

**MAITLAND**

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**COR COROLI:  
CONVERGENCE**

## **Cor Coroli: Convergence**

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**Books in this Series**

**Convergence**  
**Dirge for a Winter's Solstice**

**Cor Coroli 1**  
**Zoomers & Boomers**

**Cor Coroli 2**  
**Stardate: 42761.3**

**Cor Coroli**  
**Convergence**

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**Convergence**

**Contents:**

1. An End

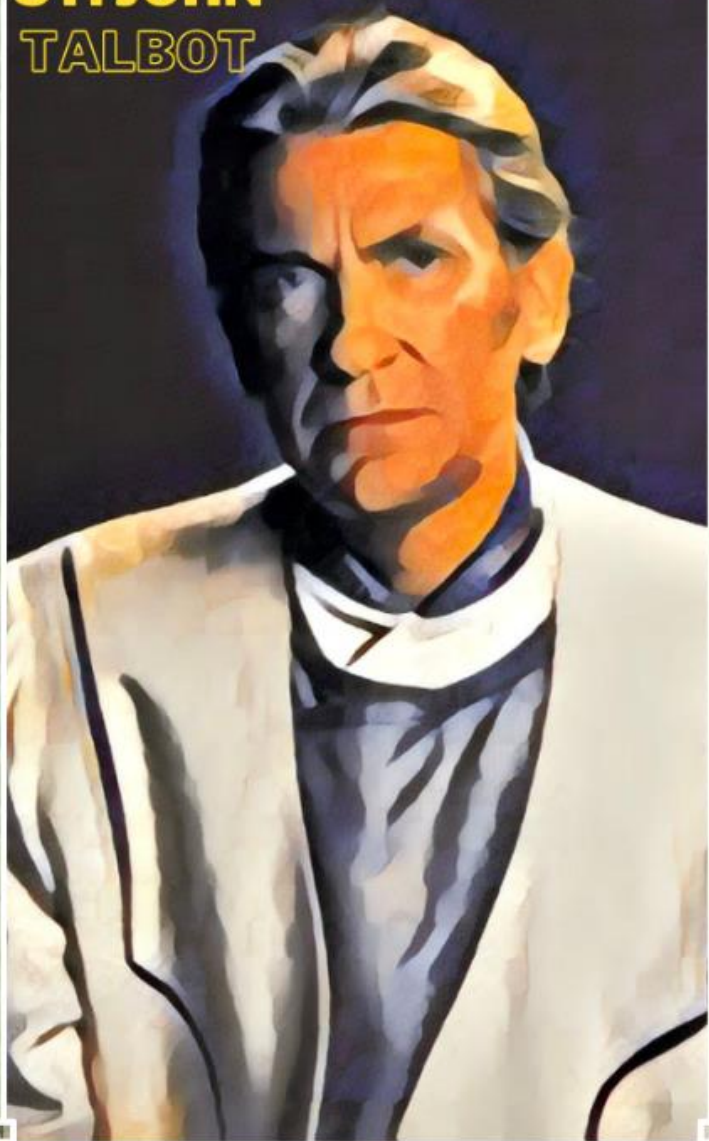
**Cover Page**

2. Council Chamber
3. Mired
4. *Vejul*
5. Embark
6. Rain
7. Service
8. Spy
9. Transit
10. Visitor
11. Collection
12. Abandoned
13. Wary
14. A Guest
15. Reunited
16. Ghosts
17. Ascent
18. Zhat Vash
19. An Apt Ship
20. Siblings in Cause
21. Change
22. The Departed
23. Dinner
24. Voyage
25. Resignation
26. Exposition
27. Soup Course
28. Fleet Deployment
29. Chance Meeting
30. Appetizer
31. Brinksmanship
32. Archives
33. Digestifs
34. Bluffing

35. Salon  
D'Observation
36. Red Storm
37. Comrades
38. *Brain*
39. *Valmaika*
40. Progress
41. Intrepid
42. Uninvited
43. Stirring
44. Refuse
45. Flying Blind
46. Hunting
47. A Meeting
48. Quell a Riot
49. On Approach
50. Conspiracy of  
Innocents
51. *Vollo* Rising
52. Commit
53. Carrion birds
54. Signals
55. Completed
56. Service No. 685-  
0813D
57. Thirst
58. Recovery
59. Detection
60. Call of the Dogs
61. Barnstorming
62. Predation
63. Time
64. A Call
65. Alarm
66. Isolated
67. Funeral
68. Raid
69. Enemy down
70. Mobilize
71. Administration

