

## Underwater Love

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# Underwater Love

by [TiffanyF](#)

## Summary

\*\*\*\*\*REWRITE\*\*\*\*\*

When Nathan returns to the seaQuest one person cannot keep their eyes off him. Something that Nathan is well aware of, even if he has trouble figuring out who the eyes belong to.

Don't own, don't claim, no money made here

## Notes

This is the first part of a multi-chapter piece I wrote years ago for the show. I've had it in my "to be rewritten" folder for years now and finally decided to just go ahead and do it. He's the first part. There's six more, so I hope it's not too hard to read. :)

# Watching

There was someone watching him. Constantly. Watching his every move. From the moment he first stepped onto the bridge when Bill conned him onto the boat, he'd sensed eyes on him. He didn't know who it was or what they wanted. All he knew was the eyes didn't feel hostile. He never could catch anyone looking at him for any longer than was proper and that, more than anything, frustrated him. No one on the boat knew about his latent psychic abilities, but even they weren't helping him much.

So he sat day after day, watching his new crew. Trying to figure them out, much as they were doing with him. He knew that he was a legend to some, a mystery to them all, but that still didn't explain the eyes on him constantly. The seaQuest was a remarkable boat, so much more than he ever dreamed when designing her, and in a small way he was glad to be back. To be the one in charge of his dream. His legacy. Not that he approved of the methods used, certainly, but he felt at home. At first, those first few long nights, he'd felt guilty about returning, but the more he thought about it, the more he realized she wouldn't want him to hide away forever. She would want him to live and be happy.

Then the eyes were back. Captain Nathan Bridger didn't look up from the report he'd just been handed on the status of their supplies. He didn't turn in his chair; he didn't do anything but try once again to figure out exactly where on the bridge that stare came from.

\*~\*

Eventually, after several more long, frustrating days trying to figure out who was watching him, he went to the only person on seaQuest he felt remotely comfortable talking with. He made sure the room around the moon pool was empty before sliding into the water.

"Bridger play!" Darwin's head popped up near him.

"Hey Dar, no play," he said with a fond smile. "I need to talk with you."

"Darwin talk."

"I know you do. I guess I just need to talk with someone I trust, and that's not a long list these days."

"Bridger trust Darwin," the dolphin grinned. "Darwin trust Bridger. No talk. No tell. Not even Lucas."

"That's right, pal." Nathan was amazed at how much his friend had learned since coming on-board. "I don't even know how much you'll understand, but someone's watching me all the time. I don't know who it is or what they want from me. I can just sense their eyes on me, and it's making me itch."

"Watch work, watch Bridger," Darwin said, nodding and splashing water. "Like Bridger, watch Bridger."

“Well, yes, I think they like me. The gaze doesn’t feel mean or hostile,” Nathan said, rubbing Darwin’s back. “I suppose it could just be someone who wonders what kind of officer I’m going to be.”

Darwin splashed him. “Bridger legend.”

“Now I wouldn’t go that far,” Nathan said, only half serious. He’d heard the talk on the ship before the people talking knew he was there. “Maybe I’m just imagining things. It wouldn’t be the first time.”

“No picture. Real.” Darwin lifted his head out of the water. “Watch Bridger, love Bridger. Darwin loves Bridger.”

“Dar, what are you...” He broke off, sensing someone in the room with them. When he turned to look, there was no one there. Not even a shadow, or a door closing in the distance. Bridger sighed. Just once he’d like for things to make sense and be easy for him.

\*~\*

Far from making him feel better, the talk with Darwin made him feel worse. If he understood the dolphin correctly, and that certainly wasn’t a sure thing, someone on the boat was in love with him. He showered at the moon pool and made his way back to his quarters, locking the door before laying down on his bunk. He knew better than to try and flop onto it, no matter how much he wanted to. Those beds weren’t really designed for comfort. Bridger’s mind was a storm for the first time in years, and he just let it go, hoping it would sort itself out before he had to be on the bridge for his watch.

He’d practically killed his wife by taking her to that island after Robert died. Deep down, as he’d realized when he came back to the seaQuest, he knew that she wouldn’t want him to grieve forever, but twenty-seven years was a long time. They’d become attuned to the other, almost two parts of a whole, and he didn’t know that he could ever love anyone ever again.

They’d talked, just after Robert’s funeral, about what they wanted for the other when they died. Carol had just wanted him to be happy. That was all she said. It was so like her to say so little but to mean so much, and Bridger could admit that he was happy to be back on his boat. He was helping others in ways he hadn’t thought possible back when the seaQuest was an idea on paper. But if he was honest with himself, even considering allowing anyone close to his heart terrified him.

He rolled over onto his side and frowned when his pillow crinkled. He reached under and pulled out a folded piece of paper that he was positive hadn’t been there when he went to the moon pool. No one had access to his quarters; no one but Lucas. That one thought chilled him to the bone because of how young the kid was. With a sense of foreboding, Bridger unfolded the note to read.

*Captain, or may I call you Nathan? Don’t worry, Lucas just did me a favor and dropped this off. He thinks it’s part of a puzzle game the two of us are working on together, and that’s why it had to be hidden under your pillow. I’m sorry if my staring makes you uncomfortable, but sometimes I just can’t help myself. You are a very handsome man, one I would dearly love to get to know better. I understand your reluctance to start another relationship, but know that I*

*am willing to wait until you are. You're not-so-secret admirer.*

\*~\*

The obvious thing to do was to just go and ask Lucas who wrote the note and asked him to put it under Bridger's pillow. The only reason he didn't do it was he didn't want to admit the paper wasn't part of a puzzle game, whatever that even was, because he knew that Lucas would be curious. A curious genius led to two things; wonders or disaster, and on a boat like the seaQuest, Bridger wanted to keep the disasters to a minimum for crew safety.

The only solution was to be logical about the whole matter. There were a limited number of women aboard the seaQuest, and he just had to observe them to see if he could figure the puzzle out. Bridger knew he could eliminate Kristin, if only because she was rarely on the bridge, and while she did seem more than a little interested in him, the secret note thing just didn't seem her style at all.

A knock at his door startled him. "Yes?"

Lieutenant Tim O'Neill opened the door and leaned in. "Captain, a priority code message from Admiral Noyce just came through," he said. "We're being ordered to the Caribbean."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Bridger said. "Any details?"

"No, Sir. I've just come off duty and told the Commander I would pass on the message for him."

"All right, thank you. Dismissed."

O'Neill nodded and left, shutting the door behind him. Bridger sighed and reached for the intercom. "Commander Ford, could you patch me through to Admiral Noyce, please?"

"Yes, Sir."

While he waited, Bridger's mind turned back to his personal puzzle. Hitchcock was almost always on the bridge when he was on duty, but doubted she would risk her career by admitting any sort of romantic feelings for a superior officer. Especially given their first interactions when he was brought on-board. No, Hitchcock was military to the core and cared more for her career than personal life. That left him with the options of Susan and a couple of science crew he had yet to get to know.

"Captain, we have the Admiral on a secure channel."

"Pipe it down, Commander." Bridger turned towards the screen as his old friend appeared. Their conversations of late had been strained since Bill tricked him back into service, but Nathan knew friendship would win out in the end. It generally did.

"Hello, Nathan, what did they tell you?"

"Just that you want us in the Caribbean," Bridger replied, sitting down at his desk. "What's going on?"

“Pirates of some sort have been looting the resorts and smaller communities both above and below,” Noyce said. “We don’t really have anything for you to go on other than a trail of attacks and debris.”

Just what Bridger needed in his life, another mystery. Maybe it would take his mind off his personal problems for a while. “There’s not to be more to it than that, Bill,” he said. “We’re the flagship of the UEO, but we’re primarily research. What aren’t you telling me?”

Noyce sighed. “Nate, I’m not going to lie to you. I’ve done that enough,” he said. “I want the reputation and presence there more than anything else. The seaQuest is the best-known boat we have. Your suspicious mind is just a bonus in this case.”

“Oh, thanks,” Bridger replied. “I’ll see what we can do, Bill, but without more info, I don’t know that I can promise you all that much.”

“I know you, Nate. You’ll figure this out. I have faith in you.” The screen went black before Bridger could reply.

“I only wish I had that faith in myself,” Bridger muttered as he stared at the blank screen.  
\*~\*

The following morning, after a fairly sleepless night, Bridger called his officers, and Lucas, together for a meeting. Commanders Ford and Hitchcock, Lieutenants O’Neill and Kreig, Sensor Chief Ortiz, the Doctor, a superstitious Security Chief, and a sixteen-year-old genius all gathered in the ward room to hear what it was the Captain had to say. “We’re going on a pirate hunt,” Bridger said by way of introduction. “Someone’s decided to resurrect the fine old tradition of looting, and we’ve been ordered to stop them.” He looked around the room and was pleased to note that everyone but Chief Crocker took the news in stride, and he really never did expect anything different from his old friend.

“What information do we have, Captain?” Ford asked, leaning forward.

“Not much, which is where you come in, Lucas,” Bridger replied. “I want you to hit the computers. Do what you do best and see what all you can come up with for us.”

“Right,” Lucas said.

Bridger smiled. He could already see plans forming in the young man’s mind. “As for the rest of us, Mr. Ortiz, I want the WSKRS scanning as far out as they can, and the communication networks monitored at all times, Mr. O’Neill. Commander Hitchcock, I want you to work with Lieutenant Kreig to arrange for some shore leave for some of the crew. These pirates are working the dry as well. Let’s see what information out people can pick up for us.”

“What about me, Cap’n?” Crocker asked.

“Well, Chief, you get to research pirate history,” Bridger said. “It’s just possible these people are history buffs as well, and there’s something in the histories that will help us out.”

“Aye, Sir,” Crocker smiled.

Bridger dismissed them and was about to follow along when he saw the note left behind on the table. He picked it up to return to whoever forgot it, and saw his name. With a small sigh, he sat back down and opened it, not sure what he would find.

*I hope you don't mind me calling you Nathan. This is the first time I've ever done anything like this, and don't exactly know the protocols, and there's no one I can ask about it. You're probably trying to figure out who I am. Well, I'm bridge crew, military with brown hair and a pale complexion. I love reading and learning new things. I'm not so concerned about my career that I won't admit to my feelings for you. If you would like to write back, give the note to Darwin. He'll find me.*

Bridger was flummoxed. Maybe he misread Hitchcock, but she'd been at the head of the table with Commander Ford and hadn't dropped anything on her way out. It was just as well he was sitting down when he realized what it meant. The one writing to him wasn't a woman. Part of Bridger wanted to jump up and run out of the room, but the more rational part of him spoke up quickly and told him to think things through very seriously before he set foot out of the ward room. This officer was putting far more than his feelings on the line, and if Bridger stepped the wrong way, he would ruin yet another life. He tucked the note into an inner pocket where he didn't have to worry about losing it and headed for the bridge. Writing back didn't seem like the smartest option to take, but it was the most logical at that point. With time he could get a few more clues about who his mystery admirer was and then he would be able to decide how best to address the situation. He would just have to be very careful not to lead them to a place they would never be able to return from.

\*~\*

*Hello. No, I don't mind you calling me Nathan. I realize that you're under my command, but since you haven't slipped yet and done so on the bridge, I doubt you will. I have been trying to figure out who you are and have it narrowed down to three people based on the hints you gave me in your last note. Let's see now, you said you wanted to know more about me. I'm primarily a scientist now, military because and when I have to be, but I do long for my days of research on my island with only Darwin for company. No, I will never take anyone there again. My wife died because I took her to that place and, in that way, it was my own personal hell. When you say this is the first time you've done this, do you mean the first time writing the notes, or the first time in love, because those are two very different things. I admire your courage to step forward as you have.*

Bridger reread the note several times before sealing it in a plastic bag. He took it to the moon pool immediately, before he could talk himself out of the whole thing.

"Bridger play?" Darwin asked, smiling as only a dolphin could.

"Dar, can you deliver this note for me?" Bridger asked in reply.

"Yes."

"Can you tell me who you're taking it to?"

"Secret. No tell Bridger. No tell Lucas," Darwin said.

Bridger grinned. To have such a simple outlook on life would be such a treasure. “Well, is it a friend?” he asked, rubbing Darwin’s nose. “Or is it someone that wants to hurt me?”

