimicked it. He put out his hand. "Hello. I'm Elnor."

Delighted, his new friend responded in kind. "Hi, I'm Agape. What would you like to talk about?"

Elnor thought about it and realised that was easy. "You'll never believe who I met on the holodeck today..."