72. Fire
73. Approach
74. Warm Up
75. Displacement
76. Stand
77. Controller
78. P'nom
79. Transmission
80. Revolt
81. Sisters
82. Wallace
83. Mercy, of a Sort
84. Paris
85. Galactic Peace &  
Marriage

**ST. JOHN  
TALBOT**



## **An End / An Sahhae**

His breath came in huge raspy huffs as he scrambled along the uneven, unseen, slick, rocky floor of the mine shaft. A fist-sized rock ricocheted off his left heel as he pushed further into the darkness. The shaft angled downward at a slowly increasing pitch and the ambient light reflecting off the purple veins of minerals lacing the black rock walls was growing dim. A grunt escaped him as the rock clattered away somewhere into the darkness. He set his arms to pinwheeling and tried to keep his balance. His left leg was suddenly useless. To tumble into the darkness now would mean death.

The air was heavy with humidity and had a coppery taste to it, which irritated his nose and throat. Tagir clenched his teeth together to keep a shriek of pain from escaping and managed to skid to a stop without collapsing. The antique phaser rifle he'd brought down from *Trudy* hung awkwardly from its strap over his right shoulder. In a controlled slump Tagir allowed the weight of the rifle to pull him down towards the righthand side of the shaft in an effort to protect his now injured left leg and foot. A sharp stone dug into his right hip and the rifle clattered on the ground as he tried to cushion his awkward fall with his hands and forearms.

A yelping groan rang-out in the darkness and echoed up and down the dark, damp shaft.

Tears rolled down Tagir's cheeks and mixed with the sweat soaking his beard. He scrambled to roll off the rock and pull himself tight against the black wall of the shaft. His rifle rattled and scrapped its way along the uneven ground behind him.

He'd managed to miss a large jagged bolder which would have surely broken him in half had he landed on it. Instinctively he curled-up and sheltered behind its black mass. With his back pressed against the leeward side of the bolder, he pulled the rifle to his lap while his chest heaved. He used his hands to awkwardly pull his limp left leg to rest parallel to his right. In the muted light he could see the vintage red coveralls he'd been so proud of donning were tattered and torn. There was no feeling in his left leg below the knee. He lay against the rock in

the dark, trying to control his erratic breathing. He knew he'd broken something important.

Tagir closed his eyes and slowly ran his trembling left hand down his face from his brow to his beard to wipe away the sheen of sweat and condensation which had drenched him.

The sounds of wild dogs barking and growling drifted down the shaft and nested in Tagir's ears. He'd run and run, but the monsters were closing.

The deeper he ventured down the shaft, the warmer the foul air became, but Tagir Rhupp found himself shivering and clammy in the darkness as the snarls, roars and barks grew louder and louder. Tagir shuddered and drew two long breaths into his lungs to calm himself. Either as a result of the injury, or sheer terror, his body and mind were in shock. He couldn't tell how close they were now, but they covered ground horrifyingly fast.

The sounds of the monsters approaching were all Tagir could hear. He opened and closed his eyes several times to no avail. The light had died.

Things had happened so incredibly quickly. One instant he and P'nom were exploring a storeroom in what they thought was an abandoned part of the facility – the next, P'nom was gone and Tagir was fleeing freakish monsters with translucent eyes toting heavy disruptors tipped with deadly looking bayonets. There'd been no time to charge, aim and fire the phaser rifle. His only options were to stand and die or tumble down a sloping cliff and hope to make it into the entrance of one of the dark shafts.

Suddenly a purple/green bolt of charged plasma flashed over his head. For a second the dark shaft was illuminated and the humid air sizzled and popped. Tagir looked down at his old phaser rifle and used the instant of light to finger and disconnect the power-pack's safety latch. The small diode mounted just above the bulky rifle's handle illuminated and Tagir worked his shaking fingers around the vintage retaining clips coupling the bulky rifle's body to the cylindrical power-pack.