“No hurt. Love Bridger.”

He knew the dolphin was telling him, in his own way, that it was a friend sending the notes. Bridger figured as much, but he was too used to being on-guard with everyone around him that he wanted to be sure.

“Nathan, what are you doing here at this hour?” Kristin asked from behind him in surprise.

“I couldn’t sleep and decided a walk might help,” Bridger replied. He let the plastic bag drop into the pool and watched as Darwin swam away with it. “How about a midnight snack and I can ask your opinion on these attacks we’re going to be investigating.”

“Sounds to me like you just want company,” she said, looking at him.

“That too,” Bridger laughed.

\*~\*

*Nathan, you’re so handsome when you laugh. Don’t be mad, but I was in the moon pool area and heard you talking with Darwin. I won’t hurt you if I can help it in any way. This is my first time for both the notes and these feelings. I was raised to believe these sorts of feelings are wrong, but refuse to deny myself a chance at happiness. I can only hope I can make you happy as well. I can’t tell you much more about myself if you’ve been so quick to figure out who it isn’t. Not unless you want me to step forward and tell you exactly who I am. I am not looking for anything short, cheap, or meaningless. Please do not think I am. I know those are easy words to say, but I mean them with all my being.*

That didn’t help much at all. Bridger had his doubts about two of his choices, but didn’t want to jump to any quick conclusions, especially given what all was at stake in the whole affair. There were three men who fit the description given, and the most recent note didn’t do a damn thing to rule any of them out. Darwin, however, did. Bridger knew there weren’t too many people on the boat the dolphin would help, after himself and Lucas, of course. Maybe it was time to see if his idea had any merit.

\*~\*

Bridger was nervous and, in a way, he had every right to be. He hadn’t been on a date or spoken to anyone about romance in almost 28 years. The words he whispered to his wife weren’t what he considered romance; they were pieces of his heart that he gave to her. Small pieces of his being that he wanted to share with her and no one else. While he knew that was what most people considered romantic, he didn’t; it was just how things were. The only thing he was sure of, at that point, was that he’d felt more alive the past few weeks than he had since Carol died.

His room was as clean as it could be. The hologram projector was off and locked, and he’d covered the window in his door. That had to be the one thing he absolutely hated about the boat; the doors to the personal quarters had windows in them. One-way windows he could understand, but the lack of privacy grated on him more often than not. It was as if the UEO

was saying they didn't trust their people to behave in their own quarters, and gave others a way to check on the business of people they had no business checking on in the first place. As the Captain, he could get away with covering his up, and usually did.

He turned slightly from the book he was reading when someone knocked on his door.  
"Enter."

Tim O'Neill walked in and shut the door behind them. "You wanted to see me, Captain?"

"Yes, sit down," Bridger said. "Have you managed to hear anything on these pirates we're supposed to be tracking?"

"No, Sir; it's strange. No one is talking about the attacks at all," Tim replied. "Not even fixing the places that have been attacked. It's almost as if the pirates didn't exist."

"Ghosts?"

"I don't know, Sir," Tim said. "Who knows what mysteries we have yet to uncover about the sea."

Bridger put the book he'd been looking through down on the table in front of them. "Chief Crocker found this and has been shaking ever since," he said. "Back in 2003, the Disney Corporation put out a movie about cursed pirates who couldn't be killed and wouldn't die. As much as I hate to say it, we could well be dealing with something similar. As impossible as that sounds, of course."

"I'll check the reports and see if there's anything there," Tim said. "I've never seen this book before. Do you think the Chief would be willing to let me borrow it?"

"You enjoy reading, don't you, Tim?"

"Yes, Sir, but the more I read the more questions I have. Every time I go past a library, I get an anxiety attack."

Bridger laughed and turned to grab another book. He felt the not familiar gaze fall on him, and knew he was right. "You might enjoy reading this book, Tim," he said. He pulled down a worn copy of 18 and 19th Century sea stories. It was also where he'd hidden the notes.

Tim took it with a smile and started to flip through the book. His smile faded when he found the letters. "You figured it out," he said, not looking up. "What happens now, Captain? Should I request a transfer?"

"You're going to look at me," Bridger said gently. "Don't ever be ashamed of your feelings, Tim. Look at me, please."

The young officer looked up slowly. "How did you know?"

"You had Darwin's help," Bridger replied. "You, Lucas, and I are the only ones on the boat he would keep secrets for. Listen to me for a minute, okay? I lost my son when he was so young, only twenty-one. Then I lost my wife, who was very much my other half. My anchor

in reality. You've made me realize that I was clinging to that anchor and forgetting to truly live. I think Carol would thank you for that as soon as she was finished boxing me around the ears. You can't take a step back in your career because things have become awkward. You would be punishing yourself for something you didn't even do, punishing me for something neither of us did, and that's not fair. We can work past this."

"What about the rules?" Tim asked.

"Damn the rules," Bridger exclaimed, "and damn anyone that wants to say anything. You've been discreet. I doubt anyone other than Darwin knows there's anything going on, and he's not going to tell. As long as we remain professional I don't see any reason why we shouldn't explore these feelings."

"Do you feel something, Nathan?"

Bridger sat down and put his hand over Tim's. "I was married a long time," he said. "When you're with someone that long you grow comfortable with them. But I have been feeling something these past weeks that I remember from when I first met Carol."

"I only wish I could know what it's like to be so in love," Tim said.

"Do you worry that you'll have to compete with her?"

"A little."

"Tim, you are very, very different from Carol," Bridger said, smiling gently. "I don't just mean you're a different gender. She was my world for along time, but she told me, right after we lost Robert, that she just wanted me to be happy. I expected to feel guilty when I realized I was developing feelings for you, but I don't. Somehow I think Carol knows and approves of my moving on with my life like I am."

"What if someone does find out?" Tim asked, staring at their hands. "What happens then?"

"I can't say it will be easy," Bridger replied. "I can't promise miracles either, but I do have some friends left in high places and I should be able to call in a few favors. One thing we are not going to do is jump right into bed. That's one of the best ways to ruin a relationship."

Tim turned bright red and looked at the floor. Bridger bit his lip and tried not to laugh; the innocence was absolutely precious. He felt as if he was seeing Tim in a whole new light. The man was unusual, but handsome in his own, unique way. "You've never talked about these things before, have you?" he asked.

"No, Sir," Tim said, slipping back into officer mode.

"Hey now, none of that." Bridger reached out and gently lifted Tim's chin so they were looking at each other again. "When we're off-duty this has to be an equal relationship," he said. "I don't want to be your Captain all the time."

"Okay," Tim said, smiling. "I can't believe how nervous I am."

“I’m a little shaky myself,” Bridger admitted. “That’ll go away with time. People will notice us spending time together, but there’s no regulation against the Captain having friends on his crew.”

“Uh, actually I think there is,” Tim said. “UEO regulation 6903.”

“Oh for, is there any part of our lives they won’t regulate?” Bridger exclaimed. “Well then, that’s one rule that’s going out the hatch right now. Maybe a few more will follow, but I am not going to let some book of rules dictate who my friends are, or who I chose to love.”

At those words, Tim lit up. Bridger stood and drew Tim into a hug. “I may be more trouble than I’m worth,” he whispered. “Be very sure this is what you want before we go any farther and end up somewhere we can’t escape from.”

“I am sure,” Tim replied, resting his cheek on Bridger’s head. “I am.”

## Chapter 2

“Captain, I have a call coming in from Admiral Noyce,” Lieutenant Tim O’Neill said, turning slightly from his station on the bridge so the Captain would be able to hear him.

“Thank you, Mr. O’Neill,” Captain Nathan Bridger replied. “Pipe the message down to the Ward Room. Commander, you have the helm. Keep running those probes and let me know if you find anything before I’m back.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Bridger walked briskly from the bridge and into the Ward Room. He wasn’t sure what his old friend needed from him at that point in time, but he had a feeling he wouldn’t have to wait long to find out. Bill Noyce wasn’t one to spare words, especially when he was upset about something. “Hello, Bill,” he said, shutting the door behind him. “I suppose you heard the good news; the pirates aren’t ghosts and we’ve got an idea of where they’re based. I’m hoping we’ll have found them by the end of the week.”

“That is good news, Nate, but it’s the not the reason I called,” Noyce said seriously. “I’ve received several reports that you’ve suddenly been spending a lot of time with your communications officer off-duty.”

Which was true. Over the past two weeks, he and O’Neill had spent as much time together as they dared just getting to know one another. Both men agreed to move slowly in their budding relationship, although they admitted the passion was there. They were also being very careful not to neglect their friends or duties onboard the seaQuest.

“That’s true, Mr. O’Neill is teaching me French,” Nathan replied. “I suppose this is the point where you tell me there’s a regulation prohibiting education in officers ranked Lieutenant and above.”

“Damn it, Nathan, can’t you be serious for once? I’m trying to protect you.”

Bridger sat down and looked at his friend. “I can appreciate that, Bill, but I haven’t done anything that’s against the regs. Now, why don’t you tell me where these reports are coming from? I don’t want anyone undermining my command.”

“You know I can’t do that.”

“You kidnap me, lie to me, and now you’re spying on me,” Bridger said, narrowing his eyes a little. “Is there anything the UEO won’t do in order to control its people?”

“Now it’s not like that...”

“Then tell me what it’s like,” Bridger interrupted. “Damn it, Bill, you know how much I enjoy learning new things. Do you really expect me to ignore a resource like O’Neill? He knows at least eighteen languages and he’s a good teacher.”

“Then say something in French.”

“Occupez-vous de vos propres fichues affaires,” Nathan snapped.

“What the hell does that mean?”

Bridger frowned. “Good-bye, Bill.”

\*~\*

Another damn mystery. Being on a boat like the seaQuest bred rumors and, in turn, mysteries. Bridger knew he could simply ask Tim to check the communication logs to see who had been talking to UEO HQ, but the only thing that would really do would be to send a red flag straight to Bill Noyce’s office that something really was wrong on the boat. There was only one person on the boat who could do what needed to be done.

“Lucas, I need a favor,” Bridger said, shutting the door to the young man’s room behind him.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Someone on-board has been sending reports to Admiral Noyce about me,” Bridger said. “Secret reports. I want to know who and what they’re saying. Do you think you could find out, off the record, for me?”

The teen grinned. “Of course I can. It’d help if you’d tell O’Neill to ignore me,” he said. “It’ll be easier for me to move. I’m guessing you don’t want any traces of this scan left once I’m done?”

“Just do what you have to do,” Bridger said. “You do good work, kid.”

“Thanks.”

\*~\*

Later that day, evening by ship time, Bridger and O’Neill met up in the mess for dinner. “Is everything okay, Sir?” Tim asked, flipping through one of his French books. “You seemed a little tense earlier.”

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Bridger said. “So, what are we learning about this evening?”

“Food.”

Bridger looked over both of their trays. “Nothing on here counts then,” he said, smiling. “Not unless the language has adapted to include things like egg product.”

Tim laughed too. “Most languages have adapted along with English,” he said. “Oh, hey Migs; what’s up?”

Miguel Ortiz was standing by their table with a tray in his hands. “May I join you?”

“Of course you can, Mr. Ortiz,” Bridger said. “Mr. O’Neill, shall we postpone our language lesson so we don’t bore Mr. Ortiz?”

“I’ve been trying to convince Migs to learn another language for close to a year,” Tim replied. He closed the book and moved it off the table. “He’s managed to avoid it every time, somehow, but I’m not sure how.”

“I already know two languages,” Ortiz said.

“So what’s one more?” Tim pressed.

“Drop it, O’Neill,” Ortiz growled. “I don’t want to fight in front of the Captain.”

Bridger started laughing. “Actually, I’m rather enjoying myself,” he said. “So tell me, Mr. Ortiz, how did those final WSKR sweeps end today?”

\*~\*

Lucas spent the day and evening working his way through the communication logs for the Captain. He wasn’t entirely sure why anyone would go over the Captain’s head, but it wasn’t fair. Lucas knew how the UEO, and Bill Noyce brought the Captain back to the fold, and he’d thought it was unfair of them to be so sneaky. To find out someone on the boat was out to hurt the Captain after he’d already been hurt so much made Lucas mad. He channeled that anger into his search, making sure he didn’t miss anything. Bridger had to have told O’Neill to ignore any unauthorized traffic because Lucas was able to fly through the system. Not that he needed to be ignored to do the same thing, it was just more practical, and he was able to erase his tracks as he went.