The creatures sounded like they were standing just on the other side of the rock he'd hidden behind. Darkness returned. Even the

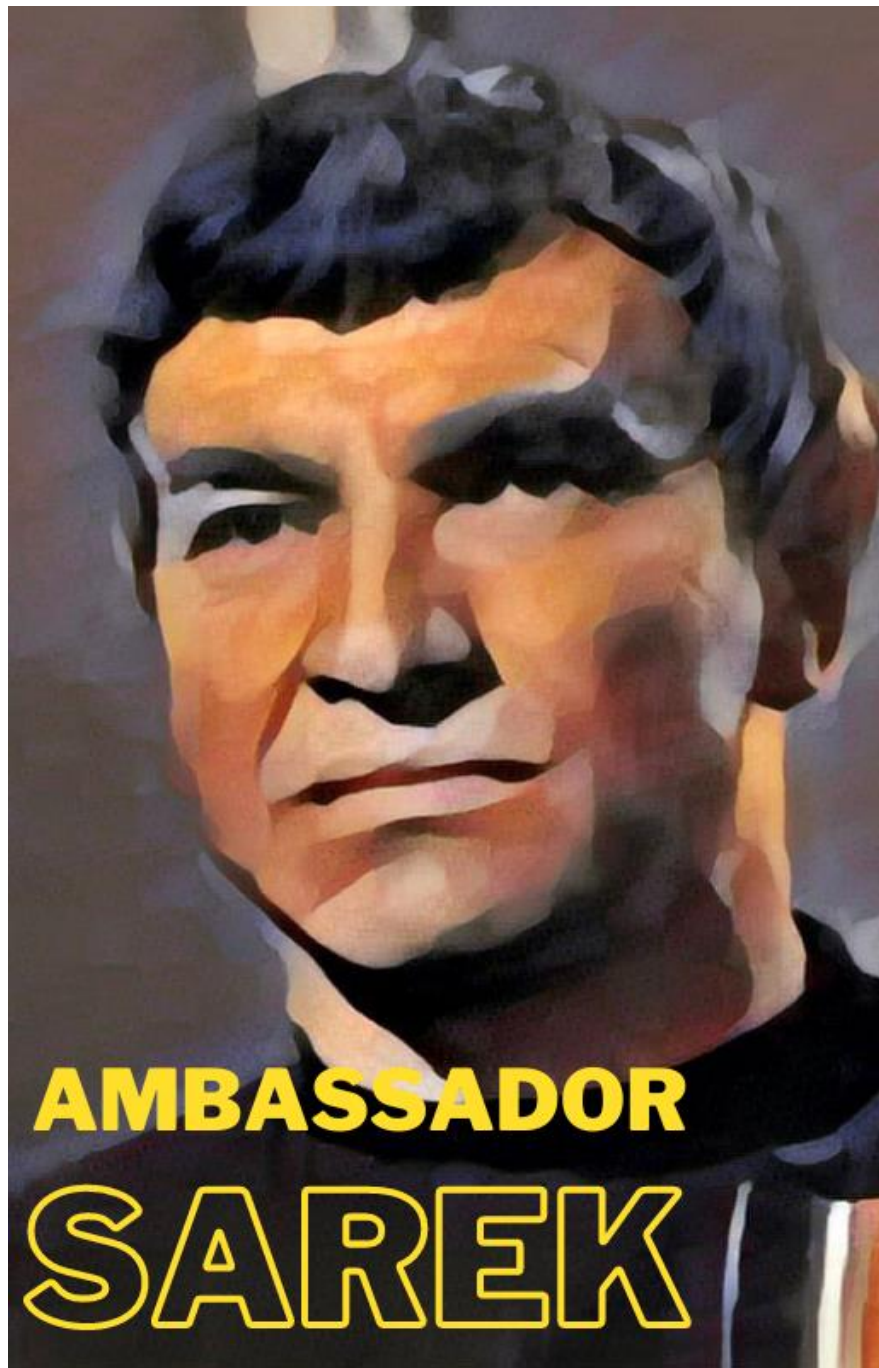
flashing red diode on the forty-year-old rifle seemed to struggle against the inky blackness.

Overload.

With all the strength he could muster Tagir pitched the large weapon over his head and behind the large, jagged stone, into the darkness. He'd removed the restrictor plates, and the old power-pack would explode in seconds. He'd die, but he'd take them with him.

***Cor Coroli:***  
**CONVERGENCE**  
The Series Conclusion.

By: Glenn G G Maitland.



**AMBASSADOR**

**SAREK**

## Council Chamber / *Rhe*

Xao T'Chou leaned back in his cushioned chair and watched in silence as the Andorian Ambassador and his delegation made their way out of the Council Chamber. The Ambassador and his aides were flanked by a troop of Imperial Guardsmen dressed in pristine tactical uniforms. Weapons of any kind were strictly prohibited within the Federation Council Complex and the empty scabbards and holsters slapping against the hard looking Guardsmen's thighs drew more attention to the commandos than if they'd been permitted to carry their phase pistols and Ushaan-tors. The Andorians moved with determination and purpose.