The young man loved computers. They understood him in a way that no one else could, although it seemed like the Captain was trying. Lucas grinned as he scanned the numerous messages in the log. Bridger was a good man and Lucas didn’t feel like he had to push nearly as hard with him as he did most adults. Bridger seemed to be a natural around Lucas, and Lucas respected that more than he knew how to say or show. It was sort of like finally having a father in his life.

A message caught his eye and Lucas called it up to read. *Whoa, no wonder the Captain wants to know about this. I wonder if it’s true or not?*

He printed out that message and narrowed his search for more messages from the same account name. It was one he didn’t know, didn’t recognize, and seemed to have been created recently. Maybe just to send the messages to the UEO brass. It would have been a good way to hide what they were doing, whoever it was sending the reports along. His search turned up several more messages about the Captain and Lieutenant O’Neill, and Lucas printed those too. Then, after erasing his tracks one final time, he left to find the Captain.

\*~\*

After dinner, where he’d had more fun than he could remember in recent months, Bridger went for a swim with Darwin, showered, and was in bed reading before turning in for the night. He didn’t want to believe there was a member of his crew, possibly an officer, that could be so petty, if that was even the right word, to report him to HQ. He knew that he and Tim were breaking several regulations with their budding relationship, but Bridger really didn’t care. He’d looked up regulation 6903 and found it to be a lot of hot air directed towards keeping the Captain of any UEO boat isolated from his crew. Bridger knew better

than to think a crew performed better with an aloof Captain. They needed to know the person in command was not a machine and someone they could trust no matter what the situation they found themselves in. He'd always been more open with the people under his command than was strictly proper, but he'd also managed to turn out some of the best people the Navy or UEO ever saw, and he was proud of that. Bridger believed in encouraging independent thinking in his people, and saw no reason to stop or change his style that late in his life. If the UEO didn't like it, he would simply retire to research again.

"Come in," he called, not looking up at the knock on his door.

Lucas shut the door behind him and walked over to the bunk. "I found something I think you need to see," he said, handing over the printouts. "I'm still searching, but I wanted you to know about these."

"Well," Bridger said, reading the top message, "no wonder Noyce is so upset." He moved his legs and motioned for Lucas to sit down. "I think a little damage control is in order here. Can you fix it so these messages come to us rather than HQ, but make it look like they actually went through so our rat doesn't figure out the game has been changed?"

"No problem," Lucas replied, confident in his skills at the computer. "The real problem is going to be finding out who this is."

"I think Mr. O'Neill will be able to help us with that."

Lucas turned red. "Captain, are these reports true?"

"Of course not," Bridger said mildly. "The Lieutenant is giving me French lessons and it seems someone on the boat decided to read more into it and make trouble for me."

"Well, it's just that, y'know, if they were, it wouldn't bother me."

"Thanks, kiddo, that means a lot to me," Bridger smiled. "And now, I think it's past your bedtime."

"Aw, Captain."

Bridger looked over his glasses. "Lucas, please don't argue with me. At least go back to your rooms so I can pretend you're sleeping," he said. "Humor an old man."

"All right, I'll let you know if I find anything else."

"Thank you. Good night, Lucas."

\*~\*

The next morning, Bridger waited until everyone on the bridge was busy before he made his way over to the communication station. "Mr. O'Neill, I need your help with something," he said softly.

"Sir?"

Bridger could feel eyes on them as they talked. At least one pair belonged to the person sending the lies to HQ, and he was damned if we was going to let that continue. He would be able to retire again, but O'Neill was still young and had the rest of his career ahead of him. "It seems someone is sending reports to Noyce," he said softly. "About me."

"That's why you were so upset yesterday." Tim looked up at the man he loved. "What's Admiral Noyce going to do to you?"

"Nothing, and don't even think about blaming yourself," Bridger replied. "We just need to figure out who it is so I can get a few things straightened out, with both them and Noyce."

"I can go through the logs," Tim started, but paused when Bridger held up a hand.

"Lucas is already doing that. I wanted a search that wouldn't flag back to HQ," he whispered. "What I need you to do is get together with Lucas and work to find out who is sending the reports."

The boat shuddered suddenly, and only years of training and experience kept Bridger on his feet and out of Tim's lap; even if he wouldn't mind being there. The bridge really wasn't the place. "Report, Mr. Ford," he snapped.

"Depth charges," Jonathan Ford replied. "I think we found the pirates, Sir."

"Anything on the airwaves, Mr. O'Neill?" Bridger asked, moving to stand behind the XO station.

"A general warning in multiple languages to stay away," Tim replied.

"Those charges say that well enough on their own," Bridger muttered. "All stop. Let's see what's out there. Mr. Ortiz, WSKRS on the forward screen. Commander Hitchcock, let's get a probe in the water."

Bridger watched and waited while his crew worked to follow his orders. He wasn't going to let the boat go anywhere until he was positive there was no danger to her or her crew. He was almost tempted to move back, but Bridger had a feeling that would be the last mistake he ever made.

"Captain, WSKRS show a ship in the water, about half a mile off, just sitting there," Ortiz reported. "Nothing else visible on the surface around it and we're alone down here, except for the charges."

"Commander Hitchcock, what do you see?" Bridger asked.

"It's made of wood," she replied a moment later. "Not much larger than one of our launches."

"Chief Crocker to the bridge," Bridger said. "Mr. O'Neill, pick a language and see if you can get their attention. Is there any way we can get a topside view of that ship?"

"Not without sending a launch," Hitchcock was saying when a splash interrupted her.

Darwin stuck his head up out of his smaller bridge tank. "Darwin go. Get pictures. Swim fast."

"There's weapons out there," Bridger said.

"Darwin careful."

"It's definitely not something they'd expect," Hitchcock said with a shrug. "Lucas and I can probably hook a camera to his SCUBA gear without taking too much time."

"Do it," Bridger said. "Let me know when you're ready and I'll come down. Mr. O'Neill, any response?"

Tim's face was red. "Several, but none I care to repeat," he said. "Especially the one about your mother, Sir."

Bridger tried very, very hard not to laugh and ended up snorting loudly. "Do they speak English?" he finally managed to ask.

"I believe so, Sir. One of the insults was in English."

"All right, broadcast this; this is Captain Nathan Bridger or the UEO flagship seaQuest," he said. "As of this moment you have done nothing illegal and I just want to speak with you."

Everyone on the bridge watched and waited while Tim's face turned redder and redder. "They said no, Sir," he finally managed to say.

"Along with a few other things too, I would imagine," Bridger said. "All right, being rude isn't against any regulation or treaty I can think of, but those charges are. We need to find out if that boat planted them or not."

"Captain," Lucas said via the intercom, "Darwin's out of seaQuest."

"I thought I said to wait for me," Bridger said with a frown.

"He wouldn't wait," Lucas replied. "He said he would swim fast and come home again. I didn't have a chance to argue with him once his gear was on."

Bridger sighed. "All right, come on up to the bridge with Hitchcock then."

"Yes, Sir."

"Captain, something's happening."

"Specifics, Mr. Ortiz."

"I'm not sure, Sir. It's like the ship is shifting," Ortiz replied. "It's definitely sinking and the wood is falling away."

Crocker appeared at Bridger's left. "Sorry, Cap; couple of my boys were hurt when we shook," he said. "What'd you need?"

"I wanted your opinion on a pirate ship, but it's either falling apart on them, or they've got something nasty hidden over there and we're not aware of it."

"Torpedoes in the water," Ortiz shouted.

"Sound collision," Bridger snapped. "Get Darwin back. That boat was a decoy."

He watched as Ben Kreig ducked through the bridge doors just before the shut. Bridger was amazed that every time they had to secure the bridge, Kreig managed to duck through at the last second. He wasn't sure how or why, but he had yet to not see it happen. "Damage report," he snapped once the boat stopped shaking.

"Minimal," Hitchcock replied. "Sealing off the damaged area."

"Flood forward tubes," Bridger said. "Mr. O'Neill, tell them if they want to beat us then they're going to need a bigger boat."

"Forward tubes flooded and ready, Sir," Ford said.

"Forty percent charge," Bridger ordered. "I'd like to at least take these people alive if we can't get ahold of their ship."

"No response," O'Neill said.

"Tell them to stand down or we fire," Bridger ordered. Tim's answering blush was the only reply he needed. "Is Darwin home?"

"Aye, Cap," Crocker said.

"Fire."

\*~\*

The clean-up in the area took another week. Bridger was so busy that he didn't have a chance to see Tim the whole time unless they were both on duty on the bridge. Finally he caved and asked Tim to join him for supper in his quarters.

"Captain?" Tim asked, knocking on the door.

"Come in," Bridger replied. "I wanted a report on those scans you and Lucas have been running."

Tim shut the door behind him and smiled. "Just that?"

"Not really, but it's as good a reason as I can think of to call you down here," Bridger said with an answering smile.

"Captain, Admiral Noyce is calling on a secure channel."

Bridger sighed at the page over the intercom and squeezed Tim's hand before moving to sit at his desk. "Pipe it down," he ordered.

"Hello, Nate."

"Bill, what can I do for you?"

"Now don't sound like a sulking child, I'm only trying to watch out for you," Noyce said. "I haven't had any reports lately and just wanted to make sure everything was all right."

"Of course it is. We found out who's been sending the reports to HQ and I had them diverted," Bridger said. "You didn't really think I would risk another man's career if I could stop it, did you?"

For a minute it seemed Bill Noyce was at a loss for words. "One of these days you'll go too far, Nate, and I won't be able to help you."

"And some might say you've already gone too far," Bridger said. "I won't have my crew used against me, Bill. From now on, if you have a problem with my command, or me, then talk to me. I won't have them tattling to HQ like I'm some sort of child."

"No one ever said you were," Noyce protested.

"It's implied," Nathan snapped. "Don't forget you wanted me here to begin with. I was happy on my island. You know my methods, Bill, and if the UEO objects then they can have the damn boat."

"Now I didn't say that," Noyce said. "Everyone knows how unconventional you are, but think how it looks to the brass here at HQ..."

"Including you."

"I didn't say that either," Bill protested. "Look at it from my end. You know the Captain of a boat is forbidden from having a relationship with any member of their crew. I get these reports that say you are and I have to be seen to do something."

Bridger snorted. "And suddenly my word isn't good enough for you."

"You could out-stubborn a mule," Bill sighed. "I suppose you'll ignore me if I order you to stop these French lessons."

"Unless you can show me a rule that clearly states a Captain may not learn anything new while on active command," Bridger pointed out. "As you pointed out, we've been friends a long time. Let's not let something like this put us on opposite sides."

"Nate, I'm not sure this is something I can overlook," Noyce said. "They want to send someone to investigate and I don't know that I can stop them."

"If that's how they want to play it, then let them," Bridger said. "Because there is nothing happening on this boat that goes against any UEO regulation I'm familiar with." He turned

off the screen before Noyce could say anything else. “You holding up okay, Tim?”

“Yeah. What reports was he talking about?”

Bridger sighed and moved to sit next to Tim on the bunk. “Those scans Lucas has been running turned up some interesting, if disturbing, communications between someone on this boat and Bill. That person seems to think we’ve developed a romantic relationship.”

“We have, in a way,” Tim said. “I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

More to stop the train of thought than anything else, Bridger leaned over and kissed Tim gently. Being very careful of Tim’s glasses – he remembered how much it hurt to get those things pressed into your face – he slowly increased the pressure and brought one hand up to cup Tim’s head. “I told you,” he whispered against his lover’s lips. “I don’t give a damn for the regulations. They took everything away from me once. I’m not going to let anyone do that ever again.”

Tim’s face slowly turned red. Bridger grinned and pulled him into a hug. “You know, if one kiss makes you turn that color, then I really can’t wait to show you more.”

# Tasting

## Chapter Notes

Please note that I've borrowed dialogue from the episode for this chapter. It should be fairly obvious what is mine and what is theirs, but I lay no claim to anything from the show itself. I also reworded some dialogue, so that's going to sound familiar as well.