The day's session had been a tense affair.

The Vulcan delegation, positioned on the opposite side of the Chamber from where the Andorians traditionally sat, moved at an almost glacial pace by comparison. At the center of the Vulcan contingent stood Sarek. Xao's dark eyes darted from the departing Andorians and settled on the Vulcan Ambassador. He was resplendent in a dark blue tunic sporting a full heraldry crest of intricate gold brocade across his chest, offset by a single Federation service decoration, meticulously pinned just below his left collar bone. The man was a living legend. Widely regarded as Vulcan's greatest Ambassador to Earth since the early years following First Contact. Xao marvelled at the man's composure as his aides patiently gathered up their briefing materials in preparation for the return to their Embassy.

"I'm told that's the same suit he wore to Babel when Coridan was first granted provisional membership in the Federation."

Admiral T'Chou snapped his head around and sat forward at an almost violent speed. He found himself staring at Maureen Bautlin. A crooked smile quickly appeared on Xao's face as he felt his cheeks flush. She'd given him a genuine surprise.

"Admiral Bautlin, ha! Well, you caught me daydreaming."

"Sorry. How are you Xao?" Maureen kept her voice low, and her posture ridged. The session was over, but they were still in full view of dozens of the Federation's most powerful politicians.

Admiral T'Chou rose from his seat and offered Maureen a warm handshake before stepping out from behind the polished table he'd laid his own materials for the day's work upon. Henry had quietly left the chamber the moment the session was closed without so much as a polite "*goodbye*". The events of the last four weeks had affected the Commander-in-Chief on a deeply personal level. Xao understood.

"I'm about as well as can be expected, thank you Maureen. And you?" Admiral T'Chou tugged at the bottom of his tunic to pull out the wrinkles that had formed across his somewhat pudgy midriff.

Maureen fixed a solemn expression on her face; well practiced. "It's just a shock for us all, I think." She sidled slightly closer to the Acting Chief of Operations to create a conspiratorial closeness. She'd manipulated Admiral Cahill's return to Mars and with no small amount of diplomatic pressure from the President's office—she'd had T'Chou moved into the now vacant Operations Command portfolio. "I know you were very close."

The flush faded from Xao's cheeks. Surprise and happiness fell away from his lips and his crooked smile became morose, nearly pathetic. "I...*cough*...sorry, I was the best man at his wedding. Did you know that?" Well practiced.

Maureen concentrated on holding the sad expression firmly in place on her own face like a mask. Of course, she knew. She slowly, sadly, shook her head.

"Yeah, yeah...we were ensigns together aboard the old *Yorktown*, must be more than thirty years ago now. Hell, when my daughter was born, I was out past the Tigrian Rift aboard the *Urquhart*...he stepped in and was there at the hospital with Yumi." Xao swallowed hard and clenched his teeth. Drama was his forte.

Maureen put her hand on Xao's soft shoulder and gently squeezed him through his maroon uniform. He was literally putty in her hands. "I can't imagine your loss, Xao. I'm so sorry."

The Vulcans moved in nearly perfect unison suddenly. Sarek, his aides, the Deputy Ambassador (the same young Vulcan who'd assisted Sestrick during her temporary tenure as Ambassador) and a contingent of Starfleet Security Officers rose and moved in a tight pack towards the Hall's northern concourse. Admiral T'Chou caught the

block of neatly choreographed activity in his peripheral vision and was grateful for the distraction. He pulled back from Admiral Bautlin slightly to watch as Sarek and his entourage departed. Thom's death had hurt...but he was now Chief of Ops. and things for Xao were looking up.

"The same suit, you say?"

As the Vulcans exited the Hall the remaining delegations made haste and began trickling out towards the exits with increasing determination. Everyone wanted to see if recent political sparks might ignite some ancient conflagration between the Andorians and Vulcans. There'd been no explosions, just rings of smoke mostly rising from the Andorian benches so far.

"So I'm told."

"Isn't that where Sarek killed the Tellarite Ambassador?" Xao knew Sarek had murdered no one, but it had long been a popular folk tale within the walls of the Council Chamber. He kept his voice very low.

Maureen let the pained expression fall from her face smiled. "Hmmm, well I've heard rumours. He did get Coridan into the Federation though...at the cost of some rather overzealous Tellarite mining concerns, I believe."