Bridger spent the next month avoiding as many calls from Noyce as he possibly could while still doing his job to the best of his abilities. It wasn't easy, and he could sense something coming. Something big, and something that wasn't good. It just wasn't something he could put his finger on, at least not until things got a little closer to the actual event.

His growing relationship with Tim, however, was very good, and their connection grew deeper the more time they spent together. Bridger was, frankly, amazed. He'd never felt so close to anyone in his life. In a way, the pair was closer than he and Carol ever had been, and Bridger wondered if Tim had some level of psychic ability that Tim wasn't even aware of, especially after Darwin spoke to both of them when he was sick.

They were still moving slowly into their relationship. Tim hadn't lied when he said he'd never been involved with anyone before. Bridger couldn't help but grin whenever he thought back to the night he spent just teaching Tim to kiss.

Tim had been jumpy about spending time alone with Bridger ever since he found out about the reports going back to the UEO about them. Bridger tried everything short of ordering Tim to his quarters and finally managed to get him to agree to visit.

When Tim arrived carrying three French books and in full uniform, it was all Bridger could do not to laugh. He knew that would be the absolute worst reaction, especially when it seemed like Tim's nerves would break if he did one small thing wrong. "You know, we don't have to do this, Tim," Bridger said softly, pulling Tim down next to him on the bunk. "We can forget it ever happened and move on with our lives."

"No, Nate, I don't want to do that," Tim protested. "I just don't want to get you in trouble, or be used to get you in trouble."

"Tim, lie back on the bed," Bridger said just as softly. "I don't want to lose you either. I know you know that, even if you're not sure how you know. We both knew that we'd be treading water with this, and I don't know how to convince you that I don't care about the rules."

"What about Admiral Noyce?"

Bridger took Tim's glasses off and set them carefully to the side. "Tim, I love you. I didn't think it was possible for me to feel this way again, but you showed me how wrong I was," he

said. "Noyce and the UEO can go to hell for all I care." He reached out and gently ran a finger down Tim's cheek. "All I could ever want is right here in this room with me right now."

"I'm sorry I'm so afraid," Tim all but whispered, leaning into Bridger's touch. "I just don't like trouble."

With a soft smile, Bridger shifted on the bunk so he was lying next to his lover. He propped himself up on an elbow and slowly leaned down, being very obvious in his purpose, giving Tim time to move away if he wanted. He didn't, and Tim moaned as Bridger's mouth claimed his in a gentle kiss. His hands lifted on their own to tangle in Bridger's hair, trying to hold him in place. Tim never thought the Captain's lips would feel so good against his own. Bridger shifted so he was lying half on top of his lover but kept his weight on his arms.

"Don't be sorry," Bridger whispered, training soft kisses over to Tim's ear. "Don't ever apologize for your feelings."

"My head's spinning," Tim whispered in reply.

"Then I must be doing something right," Bridger said. He smiled softly at his lover and leaned down to kiss him again. Slowly, carefully, Bridger opened his mouth and used his tongue to tease gently at Tim's lips. Tim moaned and his hips arched up off the bed. Bridger didn't break the kiss, but shifted his weight and trailed his hand gently down Tim's side.

"Captain, we've arrived at Alexandria," Commander Jonathan Ford's voice broke into Bridger's very pleasant thought.

"Thank you, Commander," Bridger replied. He shook his head to clear it and changed into his warm water wet suit. He would be damned if he missed this dive.

\*~\*

Bridger spent an enjoyable half an hour swimming and working with one of his science teams to collect some scattered artifacts and other items from the sea floor. When he finally returned to the seaQuest, he found Kristin Westphalen waiting for him. Bridger, on one level, felt guilty because he knew the ship's doctor was attracted to him and he couldn't say anything, so he kept using Carol as his shield against her attentions.

"This is fantastic," Kristen commented, looking over the artifacts the team brought on-board.

"There's still a lot of sand down there and I'm sure it's hiding something from us," Bridger commented with a smile. "Why don't we find out what it is?"

Katie Hitchcock and her team had been perfecting a design for a special device that could be used to rapidly blow sand away from areas of the sea floor. Commander Ford, second in command and the one Bridger suspected of reporting on him and Tim to HQ, was out in a sea crab, waiting to test the newest tool on the boat. Bridger took a navy bathrobe from the hooks on the wall and put it on over his wet suit before grabbing a towel.

“I’m almost in position, Captain,” Ford reported over the radio. “This hose is heavier than specs showed once in the water and I’m needing some additional time to configure my controls.”

“Keep me informed please, Commander.” Bridger turned away from the radio and walked over to join Kristen and their guest for the trip. “Mr. Hassan?”

“Yes, Captain?”

“What do you think?”

The archeologist smiled and launched into a detailed description of the items brought in on their initial dive. The one fact that stuck out with all of them was how many centuries and cultures the various artifacts represented. Not even a shipwreck would be able to account for all of them.

“Captain, I’m in position and standing by,” Ford reported over the radio.

Bridger walked over to the nearest intercom. “Bridge?”

“Everything is green up here, Captain,” Katie Hitchcock replied.

“Well then, let’s see how your latest creation works,” Bridger said with a grin. “Go ahead.” He stepped back to watch the screen where a dual feed was waiting for him. Bridger could see both the interior of the sea crab and the sea floor where the hose was acting as a reverse vacuum cleaner. “Commander Ford?”

A shout of joy over the line was his only reply. Bridger couldn’t help but grin at the younger man’s enthusiasm. They didn’t see that emotion from him often enough, in Bridger’s opinion. “Come on, Katie, give me more,” Ford said.

“Okay.”

“Commander, switch your view,” Bridger said, catching sight of something that should have been impossible. He wanted to know if he was the only one seeing it.

“Oh my God....”

“Mr. Hassan, am I seeing what I think I’m seeing?” Bridger asked.

The man looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh, cry, or break down and thank every deity he ever heard of. “The Great Library of Alexandria,” he confirmed, voice shaking.

Bridger felt like swearing. He was enough of a scientist to know exactly how big their discovery was. He was enough of a UEO officer to know exactly how big of a headache their discovery was. Noyce would be insufferable.

\*~\*

Bridger spent the next few hours trying to coordinate for research, even though he didn’t know how large a discovery he truly was sitting on. He was almost glad when Tim notified

him that Admiral Noyce was calling. He took the call in the Ward Room, half for privacy and half to get away from all the noise.

“How are you weathering the storm, Nate?”

“I can’t find the leak, Bill,” Bridger said with a sigh. “I have no idea how information is getting off my boat and into the wrong ears.”

“I don’t think anyone didn’t know that the seaQuest was en route to Alexandria,” Noyce sighed. “We might as well hold press conferences to issue our orders. No one here is happy about this, Nate, and there’s pressure from higher up to not only find out how this information is leaking out, but stop it so it won’t keep happening.”

“We’ve run multiple scans here, Bill,” Bridger said.

“All right, I’ll make sure there’s another check run here and on the other boats as well,” Noyce said. “In the interim, Egypt has agreed to host the conference for the Library. You’re to remain immediate.”

Bridger all but groaned. “Bill, you know I don’t know a damn thing about mediation,” he said. “I don’t have anyone on my boat that does, and you know that too.”

“I do, which is why I’m sending in a specialized team just for the negotiations.”

“Good. Who are they?”

“Trusted and gifted contractors that have done some very sensitive work for us in the past,” Noyce said. “You can trust their judgment in everything, Nate.”

“That’s fine, but you didn’t tell me who they are.”

For a brief moment Bill Noyce looked uncomfortable, although only a close friend would realize it, and Bridger realized that he wasn’t going to like the answer one bit. “You’re not going to like it, Nate, but they’ve consistently proven themselves and their worth many times over.”

“So who are they?”

“Parapsychologist. ESP.”

“Oh,” was the only thing Bridger could think to say.

\*~\*

Bridger retreated to his quarters and sent a coded personal message to Tim to join him as soon as he was off-duty. Then he sat at his desk and thought. Damn the UEO anyway. Bridger was positive the real reason the so-called specialists were being sent to his boat wasn’t the Library, and it sure as hell wasn’t the suspected leak on the boat. Noyce and the other brass still hadn’t given up on the idea that Bridger was sleeping with a man under his command. He and Tim hadn’t even discussed things that far, but Bridger didn’t think Tim would be under him for long.

To make matters even worse, Tim was still so flighty about the rules. In one of their many conversations, Bridger learned about Tim's strict religious upbringing and how he'd been punished severely for not following all of the rules to the letter.

Thinking about Tim took Bridger's mind back to their first real night together. After their first kissing lesson, Tim seemed to relax a little about spending some of his off-duty time with Bridger. The Captain, in turn, spent part of his shore leave in an adult store and bought Tim a book about homosexual relationships. Bridger didn't have a preference and had decided to let the younger man choose exactly what position he wanted.

He almost laughed when Tim arrived for their next date tomato red and stuttering. Bridger shut and locked the door, took Tim over to the bunk, and kissed him senseless. Once his Lieutenant seemed to have slightly better control over himself, Bridger slowly undressed him and started a slow massage. "Tim," he said softly.

"Hmmm?"

"You read the book I got, didn't you?"

"Mmmhmmm."

"Is there anything you want to talk about?"

Tim slowly turned his head and looked back at his lover. "I can't think, let alone talk, while you're doing that," he said. "And shouldn't you be naked too?"

"If you want me to be."

"Please."

Bridger smiled and slowly got off the bunk. He slipped out of his robe and sleep pants. Tim stared at him, eyes wide and hungry. "We can take all the time you want," he said, straddling Tim's hips to continue the back rub. "We have as long as you want."

"You've done this before," Tim said.

"Carol was a virgin when we started dating," Bridger replied. "She told me I gave very good backrubs."

"She was right." Tim shifted slightly and Bridger landed next to him with a muffled oomph. "But I'd rather have you here where I can touch you too." He leaned in and initiated a kiss that quickly turned passionate. Bridger let Tim lead the kiss, but pulled their hips together so Tim could feel the effect the kiss had on him.

"How carefully did you read that book?" Bridger whispered.

"Actually, I've only studied the first few chapters," Tim replied. "I've got to be careful that Migs doesn't catch me with it. He'd flip."

Bridger thrust his hips forward and Tim broke off with a gasp. “Just tell me if you’re uncomfortable,” he whispered.

“Only if you don’t do that again,” Tim panted. He pulled his lover back in for another deep kiss.

Bridger jerked back to the present when strong, thin fingers wrapped around his aching erection. “If you’re going to do this,” Tim whispered, starting to stroke, “you could at least wait for me.”

“I was thinking about you,” Bridger replied, pulling Tim in for a deep kiss. He moaned into his lover’s mouth as Tim stroked slowly up and down his hardened cock.

“It’s your turn to relax,” Tim whispered. He kissed down Bridger’s neck to his collarbone and a sensitive spot he’d found by accident one night. “You’ve been so tense these past weeks that you deserve a chance to relax.”

“Captain,” Commander Ford’s voice interrupted via the intercom.

Bridger took a deep breath. “Yes, Commander?”

“Sir, we’ve got approaching ships and several are heavily armed. There’s also a UEO launch on our far WSKRs view.”

“All right, I’ll be right there,” Bridger said. “In the interim, establish a no-anchorage zone.”

During the conversation, Tim went completely still and silent. When he was certain the intercom was off, he relaxed a little. “That was close.”

“Not to mention it kills all the plans I had for this evening,” Bridger sighed. He kissed Tim gently and got up to change into a clean uniform. “Tim, we’ve got some visitors coming from the UEO. They’re mind readers and I’m convinced they’ll be trying to find out about us, about our true relationship. That doesn’t mean anything special, I just wanted you to know.”

Tim stood and wrapped his arms around his lover. “What if they do find out?”

“Then I’ll deal with Noyce.” Bridger pulled Tim’s head down for a kiss. “I know you’ve just come off watch, but I could really use your talents on the bridge while we’re trying to get everyone parked up there.”

“Can I show you some other talents later?”

“Oh, I’m counting on it.”