The last of the Vulcans disappeared into the exterior concourse and the Council Chamber suddenly seemed very empty. Admiral T'Chou turned back towards his seat and began gathering up his own briefing materials. He'd been assigned a commander to serve as an aide when he'd moved from Starfleet Security to the Chief of Operations portfolio temporarily, but he'd advised the young woman that he preferred to "*haul my own freight*". Commander Lisa Donaldson was awaiting Admiral T'Chou just beyond the Chamber.

"I haven't seen you around in close to a year, Maureen. Contemporaneous Affairs keeping you busy?" Xao packed the last of his pads into an oversized silver attaché case. He wondered if he should mention the night Thom shipped out, he'd stopped by for a coffee. Knot was dead, but Xao's personal relationship with the man might still serve to bolster T'Chou's career ambitions.

"It's interesting work. I'm pleased you were receptive to our requests for the *Enterprise* to survey some of the more tactically

interesting asteroids out in the Foxtrot Sector.” She’d set to work sowing the seeds of the plan she’d been tasked with by her Controller the moment she got back to Jupiter from Cor Coroli. Having T’Chou named Acting Chief of Ops had been crucial; he owed her.

“Yes, yes of course. In fact, Captain Harriman has made some rather interesting proposals himself now that they’re on station.” The moment to draw sympathy off Thom’s death had passed.

“Oh, really?” She smiled.

## **Mired / Uwheawhoiik'heqr**

*Captain's log supplemental, Grant Baker commanding USS Fury. It has been just over four weeks since we first arrived in orbit above Andoria with the stricken Battlecruiser Shrar in tow. Since that time, we've been obliged to hold a polar orbit above the planet where we are flanked by three Imperial Guard Frigates and a dozen combat-ready Raiders. The USS Meni T'Pra has been locked into a parallel orbit with us, some fifteen hundred kilometres off our starboard stern since her arrival three and a half weeks ago.*

*Officially we are guests of the Andorian Government; a fact Starfleet Command continues to reiterate to both Fury and the Meni T'Pra. The truth is we're hostages of the Imperial Guard and look to remain as such until Chancellor Ch'Shoro and his people determine how the sudden death of Admiral Knot weeks ago while attending an official ceremony in the capital affects their standing with Starfleet and the Federation at large...especially in light of Vulcan's recent political maneuvering.*

*Communications between Fury and Meni T'Pra are being openly monitored by the Andorians, as are the long-range transmissions between our ships and Starfleet Command. We've managed to devise a method to pass coded messages between our two vessels though using a low-level bandwidth employed by our autonomic maintenance servers. We're fortunate that the Meni T'Pra is just barely within range of what amounts to an old-fashioned radio signal and that her Chief Engineer, much like myself, is ancient and has enough practical field experience to recognize Mr. Kelly's efforts at clandestine transmissions.*

*The Meni T'Pra is presently under command of her first officer, a young man by the name of Grover Tchullmar. Captain Evengii remains on the surface and unheard from since attending the ceremony weeks ago with myself and Admiral Knot, Chief of Starfleet Operations. I didn't get a chance to get to know the*

*young Captain Evengii, but I understand his previous posting was to the C-in-C's personal protective detail; he was apparently quite close to Admiral Knot as a result. Commander Eldredge, Knot's protective officer, also remains below.*

*To date we have entertained seven official visits from Chancellor Ch'Sharo's Office—the last such tour wrapped up just an hour ago. The Chancellor himself attended Fury a week ago to present the Andorian Medical Examiner's findings concerning the cause of death for Admiral Knot. My CMO, Commander Stacey, diligently waded through the eleven-hundred-page report and examined the tissue samples the Andorian ME provided. She tentatively reached the same, baffling conclusion; Admiral Knot died as a result of an extreme, irreversible, anaphylaxis. Apparently, he was allergic to the Vithi Bulb Tea served as part of the traditional Andorian ceremony of appreciation following the presentation of my...medal.*

*Dr. Stacey and the Meni T'Pra's CMO, Dr. Vorsch, have been given full access to the Admiral's remains and have been permitted to extract samples for independent verification aboard both starships. So far both the lab here aboard Fury and the older lab aboard Meni T'Pra have produced corroborating results with the Andorian findings. Our "hosts" refuse to release the Admiral's body to our care though. Neither have the Andorian's permitted the survivors of USS Isadore to transport up to either of our ships. They remain as "guests" within the capital.*