\*~\*

The discovery of an air pocket over in the Library thrilled Bridger to his very core, and he would have jumped at the chance to be one of the first to visit, but he knew he had other duties to attend to. With a sigh, he went to greet the UEO guest and help get them settled onto the seaQuest.

Midmorning found Bridger back in his wetsuit at the moon pool waiting for Commander Ford to report back in. He couldn't help but laugh when he heard the younger man's voice, and the enthusiasm and awe it contained. "Somehow I think I'm losing my executive officer," he said, laughing.

Kristen swam over near where he was sitting. "You did give him to me."

"That was a loan, not a gift."

"Then I wish I'd known. I've almost got him completely brainwashed to forget he's military." She sat down next to Bridger on the edge of the pool. "He thinks he's a great explorer now."

"Captain, it's a two-thousand year old library book," Ford said, opening the container they'd brought back with them."

"You know, I think it's important that some of these items go to the conference with us," Bridger said. "We've got ships from around the world anchored over us, and artifacts from around the world down here. Why don't we show what we've got?"

"A few things still have to be desalinated, but anything taken from the dome can travel with care," Kristen said.

"Then let's put together a sample of what we have," Bridger said.

As the others swam off, Bridger climbed into the water and looked around for Darwin, smiling as the dolphin swam up. He sensed someone watching him and looked towards the door. "Miss Rossovich, have you met Ensign Darwin yet?"

"Savannah, please, Captain," the young woman replied. "And no, I haven't had the official pleasure yet. Hello, Darwin."

"Melon lady," Darwin said. Bridger looked down at the dolphin in surprise.

"Would that be cantaloupe or honeydew?" Savannah asked, laughing.

"Melon is what we call this part of a dolphin's head," Bridger said. "It's a very sensitive transmitting station for them. The two of you just made a connection."

Bridger became aware of a probing sensation and focused on Darwin. Savannah smiled. "Did you call him down here, Captain?"

"No, he comes and goes as he wants to."

"It seemed like you were expecting him to be here."

"Darwin always finds me when I'm in the water," Bridger said with a smile down at his friend. "He either hears me or picks me up on sonar."

"Why not ask him?"

“There’s still a lot we don’t understand about the dolphin’s thought process,” Bridger said. “Darwin knows the words, but sometimes his meaning isn’t all that clear.”

“Bridger rub.”

Bridger laughed. “Sometimes it is.”

He would have continued, but Lucas skipped up to a stop near the pool and started talking before he could say anything else about the dolphin. “Hey, Darwin, want to go for a swim outside?”

“Alone?” Bridger asked.

Lucas flushed a little. “I thought I could go along with one of the teams,” he said. “Go under their supervision and help out.”

“Ever think about asking permission there, kiddo?” Bridger asked. “You never know, I might surprise you.”

“May I go to the Library, please?”

“Yeah,” Bridger smiled.

\*~\*

Tim was waiting in Bridger’s room that evening when the frustrated Captain returned from the scuttled conference. He listened as Bridger paced and muttered about gifted assets and trust until he was finally able to understand what happened up above. “Nate, could you please sit down?” Tim finally asked. “I’m starting to get dizzy.”

“I’m sorry,” Bridger sighed. He sank down onto his bunk. “I’ve always thought better on my feet. How was your day?”

“Busy. It’s a parking lot up there and not everyone is happy about it,” Tim said. “What do you say we just go to sleep?”

Bridger pulled Tim to him. “I’d love nothing more than to hold you all night,” he said.

“But the bunks are too narrow,” Tim finished. “You sleep. I’ll read and see you for breakfast.”

After one last lingering kiss, Bridger secured the door behind Tim for the night. He changed into a t-shirt and shorts before climbing into bed. He’d had a long couple of days and knew it wasn’t going to get better any time soon. Being able to spend time with his lover would help, but they couldn’t risk it with their guests on the boat. As Bridger drifted off to sleep, he joined Tim and Darwin in the moon pool. They were playing a game of tag and, just as Bridger dodged to avoid Darwin, Savannah walked into the room. Bridger felt her presence and jerked awake. Furious, he pulled on his robe and stormed down the hall. “I just saw you in my dream,” he said, bursting into his room. “What the hell are you doing inside my mind?”

An hour later, Savannah and her father joined Bridger in the ward room. Bridger had changed into a clean uniform and felt a little more in control of himself, if not the situation. “You know that your abilities scare the hell out of people,” he said. “When you use them like this, it’s a violation of human rights and dignity.”

“Sometimes, yes.”

“Nothing gives you the right to go in and dig around in a person’s soul. Nothing. I don’t care what you justify your actions with, what balm you use so you can sleep at night,” Bridger said. “There is nothing in this world or outside of it that gives you any right to invade a person’s mind.”

“Our abilities didn’t seem to disturb you so badly yesterday,” Dimitri said.

“It did, but I convinced myself that you were there as a means to an end,” Bridger said. “A peaceful means to a peaceful end, and in doing that, I forgot some very basic things.”

“It is just as you describe.”

“No, it isn’t,” Bridger said. “It’s an intrusion.”

“This is a matter I have spent a lifetime wrestling with,” Dimitri said with a sigh. “The question of what is right and what is wrong. Is it right of me to go in and find information that people wish to keep secret? I finally realized it is only an intrusion of you know we’re there. If you were not so strong, mentally, you would never have realized Savannah was there. The others have no idea.”

“The representatives at the conference?”

“Them, and those on your ship. Your submarine has a far more dangerous leak than the kind that allows water entry.”

Bridger almost snorted. “So Noyce did send you to find out who’s giving away our orders.”

“No, my authorization comes from much higher up.”

“Then tell me who the leak is,” Bridger said.

“Your crew all are clean. We need to do another scan.”

“Over my dead body. You’ll be off my boat in an hour.”

“And what of the conference?” Dimitri asked.

“You managed to kill that yesterday,” Bridger said. “It’s going to take a miracle to get them to step back up to the table.”

Dimitri sighed. “I gave you the best information I had,” Captain.”

Bridger leaned over the table. “Savannah, tell your father that I know that he knows that I know he’s lying,” he said softly.

\*~\*

It took some work, but Bridger was eventually able to get all the answers he needed to complete his job as conference mediator and help some people who felt they had no other options left to them.

He hadn’t realized that his mental abilities had expanded as much as they had and, as he watched Tim, he realized his lover was experiencing the same expansion he was. They talked about it and decided to keep their newest weapon to themselves. Neither of them knew if they would need to use it or not, but with the way events were progressing, they both thought it would be a good idea to have a secret that no one else, not even Darwin, knew.

# Touching

Captain Nathan Bridger of the UEO flagship seaQuest was not what anyone would call conventional. He had turned his back on his career and had literally been forced to return. While he didn't consider rules to be stupid in general, Bridger knew there were good rules and bad rules. The good rules were there to be followed regardless. The bad rules he saw as optional depending on the situation. One prime example was UEO 6903, which stated that a captain on any UEO boat was strictly forbidden from fraternizing with his crew while off-duty. Bridger knew there were two definitions of fraternization and also knew how absolutely stupid that rule was.

It was a point that he and his friend, Bill Noyce, had argued about many times. Bridger maintained that a crew functioned better if they knew their captain from places other than the bridge. And, he always added, they'd be more comfortable coming to him with problems. Noyce maintained that rules were there for a reason and should be obeyed no matter what. Nathan usually rolled his eyes and pointed out that, as an admiral, Noyce had to say that.

However, Bridger had recently broken several regulations but he really didn't give a damn. When Bill Noyce forced him out of retirement and back onto seaQuest, Bridger began to receive notes from someone who claimed to be in love with him. It hadn't taken Bridger long to figure out who it was and he was surprised to find he returned their feelings. He had believed his heart buried with his late wife, but his communications specialist, Tim O'Neill, had brought him back to life.

They kept their budding relationship a secret, hidden behind language lessons. Someone on seaQuest reported them to HQ but Bridger managed to deflect all the questions, and Bill Noyce. With a little help from their resident genius, Lucas, they managed to stop the reports as well.

Now seaQuest was making an unscheduled stop at Pearl. Some government big-wigs and private investors wanted to see the boat. Most of the crew would get leave, but the main bridge crew, science staff, and Lucas were to remain behind to answer questions. But Noyce had promised them all three days leave before their next assignment.

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When Admiral Noyce arrived he was a little surprised that Bridger wasn't there to meet him. Instead the supply and moral officer, Ben Krieg, was waiting. "The Captain sends his apologies, Admiral, but we had a small problem this morning that's requiring his attention on the bridge. May I show you to your quarters?"

"No, I know my way around," Noyce replied. "I'll go on up to the bridge."

Krieg nodded, saluted and left. Technically he didn't have to stay as he wasn't exactly bridge crew, but he'd promised Lucas he'd stick around so the kid would have someone to talk with.

When Noyce walked onto the bridge, Lieutenant O'Neill noticed him first. "Admiral on the bridge."

“As you were,” Noyce said automatically. “Where is Captain Bridger?”

“Under here, sir,” Commander Jonathan Ford replied.

Bill Noyce looked closer at the side of the bridge’s pool and saw two pairs of legs sticking out. One pair was in jeans and sneakers, which would be the boy. So the other pair had to be...

“Ouch, damn it Bill, don’t do that!”

Noyce grinned as he sat down next to his old friend. “That’s what you get for not coming down to meet me,” he said. “What’s wrong?”

Bridger worked his way out from where he was trying to work and glared at Noyce. “We’ve been chasing an electrical short around the bridge all day,” he said. “Thank you, lieutenant.” Bridger took the towel Tim was holding out and used it to wipe his hands. “It shouldn’t effect the next two days, but I wanted to at least pin it down before anyone came on board.”

“If Lucas can’t fix it, it must be serious,” Bill said.

“I could fix it if I could find it,” Lucas said, his words muffled. “Captain, can we shut down all non-essential functions for a couple of hours?”

“Sure, kiddo, the tours don’t start until tomorrow morning,” Nathan replied. “O’Neill, Hitchcock and Ford please stay. Everyone else get out of here; I’ll see you at 0600 tomorrow.”

“Can we talk, Nate?”

“Let me get cleaned up and I’ll meet you in the mess in an hour.”

\*~\*

“The food probably isn’t what you’re used to,” Bridger joked as they sat down. “O’Neill tells me that languages have adapted to include the new foods but I haven’t found any of this in a dictionary.”

“You know it’s considered chemically perfect for those who serve on submarines,” Noyce replied.

“That didn’t stop my supply lieutenant from spending an entire week complaining that there were no chickens involved in creating the eggs he eats for breakfast. So, what’s on your mind?”

Bill looked serious. “Those reports I received,” he said. “You have to admit they were pretty graphic, Nate.”

“And total fiction,” Bridger replied. “You remember what it’s like to captain a sub; there’s no personal time and absolutely no privacy. Whoever it was saw our language lessons and let their imagination run away with them.”

“So you’re not sleeping with a man under your command?”

“Tell me the truth, Bill, what would bother you more if these reports had been true,” Bridger asked. “The fact that it was a member of my crew or the fact that it’s a man?”

“Now Nate, you know that’s not a fair question,” Bill protested.

“Neither are the ones you keep pressing on me,” Bridger replied. “I told you the truth and now you can drop it. Tell me about these blasted tours you’ve got planned.”

Noyce grinned; the other man had always been overly protective of his boat. “Nate, this is where the money comes from,” he said. “You know how important...”

“Captain,” Lucas yelled, skidding into the room.

“Slow down, kiddo, what’s wrong?” Bridger asked, steadying the boy so he didn’t fall over.

“I figured out where the short is coming from.” Lucas grinned at Noyce. “Sorry for interrupting, Admiral.”

“It’s okay, son, I understand how important this boat is to both of you.” He stood. “I’ve got some work to do in my quarters so I will see you later.”

Lucas sat down with the Captain. “Sir, the short originated from one of those reports I tracked down for you,” he said, softly. “Apparently the last one had some kind of bug attached that would effect the ship if not sent to HQ. I think whoever was sending them figured out they weren’t going through.”

“So who is smart enough to create something like this, other than you of course?” Bridger asked.

“I’ll have to track it to the source to know for sure,” Lucas replied. “But I will find out.”

“Run a few more involved virus checks while you’re at it,” Bridger said. “I don’t want any problems tomorrow.”

\*~\*

When he got off watch, Tim changed into some casual clothes, picked up the reports he’d tracked down and went to the captain’s quarters.

“Come in.”

“Captain, I finished those sweeps you requested,” Tim said, shutting the door behind him.

Bridger took the reports, dropped them on his desk and pulled Tim to him. “Bill will be here in half an hour,” he said. “So we have to be aware of the time.” He pulled the taller man’s head down and their lips met in a soft but passionate kiss. “Damn, you feel good,” he whispered.

“Are our plans still on for leave?” Tim asked, pulling Bridger in tighter.

“Admirals tied to wild horses couldn’t keep me away,” Bridger replied. “I really hate we can’t spend more time together tonight.”

“I understand the reasons, Nate, and I know we can’t even look unusual when Admiral Noyce gets here,” Tim said. He kissed Bridger gently and moved to sit at the table.

They were discussing Darwin when Noyce walked in unannounced. “Mr. O’Neill,” he said, sitting down. “All right, Nathan, what’s this all about?”

“We’re just waiting on Lucas,” Bridger replied. “We’ve discovered a problem on-board, one that needs to be fixed sooner rather than later.”

“What’s wrong?” Bill asked.

“Sorry I’m late, I wanted to finished the scan I was working on,” Lucas gasped as he burst into the room.

Bridger smiled fondly. “You know where the water is,” he said. “Catch your breath while I attempt to explain things to the Admiral.”

Noyce was pleased to see at least one of his plans had worked, Bridger was a father at heart and he wouldn’t let anything keep him from loving a child who needed it. “All right, Nathan, now what’s going on?” Bill asked.

“Lucas managed to track down our little problem on the bridge this morning,” Bridger said. “It would seem that there’s a few things I wasn’t able to figure out about our snitch and a few things you didn’t tell me.”

“When I re-routed the messages to my computer, I put in a patch so the sender would believe they were being sent to you,” Lucas said, picking up the story. “What we didn’t know was that you had been sending a confirmation message for each report. It’s probably something I should’ve thought of but I didn’t want to do anything to make our sender suspicious.”

“You can’t think of everything,” Bridger said. “It seems whoever was sending these messages got a little paranoid and attached a virus to the last report.”

“When the message came to my computer, it did something that triggered the virus and sent it into the electrical system,” Lucas said. “It was fairly simple once I found it, and I’ve already taken care of the virus itself. I’ve also set up a special folder for any new reports that run through the old system.”

Bill looked at the men in front on him. “Are you saying that a member of this crew deliberately attempted to harm the seaQuest?”

“Not exactly,” Lucas said. “See, I don’t think they knew exactly where the messages were being routed to. It wasn’t meant to do anything harmful to the system, just be annoying.”

“I asked Lieutenant O’Neill to check the logs to see how long this particular user has been around,” Bridger said.

“This name appeared almost a week to the day after I started teaching Captain Bridger French,” Tim said. “But I haven’t been able to track down who created and was using it.”

“Can anyone do that?” Noyce asked.

Lucas smiled. “I’m working on it, sir, but whoever this was covered their tracks well,” he said. “For now, however, everything is under control and I think we’re ready for tomorrow.”

“Oh, well thank you, Captain,” Bridger said, looking at Lucas. “Good work, both of you. Now go get some sleep.”

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As predicted the tours went extremely well and Admiral Noyce was pleased. At the end of two days he ordered seaQuest into dock for maintenance and basically told everyone to get out and enjoy themselves for a change.

Bridger and Tim had learned that Ben Krieg was going to show Lucas around Pearl and promptly squashed that idea. The lovers wanted to spend time alone but the young man was important to them. So Bridger had rented a beach house just off base where they could swim with Darwin, be moderately alone and still invite Lucas to stay with them. Besides, they had been talking about telling Lucas the truth, if he asked.

On their second day of leave, Bridger left Tim and Lucas playing with Darwin and made a trip into town. He bought a few things for himself and Tim, along with something special. When he returned, just after lunch, Lucas was gone and Tim was waiting in the bedroom. “Where’s Lucas?” he asked, stripping off his t-shirt.

“Krieg and the others came and got him,” Tim replied. “I wouldn’t have let him go, but they had Migs and Commander Ford in the group.”

“So how long will they be gone?” Bridger asked. He stepped out of his shorts and boxers before joining Tim in bed.

“Tomorrow morning,” Tim replied. “So I thought we could have some time together.”

Bridger pulled Tim’s naked body against his and rolled. Tim gasped as a heavy weight settled against him. “So, any thoughts about what we could do to pass the time?” Bridger whispered, thrusting gently. “I got some books while I was in town, we could go out on the beach and read or...”

Tim pulled Bridger’s head down and claimed his mouth in a passionate kiss. Bridger moaned softly in reply and increased the strength and speed of his thrusts. Tim arched up against his lover, his body stiffening as he came, Bridger following closely behind.

“Have you thought more about what role you want?” Bridger asked, once he’d gotten his breath back.

“I think we should each try both,” Tim replied. He reached out and gently caressed Bridger’s face.

Bridger turned his head and captured one of Tim’s fingers in his mouth. “Then why don’t you show me what you’ve learned from your book?”

Tim moaned as Bridger rolled off him to flop on the bed. “Are you sure, Nate?”

“I’ll tell you if you do anything I don’t like,” Bridger replied, smiling.

“It’s just that you have so much more experience,” Tim said, hesitating slightly. He’d never had anyone touch him before Bridger and hadn’t really touched anyone else.

“Nervous?” Bridger asked.

“Yeah.”

Bridger sat up and slowly climbed to his knees. “Well then, I guess we’ll have to be creative about this.” He leaned over and kissed Tim gently. While his tongue explored his lover’s mouth, Bridger shifted his body so he was laying chest to toe with his weight propped up on his forearms.

Tim hissed as Bridger kissed gently down his throat to his chest and arched up when Bridger sucked gently on a nipple. He started speaking, in Spanish Bridger thought, and his hands tangled in Bridger’s hair.

Being on seaQuest had not only limited their time together but it had placed limits on exactly what they could do as well. The bunks were just large enough for one, no matter how creative they were. Tim’s room was directly across from Ben Krieg and supply while Lucas more or less had free access to Bridger’s quarters. So they had to be satisfied with kissing and touching. But now Bridger was determined to show Tim how much more they could do together.

Bridger didn’t want to admit to Tim but he’d looked through the book himself before passing it on. And while he had experience with Carol, he’d never had a male lover before and was kind of nervous too. He wanted to do everything with the man under him, proving once and for all that it was love that dictated relationships rather than the sex of the partner.

“Nate, more, please,” Tim begged, his head thrashing on the pillow.

With a smile, Bridger bent over and took Tim’s leaking cock into his mouth gently. It was an unusual sensation, but one Bridger definitely liked. He sucked harder as he reached towards the bedside table. One thing the book had been definite on was the receptive partner had to be relaxed before penetration and recommended starting to stretch them while they were distracted.

Tim came with a shout and collapsed back on the bed. Bridger grinned and moved his hand gently. “That feel okay, love?”

“When....?”

“You were a little occupied,” Bridger replied. “I want to be in you so much, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I don’t think you could ever hurt me,” Tim muttered. “Please do it. I want to feel you. I want to be yours forever.”

Bridger smiled and gently pulled his fingers out. He reached for the lube again and applied it to his erection. “Are you sure?” he asked, kissing Tim.

“Now, Nate, please,” Tim groaned in reply. He hadn’t realized exactly how good it all would feel. He just wanted more.

Grabbing one of the extra pillows Bridger got Tim settled on his back and carefully pressed home. Nothing could have prepared Bridger for the heat and the tightness surrounding his cock as he entered his lover. He moved slowly, watching Tim’s face the whole time for any sign of pain. When he finally bottomed out, Bridger paused to let Tim get used to the feel of having something in him.

Finally Tim pushed back against his lover. “Please move,” he whispered.

Bridger started thrusting gently and leaned over to claim Tim’s mouth in a gentle kiss. They stayed like that for a while, just enjoying the new sensations building between them, but nature eventually took over and Bridger’s speed increased. He also changed the angle of his thrusts a couple times until Tim shouted and he knew he’d found the perfect one. Bridger knew that neither of them would last long this first time so he reached between their bodies for Tim’s cock. He started stroking it in time with his thrusts. Tim’s head moved on the pillow and he mouthed wordlessly for a minute before his body arched up into Bridger’s and he came with a yell. The feel of Tim coming pushed Bridger over the edge as well.

Neither of them noticed the face at the window, or the camera.

# Telling

Admiral Bill Noyce was not a bad man. He'd always tried to do what he thought was right, given the circumstances. But as an officer in the navy and later the UEO, he couldn't always do what his heart wanted. He'd been living with rules and regulations regulating his life for so long, Bill honestly couldn't remember any other kind of life. Unfortunately that meant he sometimes had to do things he didn't want to.

The package sitting in front of him was a perfect example. Over the past few months Noyce had been receiving anonymous reports that the captain of the UEO flagship, seaQuest, was involved in a romantic relationship with an officer under his command. That the captain was also one of Noyce's oldest and closest friends made the situation even harder to deal with. The rules and regulations said one thing, but Noyce hadn't gone that far.

Rather Noyce had listened to his friend and finally believed him when he said there was nothing going on other than some lessons in French. Noyce supposed that really should have been his first clue; French was usually known as the language of love. And now this package had hit his desk containing pictures of his friend doing things with one of his officers that literally turned Noyce's stomach. Bill couldn't really figure out which was worse; that his friend had lied to him repeatedly or that he was breaking so many rules and now Noyce would be forced to do something about it. Either way, Bill Noyce was not looking forward to visiting seaQuest.

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"Captain, we're receiving a transmission from UEO headquarters," Lieutenant (jg) Tim O'Neill, communications officer reported from his station on the bridge.

"Pipe it down to the ward room," Captain Nathan Bridger replied mildly. He'd long ago given up reacting to priority messages until he found out if there was truly a need.

"It's not a live message, sir," Tim replied. "We're being ordered to meet up with Admiral Noyce. Co-ordinates following."

While it was unusual, Nathan wasn't too surprised by the information. He'd had a feeling for the past week or so that something was going to be happening that would upset his life. Nathan supposed Noyce was coming to rehash their conversation regarding his personal life.

There were times when Nathan regretted staying on seaQuest once he'd been tricked back but one glance across the bridge at his lover reminded him it was all worth it. "Send the co-ordinates to the helm," Nathan ordered. "And let Lieutenant Krieg know we have company coming."

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When he got off watch, Nathan retreated to his quarters. He knew it wouldn't be long before his lover joined him and he tried to brace himself for the conversation he knew was coming. His lover was horribly nervous about breaking the rules, no matter how many times Nathan assured him it didn't matter and those rules were pure hot air.

“Come in,” he called in response to the knock on his door.

“Captain,” Tim O’Neill said, shutting the door behind him. “Do you think we’re the reason Admiral Noyce is visiting seaQuest?”

Nathan smiled and motioned for Tim to sit down next to him. “I’m not sure,” he said, interlacing their fingers. “It could be nothing worse than a situation we’re needed at that’s too sensitive to trust to the air waves. You know better than anyone that secure channels aren’t always.”

“I know, I guess nerves still play a role,” Tim sighed. “Are we still on for dinner tonight?”

“If you want, but I’m not really all that hungry,” Nathan said. “At least, not for food.”

As the creator and designer of seaQuest, Nathan knew every inch of the boat and had found a nice hidden room in the guest block that it seemed like no one knew about. He and Tim had decided to use it as theirs and spent as much time there as they dared.

“How long until the admiral arrives?” Tim asked, loving how dark Nathan’s eyes had become. He knew he’d give up everything for this man if he had to.

“Two, maybe three hours,” Nathan replied.

“We should probably spend the time getting ready,” Tim said. “We don’t want the admiral to catch us with our pants down.”

Nathan chuckled. “Literally,” he said. “Well, I know for a fact that Lucas will be in the lab for another hour at least.” He stood and pulled Tim to him. “So we don’t have to worry about him bursting in here. How hard do I have to beg for a kiss?”