*For the last two weeks an open invitation has been extended for up to twenty crewmen and officers from either ship to transport down to the Andorian capital for respite while we all wait for the ongoing "bureaucratic impasse" to resolve itself. As there has been no word from Captain Evengii since the ceremony, the crew of the Meni T'Pra have not availed themselves of the invitation. While I would direct the crew of Fury to stand in solidarity with the Meni T'Pra—there's been no need. The Andorian invitation specified that Vulcan crewmembers were not welcomed in the capital owing to concerns for their safety, hence*

*none of my crew have expressed any desire to transport to the surface.*

A soft double chime drew Grant's attention from his desk to his cabin's door. He briefly considered pulling himself out of the comfortable chair and pulling on the uniform tunic he'd left hanging by his bunk, but he didn't have the ambition.

"Come."

The slate blue doors of the two-room cabin hushed open, and Commander Syrk stepped over the threshold. The tall, slender Vulcan was immaculately attired in his full duty uniform and his tunic's bib was firmly and stiffly fastened. Syrk, a graduate of the Vulcan Science Academy and expectant commander of the *USS Fury* once their initial shakedown cruise was completed (and Captain Baker finally retired) regarded his paunchy captain seated at the desk with a raised eyebrow. "Captain, I apologise for intruding on your...personal time."

Baker pushed himself up with a grunt and smiled. Vulcans were the Universe's greatest straight men, and Grant did enjoy flaunting his humanity in front of Syrk whenever he could. He drew a long breath and arched his back, pushing his belly out towards the Vulcan. Syrk remained tacit at the sight of his captain wearing nothing but a tight-fitting white turtleneck, displaying his immense girth with crude human pride.

"It's fine Mr. Syrk, report." Grant waited for his first officer to speak.

"Sensors have registered two additional Andorian Raiders falling into the flight pattern of vessels presently encircling the *Meni T'Pra* and ourselves." Syrk extended his left hand and presented the captain with a PADD.

Grant grunted and took the PADD from the Vulcan and motioned for the man to take a seat at the cabin's small conference table opposite the desk built into the main room's far bulkhead. Syrk waited for the captain to seat himself before deftly sliding to an erect perch opposite the old human. Captain Baker studied the PADD closely. He furled his thick black and grey eyebrows as he read.

"These two Raiders are...older ships?"

“Yes, sir. At least two generations removed from the vessels presently deployed to forward duty within the Imperial Guard. They appear to have launched from the surface from a facility south of the capital.”

Grant set the PADD down and regarded Syrk for a moment. The man was just over two meters tall, rail thin and possessed of the straightest, blackest hair Grant had ever seen. He was mean and sharp, young and nearly cripplingly professional. He’d make a stern and demanding captain to be sure. “Why is this development important then, Mr. Syrk?”

“Sir, these older Raiders are specifically equipped with broadband monitoring equipment. Such equipment developed out of the Imperial Guard’s clandestine observation branch which, only a few generations ago, was specifically tasked with eavesdropping on Vulcan interstellar transmissions.”

Understanding dawned on Grant’s tired face. “You feel these old ships will be able to pick up on our private line to the *Meni T’Pra*?”

“If they haven’t done so already sir, they certainly will.”

“Very well. Tell Mr. Kelly to transmit: *earsyay onyay ushhay*. Understood?”

Syrk cocked his eyebrow again. “Sir?”

“*Earsyay onyay ushhay*. Then radio silence until we can figure out some other way to code our transmissions.” Grant didn’t have time to explain Pig Latin to his Vulcan Science Officer. Kelly would know what was meant by it and the old hand across the vacuum of space aboard the *Meni T’Pra* would catch the hint too. “Dismissed Commander Syrk, go.”

Syrk rose and left the cabin to proceed to Engineering as ordered.

## *Vejul / Vejul*

The twenty-three-square-meter section of *ih'hedaes* cladding crumpled and withered in upon itself like some scrap of paper dropped into a fire by a curious child. The star flared blue/white and yellow as the mass of metal combusted and broke apart.

Tikot Ketor stood at the observation port aboard the *Vejul* and silently furled his pronounced brow as he watched a *khaidoa's* worth of work burn away in a mass of solar plasma. The heavy tractor emitter aboard the *V'Dara* had failed and the massive panel was ripped away from the Warbird by the fierce gravity of the smaller of the two Kea suns.

“Commander Tenaj reports an intermittent failure in the *V'Dara's* primary energy distribution system, Tikot Ketor, Rekkhai.”