Tim laughed, knowing they were safe in Nathan’s room as long as Lucas was occupied. “Not hard at all,” he said. “Although I wouldn’t mind hearing you beg later on.”

“I think that just might be arranged,” Nathan whispered before kissing his lover gently.

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“Admiral Noyce, welcome,” Commander Jonathan Ford said, smiling. “Captain Bridger just woke up and will meet you in the ward room.

“Thank you, Commander,” Noyce replied. “Tell me, have you noticed anything out of the ordinary the past few months? Just prior to your stopover in Pearl?”

“No sir, not really,” Ford replied. “Although we have had some problems with the computer system.”

Noyce sighed; Jonathan Ford wasn’t a stupid man, hell he graduated first in class, had to relieve a commanding officer of their post and helped get Nathan Bridger back to active duty. For a while Noyce suspected the mystery reports were coming from him, but gave up on that idea. Secrets just weren’t Ford’s style. If he’d had a problem with his captain, he’d come out and say it. The man wouldn’t sneak around behind anyone’s back.

“No problems at all with Captain Bridger?” Noyce asked, in what he hoped was a really casual tone.

“No sir,” Ford replied. “The Captain has settled back into command like he never left. You were right to bring him back. Honestly, sir, I think you saved his life.”

“That’s good to know, Commander,” Noyce said. “Could you please put out the word that Captain Bridger and I are not to be disturbed?”

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Nathan was waiting in the ward room reviewing some reports on the seemingly endless string of computer problems seaQuest was battling. He was almost afraid to even think about taking the boat into any kind of confrontation as he wasn’t sure the computer system would hold on.

And it seemed like no matter what Lucas did the problems kept cropping back up. He told Nathan that he was still working on a new program to try and beat this virus. Lucas believed it all linked back to those reports that had been sent to Noyce.

“Captain Bridger,” Noyce said, closing the door behind him.

“Hi, Bill,” Nathan replied, picking up on the undertones in his friend’s voice, but choosing to ignore them. “We’ve got a problem. I was going to call you, but as you’re here we can talk it over.”

“Somehow I doubt it’s as serious as the matter I came to talk about with you,” Noyce said.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think we need to dry dock the seaQuest until we get this computer virus taken care of,” Nathan said. “The only systems it hasn’t infected are weapons and life support, but I think that’s only a matter of time before those go down as well. I don’t even want to risk taking her into a combat situation. This virus is something Lucas is having trouble with I don’t know what these mystery messages have done to my boat but I won’t risk anyone under my command.”

“You’d like dry dock, wouldn’t you,” Noyce snapped.

Nathan looked up at his friend and was surprised to see what appeared to be hatred in the admiral’s eyes. “Are you okay, Bill?” he asked. “I’ve never known you not to think about the people under your command.”

“Oh, like you are?”

“Bill, somehow I think we’ve ended up on two different pages,” Nathan said. “Why don’t we backtrack and see where we got off kilter?”

Noyce sat down and glared at the man across from him. “I didn’t come to talk about any stupid problems aboard this boat,” he snapped. “I came to talk to you about how and why you thought you could lie to me without any consequences.”

“I’m afraid you’ve lost me,” Nathan said. “I can’t think of any time, recently anyway, that I lied to you. I can think of a few times you lied to me though.”

“So you think that makes it all right?”

Deep down Nathan knew what this whole conversation was about. Bill Noyce was still on his kick about Nathan breaking regulations.

“Admiral Noyce, sir, why don’t you stop beating around the bush and tell me what the hell’s going on.”

Truthfully, Noyce was almost relieved to see Bridger lose his temper a little. Of the two of them, Noyce had the shorter fuse and was always the first to react. Somehow, seeing Bridger sitting so calmly in the ward room, concerned only about his people and his boat was so normal, it only made Noyce madder. He couldn’t reconcile the man in front of him, his friend, with the man in the pictures he had seen.

“I received a package two days ago containing numerous pictures of a deeply disturbing nature,” Noyce said. He opened his briefcase and handed an envelope to Nathan. “Based on all the evidence presented, I feel I have no choice but to take immediate action.

Nathan took the package and opened it up. He almost groaned when he saw a picture of himself and Tim in bed together, although from worry or passion he couldn’t really say. He quickly scanned the other pictures and found they’d all been taken during the down time in Pearl at the beach house. Nathan’s body started to react to both the photos and the memories. He was half tempted to ask to keep them.

“Well, Bill,” said Nathan finally, his voice steadier than it had any right to be, “it seems that whoever decided to infect us with this computer virus is trying their hand at some computer imaging as well.”

“So you’re denying those pictures are real?” Noyce demanded.

“What do you want me to say?” Nathan asked. “Yes, I’m involved in a forbidden relationship with one of the most talented young officers on my crew? I think whoever is doing all this picked two of the people who have the most to lose. I’m honestly surprised they didn’t pair me up with Lucas.”

“You realize I’ll have to talk with Lieutenant O’Neill this time,” Noyce said. “Just to see what he has to say.”

Nathan shrugged. “Fine with me, give me a second and I’ll call him down. I think he’s helping Lucas with a program to contain this bug.”

“You don’t think he’ll tell me a different story?”

Before Nathan could answer, the boat shuddered and stopped. Like a shot, Bridger was out of his chair and heading towards the bridge.

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All the senior bridge staff, whether they had been on duty or not, reported to their stations. Lucas joined Miguel Ortiz by the WSKRs station.

“Report, ladies and gentlemen,” Nathan ordered as he strode onto the bridge.

“We’ve lost power, Captain,” Commander Ford replied. “It just happened, with no warnings or indications of any kind.”

“Life support systems?” Nathan asked.

“Functioning,” Katie Hitchcock replied. “But I’m not sure for how long if we can’t get the engines going and the power back on.”

“Lucas,” Nathan said, motioning for the teen to join him. “How’s that program of yours coming?”

“I don’t think it’ll do us any good,” Lucas replied. “This is an electrical problem, not necessarily a computer problem.”

“So we should be able to take care of it from the bridge?” Nathan asked. “At least long enough to get us to dry dock?”

“The only dock able to handle us is Pearl,” Noyce interjected.

Nathan looked down at the readouts. “Lucas, can we still work the escape pods or has this virus gotten into them as well?”

“You can’t order that!” Noyce said. “Are you crazy?”

“Not crazy enough to keep non-essential personnel on a dying boat,” Nathan replied. “You haven’t read all the reports. This isn’t like last time. I’m seeing no guarantee that we’re not going to lose life support systems and, by then, an evacuation would take too long. There’s an island well within reach of the launches and pods. If we send all the non-essential crew and most of the science staff now we stand a better chance of keeping everyone alive.”

“If you’re going to do anything, sir, it needs to be now,” Ford said. “We’re starting to lose other systems.”

“Lucas, you go see what sense you can make of the systems,” Nathan said. “Commander Ford, take Lieutenant Krieg and start getting people off the boat. I need someone I’m sure of taking care of them.”

Ford nodded. “Yes sir, I’ll see you soon.”

“Keep that thought in mind, Jonathan,” Nathan smiled. “Lieutenant O’Neill, let HQ know our situation and that we have Admiral Noyce aboard. Bill, it’s up to you if you want to leave or not; I can’t order you.”

“I’ve never backed down from a challenge yet,” Noyce said. “I’ll go help keep people calm as they’re leaving. I may not approve of this or anything else you’ve done recently, Nate, but I hope our friendship is stronger than that.”

“Of course it is, Bill,” Nathan said. “Commander Hitchcock, I need you to start reviewing systems and see if you can figure out exactly where this thing is going.”

“Yes sir.”

Nathan walked over to the bridge’s moon pool where his friend was watching from the water. “Darwin, I want you to leave the boat,” he said. “Keep an eye on everyone for me.”

“Bridger scared.”

“A little,” Nathan admitted. “Now go on, keep everyone safe for me.”

“Darwin watch pod,” the dolphin said, ducking down and swimming off.

“Captain,” Lucas called. He was back up at the WSKRs station. “I think I may have something.”

“What is it?” Nathan asked. He listened to Lucas’ technical explanation that involved the words virus, mainframe, power loss, and corrupted file. He wouldn’t readily admit it, but those were the only words he recognized in context. “Okay, so what’s that mean in English?”

“I’ve been trying to head this virus off one file or system at a time,” Lucas said patiently. “What if we shut down everything but the emergency lights and life support? We can stay like that for several hours, right?”

“As long as no one shows up and challenges us,” Nathan replied. “But we’re in the middle of UEO controlled territory so that, hopefully, won’t be a problem.”

“Okay, so we have everything shut down,” Lucas continued. “Then we bring the primary systems back on line one at a time, run them through my program and basically corral the virus into the special folder I have prepared. I’m positive this thing isn’t in life support, yet.”

“That sounds like the best possible plan,” Nathan said. “Can we afford to wait until we get everyone off the boat?”

Lucas looked at his watch. “The evacuation takes fifteen minutes,” he said. “It’ll take nearly that long for me to get everything set up. We should just be able to do it.”

“Okay, kiddo, go ahead,” Nathan said. “Hitchcock, go check in with your people in engineering. Let them know what we’re planning to do and tell them I want alternatives on the slim chance Lucas can’t solve this problem.”

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Over the next three hours Nathan went from station to station on the bridge, checking on everyone who remained behind. He knew exactly how stressful this type of situation was and no matter how many times they drilled, the real thing was always worse.

Admiral Noyce was back on the bridge by that time and watching everything from the XO station. He was impressed, in spite of himself. No matter how closely he watched them, he never saw a stray touch or look between Nathan and Lieutenant O’Neill. He was starting to

think that maybe he'd let his emotions get the best of him. It was entirely possible those pictures had been made on the computer. With this current crisis it appeared someone, most likely the one who mailed him the package, wanted to cause problems for not only Nate and O'Neill but seaQuest as well.

Bill was just trying to find the courage to approach Nathan to apologize. Nate was watching the WSKRs station while Ortiz and Lucas were working not far away. Noyce had just stood when the station exploded. The boy and Ortiz were able to get out of the way, but Nathan took the full force of the explosion and landed by the Captain's chair.

And as Noyce watched, horror-stricken, Lieutenant O'Neill ran across the room and dropped down next to Bridger. Noyce was the only one close enough to hear his whispered words through the chaos on the bridge.

"Nate, can you hear me?" Tim whispered. "Hold on, Nate. Dr. Westphalen is on her way. Just hold on. I love you, Nate, please don't leave me."

\*Well, shit\* Bill thought to himself.

# Hearing

Following the explosion on the bridge, Lucas did what he could to quickly contain the virus or electrical problem. If he was really honest he wasn't sure what was happening and it wasn't a feeling he enjoyed at all. To make matters worse, Captain Bridger was injured and Lucas didn't know how he felt about working for Admiral Noyce. He'd overheard their argument in the ward room just before everything went to hell and, to Lucas at least, it sounded like the captain and Tim were in a lot of trouble.

Lucas wasn't as blind as the captain thought he was; the teen had seen the looks and touches between the two men. He knew what they meant and he was happy Bridger had found someone to love again. Lucas remembered how withdrawn and stand-offish Bridger had been when he first boarded seaQuest. His relationship with Tim seemed to be making all the difference in the world.

Now if Lucas could just find out who was determined to cause trouble for them, aside from Admiral Noyce of course. There really wasn't anything he could do about the admiral except perhaps run some interference.

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Dr. Kristin Westphalen looked at the man in the hospital-style bed and sighed. She'd done what she could for Nathan and the rest was up to him. The broken bones would heal, as would the burns, punctures and lacerations. It was the head injury she was concerned about. She planned to keep him asleep for a couple of days while, hopefully, the swelling around the brain would decrease. Kristin didn't want to do any surgery as she wasn't entirely sure Nathan would live through it.

"Dr. Westphalen?" a soft voice asked from the door.

"Tim, it's all right," she replied. "He's as stable as he can be and resting."

"Will he be all right?" Tim asked looking at all the tubes and monitors hooked up to his lover.

"He's not out of the woods," Kristin said. "He'll be sleeping for several days; I want to try and let his head recover before I let him wake up."

O'Neill swallowed hard. "Is it all right if I sit with him for a while?" he asked. "I'm off duty and maybe a friendly voice will help him out."