Ketor stood silently watching as the panel disintegrated in the hellfire of the sun. Nearly an entire cycle had passed since the incursion of the Starfleet vessel. The loss of the *Votol* had thrown his timetable into chaos. The *Votol* remained in a low orbit above AK-hyi, a nonfunctional hulk. Dozens of requests to have a replacement *Horo*-class Warbird dispatched to replace the ruined vessel had gone unanswered by Romulus. Mivik's people had managed to strip most of the damaged Warbird's useful components to stockpile an inventory of spare parts for the remaining ships in Ketor's diminished workforce.

Behind the stoic Ketor, Commander Veeta cleared his throat and was about to repeat the status update from the *V'Dara*, when Tikot spoke in a low, clear, emotionless voice...

“Why has Commander Tenaj allowed this failure?” Tikot kept his eyes fixed on the spot where the last particles of the massive sheet of metal cladding had been consumed by the sun.

“Rekkhai, the fault is with the *V'Dara*, not the crew, or Commander Tenaj.”

Veeta had served under Ketor for more than thirteen cycles, but Tikot, with his almost Vulcan-like emotional detachment and his unnerving ability to command the loyalty of the Remans of AK-hyi without the threat of violence or death, was an unknowable entity. He

didn't fear the man, not exactly, but he never knew what to expect from him.

"The *V'Dara* is but a tool in the hands of its commander, is this not so?" Tikot asked as he smoothly turned away from the view port in a flowing, almost dance-like motion, and spun to face the *Vejul's* commander.

"That is so, Rekkhai, but we've been taxing all the ships for *khaidoas* now without proper maintenance..." Veeta closed his mouth as Tikot Ketor raised his left hand.

"You will contact Centurion Setaib on AK-hyi to prepare the next section of cladding for immediate deployment." Tikot watched as the silver uniformed commander grimaced and swallowed whatever words were fighting to make their way out of his mouth. "Bring the reactors to full power and prepare the *Vejul* to retrieve the load and fit it successfully in place."

Veeta felt his cheeks flush with a sudden rush of blood. If Tikot Ketor had noticed the green blush of colour rise on the *Vejul's* commander's face, he didn't let on. There was no point in attempting to argue. Veeta brought his heels together in a sharp *-click!* and nodded his understanding without uttering a word. The *Vejul* was the newest of the prototype *Horo*-class Warbirds at work in the Kea System, but she too had been tasked with unceasing sorties without a proper break for routine maintenance. The odds were just as good that they too would suffer a systems failure while under stress of moving the next massive piece of *ih'hedaes* cladding from the surface of AK-hyi to the intended spot on the Eisan Lattice. There was no use sharing that with Ketor though.

Tikot watched as Commander Veeta turned and marched stiffly towards the primary control post on the *Vejul's* bridge to communicate to his subcommander what needed to be done. The man had come specifically recommended after a tour of duty liaising with the Tal Shiar—as had all the Warbirds' Commanders. As Tikot watched Veeta march in indignant silence back to his officers, he doubted not only the man's competence, but his very loyalty.

As the "ready alert" sounded and the ship began preparing for live operations, Tikot turned once again towards the view port. The Eisan

Lattice was as immense as ever. They'd managed in just over twenty cycles to seal less than twenty percent of its fearsome aperture. The delays caused by Starfleet, the loss of the *Voltol*, and now the sudden ineptness of his commanders were all conspiring to doom his mission to safeguard the known universe.

He remained fixed in place. A black-clad figure in a sea of silver uniformed Romulan military men; a black smudge on a bright silver blade.

## Embark / *Nviomn*

(Three weeks and two days earlier.)

The small docking bay decompressed quickly and without issue. Dirlo had her hands resting lightly on the old-style thruster and navigational toggles waiting for Rhupp to signal “all go” for departure. P’nom had taken the seat just behind Moira and was running through *Trudy’s* operations system for a fifth time. She’d managed to rest for nearly an hour following her traumatic passage through Teague’s make-shift transporter.

The green atmospheric diode above Tagir’s engineering station switched from green to red and the large, corrugated bay door rolled smoothly up and out of sight. The curious “runabout” now rested in a decompressed hangar looking out at the Gav-Garr asteroid belt marking the fringes of the Tellarite home system.

“Pressurization equalized; bay door retracted. Impulse plant and thrusters at stand-by, sir.” Tagir couldn’t help from grinning like a child as he flipped the old-school toggles and pushed the colourful “jelly” actuators arranged in neat rows along his engineering post.