"I know you've become friends with all these language lessons," Kristin said. "But why don't you let him rest and sit with him tomorrow? I know it's hard to see someone you care about hurt, but I'm positive he'll be fine."

"Five minutes, please; I guess I just have to see for myself."

Kristin saw real fear in the man's eyes and caved. "All right, I suppose it'll make you both feel better," she said. "I'll be in my office, call if you need me or any of the monitors

change.”

Tim sat down in a chair and studied his lover’s face. It was bruised with several cuts and at least one set of stitches and butterfly bandages. He knew there hadn’t been any way to know that Mig’s station would explode and that Nate would rather be hurt himself than have any of his people injured, but it didn’t make seeing him like this any easier. Tim checked to see where Dr. Westphalen was before reaching over and gently taking Nate’s hand.

“Hey, love,” Tim said softly in Spanish so no one, but Miguel, would be able to understand him. And he knew Mig was on the bridge. “You really gave us all a scare today when you went flying across the bridge. Lucas is still working on the problem and I’m sure he’ll figure out what’s wrong. Noyce has taken command and I’m not sure how well that’s going to work. I think he’s ridden a desk for too long or maybe he just doesn’t have your natural flare for command.” He rubbed his thumb over the back of Nate’s hand. “The doc says she wants to let you sleep for a few days so you can get better. I’ll come down every chance I get. I think the admiral knows about us so I guess it doesn’t matter anymore. Seeing you flying across the bridge made me realize what you’ve been trying to tell me, the rules really don’t matter. I don’t care what happens to us here anymore, just as long as you wake up for me.”

He looked around carefully to make sure they were alone before leaning over and kissing Nate gently. “I love you so much. I’ll be back tomorrow.”

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Tim wasn’t the natural problem solver Lucas or Nathan were, but with the computer genius on the bridge trying to make the necessary repairs to get them to dry dock and the captain in the sick bay, Tim knew that figuring out the identity of the person tattling to Noyce was now his job.

Whoever it was knew their way around computers and the boat. Lucas had been ruled out by Nathan and that was more than good enough for Tim. Besides, he really didn’t see the teen as the type to create something that would take out the entire electrical system on seaQuest and endanger everyone.

So maybe a member of the science division. Tim checked his comm. logs and didn’t see any names that he really knew. Something was telling him that this snitch was someone both he and Nate knew and would have a reason for wanting them hurt.

Tim didn’t think it was Commander Ford. The man was very much by the book, but he also seemed to genuinely like Nate, even if they did disagree. Besides, Tim just couldn’t see Ford as sending secret messages to anyone.

Then the answer hit him. There was one member of the bridge crew who would have every reason to object to a possible relationship between a captain and another officer. He couldn’t believe it’d taken them all so long to figure it out, the answer was so obvious and, thinking back, the officer in question and Nate had clashed the first time Nate stepped onto the bridge. Now he just had to see if his idea had any merit.

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“Lucas, I’ve got something,” Tim said several hours later. He shut the door to the teen’s room. “I think I know who caused all these problems and hurt Captain Bridger.”

“Who?” Lucas asked. “They managed to erase all their tracks and I’m totally lost. I’m pretty sure I managed to trap this damn virus but I thought that before and look what happened.”

“That’s just it, Lucas,” Tim said. “They managed to hide from you and you know this system better than anyone. Who else knows that computer and ship systems so well?”

Lucas’ jaw dropped. “Hitchcock?” he exclaimed, turning to his computer. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Probably because we don’t like to think badly of people we consider friends,” Tim said. “You weren’t on the bridge when Nate, Captain Bridger, came aboard. She challenged him and was not only embarrassed when Crocker introduced him but the captain delivered a fairly good put down as well.”

“Tim, I know all about your relationship with the captain,” Lucas said, tapping away at his keyboard. “You don’t have to hide it when you’re around me.”

“How do you know?”

Lucas grinned. “That’s one advantage to being a kid, people tend to forget you’re around,” he said. “I just watched you guys. Mainly at the beach house, but there’s a spark there if anyone knows to look for it.”

“I’m not ashamed,” Tim said. “Even if everything I was raised to believe in says it’s wrong.”

“Hey, anyone who says love is wrong deserves to be ignored,” Lucas said. “This search is going to take a while. Do you want to talk or anything?”

“About what?” Tim asked.

“Before all this trouble started I overheard the captain and admiral fighting,” Lucas said. “Apparently someone, Hitchcock, took pictures of you guys at the beach house and sent them to Noyce. Captain Bridger said they had been faked on the computer and Noyce said he wanted to talk to you. I think the captain was just about to call you when everything went to hell.”

“Shit!” The color drained out of Tim’s face and he sat down heavily on Lucas’ bunk. “Admiral Noyce was standing by the XO station after Nate landed. I was whispering and told Nate I loved him. Do you think Noyce was close enough to hear me?”

Lucas sighed. “I don’t know, it was pretty noisy,” he said. “I’d just keep quiet about it and talk with the captain when he wakes up. I can’t see Noyce doing anything about this when we’ve got so many other problems to solve.”

“So how are we going to prove this to Noyce?” Tim asked. “That it’s Hitchcock, I mean.”

“I’ve hacked into her personal files,” Lucas replied. “I’m just searching for key words at the moment. If I find anything then I’ll go in and look closer. After that, it’s probably all down to our acting skills.”

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By the time seaQuest was back in Pearl Harbor, Lucas and Tim had a nice but largely circumstantial folder of evidence against Lt. Commander Hitchcock. Tim spent as much of his down time as he could at Nate’s bedside and was there when his lover finally opened his eyes.

“Nate?” Tim asked, squeezing his hand and leaning in. “How do you feel?”

“Like something heavy sat on me,” Nathan replied. “Or landed on me. What happened?”

“What do you remember?” Tim asked.

“I was watching the WSKRs,” Nathan said, sipping the water Tim offered. “I turned around to see what you were doing and that’s it.”

Tim sighed. “You were injured when Miguel’s station exploded, the only one hurt I might add,” he said. “You’ve been in a medically induced coma for three days and unconscious for the rest of the week. Let me go get Dr. Westphalen so she can check you out and then I’ll come back and talk some more.”

“Love you,” Nathan whispered, squeezing Tim’s hand.

“Love you too.”

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Admiral Noyce was relieved when he got the message that Nathan was awake and appeared to be on the mend. He left his temporary quarters and went to see how his friend was doing. He wasn’t too surprised to find Lieutenant O’Neill sitting by Nathan’s bed but was surprised to see them holding hands. Noyce stayed in the shadows and listened to their conversation.

“So Lucas knows?” Nathan was saying. “I guess I’m not too surprised by that news. In a way I’m glad; he’s very much like a son to me and we’d have to tell him eventually.”

“I think Admiral Noyce does too,” Tim sighed. “When you got hurt I didn’t really think before talking and I think he heard me say that I love you. But he hasn’t said anything so I don’t know for sure.”

“Bill Noyce may have a short temper but he does believe in giving people a chance,” Nathan said. “Can I have some more water?”

Tim picked up the glass and bent the straw for Nathan. “When you’re cleared to leave, I’ve got permission to take you back to that beach house so you can rest in the sun,” he said. “I’m going to spoil you rotten.”

“We should think very seriously about what we’ll do if Bill does court martial us,” Nathan said. “I doubt he’ll do things the official way because it might mean prison time and I’d like

to think he wouldn't do that. But our careers would be over."

"As long as we're together, that's all that matters to me," Tim said. He looked around before kissing Nathan. "When I almost lost you, I realized how stupid all the rules are and you're all that matters."

"If we do have to leave seaQuest we should try and live somewhere she 'docks' often so Lucas can visit," Nathan said. "That's if he wants to stay aboard after I leave. And I'm not sure what Darwin will want to do. You're the only constant in my life right now, don't go anywhere."

"I won't, I can't wait to get you alone so I can show you how I really feel," Tim replied, smiling. He switched to French. "You know we're not alone, don't you?"

"Yeah, I felt him come in," Nathan replied. He shifted around a little. "You may as well come in, Bill, we know you're there."

"Can I ask you one question, Nate?" Bill asked, stepping into the room. "Why?"

"Why do I love Tim?" Nathan looked over at his lover. "Well, Bill, why do you love Barbara? There's no explanation for feelings, you should know that by now. I love Tim because of who he is and how he makes me feel. He completes me. You overheard our conversation, what are you going to do know that you know?"

Noyce sighed. "I've been doing a lot of thinking and soul searching since you got hurt," he said finally. "And I realized that you've, somehow, managed to keep personal and professional separate in a way I never could. I would have totally believed your story about those pictures being faked if you hadn't been injured; and even then it was only by chance that I was able to hear what Lieutenant O'Neill said as he was taking care of you."

"Bill, we'll both leave the UEO if you want us to," Nathan said. "We've talked about it several times and there are other things we can do. We'd just prefer not to."

"Nate, I'm willing to overlook everything, including an on-going relationship, as long as it doesn't affect your work," Noyce said. "When I saw those pictures I reacted on instinct. I thought you were throwing away everything for nothing. I've realized how wrong that initial assessment was. Now I can't really say I like or am comfortable with the idea, but we've been friends a long time. I don't want anything to change that."

Nathan smiled. "Thanks, Bill, for both of us," he said. "Maybe we can work on changing a few rules while we're at it."

"Don't push your luck," Bill warned sternly.

## Afterwards

Bill Noyce had to admit that Lucas did very good and complete work. He managed to compile enough evidence to show that it really was Katherine Hitchcock who reported the relationship between Bridger and O'Neill and also infected the seaQuest with a potentially lethal computer virus that couldn't be fixed by anyone. They also decided that she was indirectly responsible for Nathan's injury, even if he protested that one.

So they called a hearing in the ward room so Bridger wouldn't have to travel. He was having a hard time healing up from some of the injuries he suffered during the explosion on the bridge. Nathan was only just able to sit through it, and that was only because of the medications given to him prior to the start of the hearing. Noyce ran the proceedings as Nate was still on pain killers and not exactly coherent. Noyce was surprised at how mad Hitchcock was at being found out. She stated that it should be Bridger and O'Neill in trouble instead of her.

"That's another matter entirely," Noyce said firmly. "We are here to discuss your actions towards your ship, crew, and captain. I assure you that Captain Bridger and Lieutenant O'Neill will be dealt with once the captain is fully recovered."

"I don't have to tell you anything," Hitchcock said.

"No, you don't, although we would like to know why you decided to sabotage your own ship," Noyce said.

"I didn't mean to hurt anyone," Hitchcock said. "But Bridger shouldn't have been given this command. It should've gone to Jon. He's worked so hard and this is how you rewarded him. You took a prime command out from under him to give it to a retired Captain that should never have come back to service."

Nathan and Bill looked at each other. Noyce knew about the mini-confrontation between Nate and Hitchcock back when he first boarded. Bill always wondered, deep down, if Hitchcock was jealous that someone else knew the seaQuest better than she did.

"I can see this is going to have to go before a full board after a few psychological tests," Bill said finally. "But you've been in the service long enough to know that command positions are decided for a reason. They can be questioned, but Commander Ford knew my feelings on the matter. He accepted my decision and that should have been the end of it. This hearing is over. Lieutenant O'Neill, if you would help Captain Bridger back to his quarters."

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"What's going to happen now?" O'Neill asked once he and Bridger were back in the Captain's quarters.

"Bill will push for extensive exams for Hitchcock before the full hearing," Bridger replied. He shifted on his bunk to get comfortable and sighed. "She's going to try and bring our relationship up to discredit me in front of the UEO, Tim."

"What do we do?"

"We leave it to Bill," Bridger replied. "He's on our side and he'll be able to convince them that Hitchcock has made up stories in an attempt to get me off the seaQuest when her original plan didn't work. We have plans in place, Tim. All we can do now is move forward and put this hate behind us."

"Do you think there's anyone else on the boat that would have the same reactions?" O'Neill asked.

"There might be, but we'll face the problems when we get there," Bridger replied. "I'm about to fall asleep on you, Tim. Will you be here when I wake up?"

"Of course I will," O'Neill said. He kissed Bridger's forehead and went to get a book off the shelf to read. He wasn't on duty until the next day and planned to stay with his lover until then.

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