Captain Shorh Ch’orithron leaned forward slightly in his seat and glanced around the small cabin of the *runabout* Dannar Teague had supplied them with. He didn’t share Tagir Rhupp’s affinity for museum pieces and couldn’t help but feel distrustful of the nearly fifty-year-old tech they were relying on. “Ensign Dirlo, status?”

“Sir, all systems show ready.” Moira glanced to her right and confirmed her own small status panel was in line with what Chief Rhupp was receiving at engineering.

“Lieutenant P’nom, any indications of vessels or active sensor sweeps out there?” Shorh turned to watch the young half Vulcan attend to her sensors. She looked like a child playing dress-up in the red engineering coveralls Tagir had found stowed aboard Teague’s vintage craft. As the young officer ran a sensor sweep, it occurred to Shorh that they all must look like crazed reenactors or deranged tour guides escaped from the Fleet Museum.

“Indications negative, sir.”

“Very well...” Shorh inhaled slowly and checked his own status board. All green. “Chief, release docking clamps. Ensign, ahead slow, thrusters only.”

*Trudy* slid out of her den without a sound and easily glided out among the asteroids and stars. At three hundred meters clear of the sequestered dock Teague had so impressively built into one of the larger asteroids, the corrugated bay door rolled back into place automatically. A secondary indicator panel at Tagir’s station reported the docking bay was secure and would remain unpressurized until such time as a code sequence was transmitted to activate the asteroid’s independent atmospheric controls.

“Captain, we’re at three hundred and twenty meters from our bay, clear and free to navigate.” Moira cut *Trudy’s* aft thrusters and prepared to fire any one of the eighteen different thrust modules to align their small vessel with whatever course Captain Ch’orithron might order.

Time was an issue. Shorh was sure that their absence from Spacedock 17 had been discovered by now. As much as he’d been impressed with Teague; he didn’t trust that the old human would manage to keep quiet as to where they’d managed to flee. Shorh rose from his seat and moved towards Dirlo at the navigation station and groped in the broad black belt cinched around his red overalls. There were several secure pockets and compartments lining the utility belt and Shorh quickly removed one of the discs Teague had given him before they departed.

“How are our engines looking, Mr. Rhupp?” Shorh called back towards Tagir as he handed Moira the disc Teague had promised would guide them to a more “suitable” vessel for their intended quest to seek out the truth behind the disappearance of the *USS Sheaffe*.

Tagir, still grinning like a schoolboy, pressed four more bright “jellies” and leaned into an old-style viewing cowl. In the hour he’d had for the preflight inspection of the Frankenstein-like runabout Teague had fashioned out of two Class F shuttles, he’d discovered that the nacelles and impulse engines had been swapped out for modern components. More impressively, *Trudy’s* warp drive was a perfect miniaturized version of the standard NECC Mark VII reactor plant. His

growing beard bristled against his chest as he scanned through the various status screens his viewer gave him access too. He slowly raised his arm to give Captain Ch'orithron the thumbs-up.

Shorh regarded the human gesture and let it pass. He didn't know *Trudy*. He didn't particularly trust *Trudy*...or Teague for that matter, but things were what they were.

Moira took the isolinear disc from her captain's strong blue hand and inserted it into a modified reader affixed to her navigation station. An orange light flared on the primary panel. Behind her P'nom's operations board came to life. Tagir pulled himself away from his viewer to watch as P'nom methodically worked her own rainbow of fat "jelly" buttons.

Shorh stood by and watched as his former communications officer and helmsman manipulated the obsolete controls at their respective stations. There was a second disc in his belt. *Brain*, or at least a third of *Brain* as Teague had explained it. This was meant for whatever the next stage in their adventure might bring. As his young crew worked, he ventured a tentative touch to his ruined left antennae. Moira had gently applied a fresh dressing to the shattered sprig after Shorh had availed himself of *Trudy's* cramped sonic shower stall. He could feel the base of his poor antennae move freely as he slowly fingered his flagellum. A hypo from the onboard medkit had numbed the pain.

"Sir...?"

Shorh lowered his hand and looked down at Dirlo seated at the navigation station. "Yes ensign, report."

"We have a preset course, no stand-alone coordinates. If we commit, I'll have no control of the ship." On the small status screen mounted just above the primary actuator a simple "Y/N" prompt was flashing. It was a rudimentary matter of flipping a toggle up or down and hitting a chunky red "jelly" to command *Trudy* to either take them where Teague intended or leave them free to find their own way.

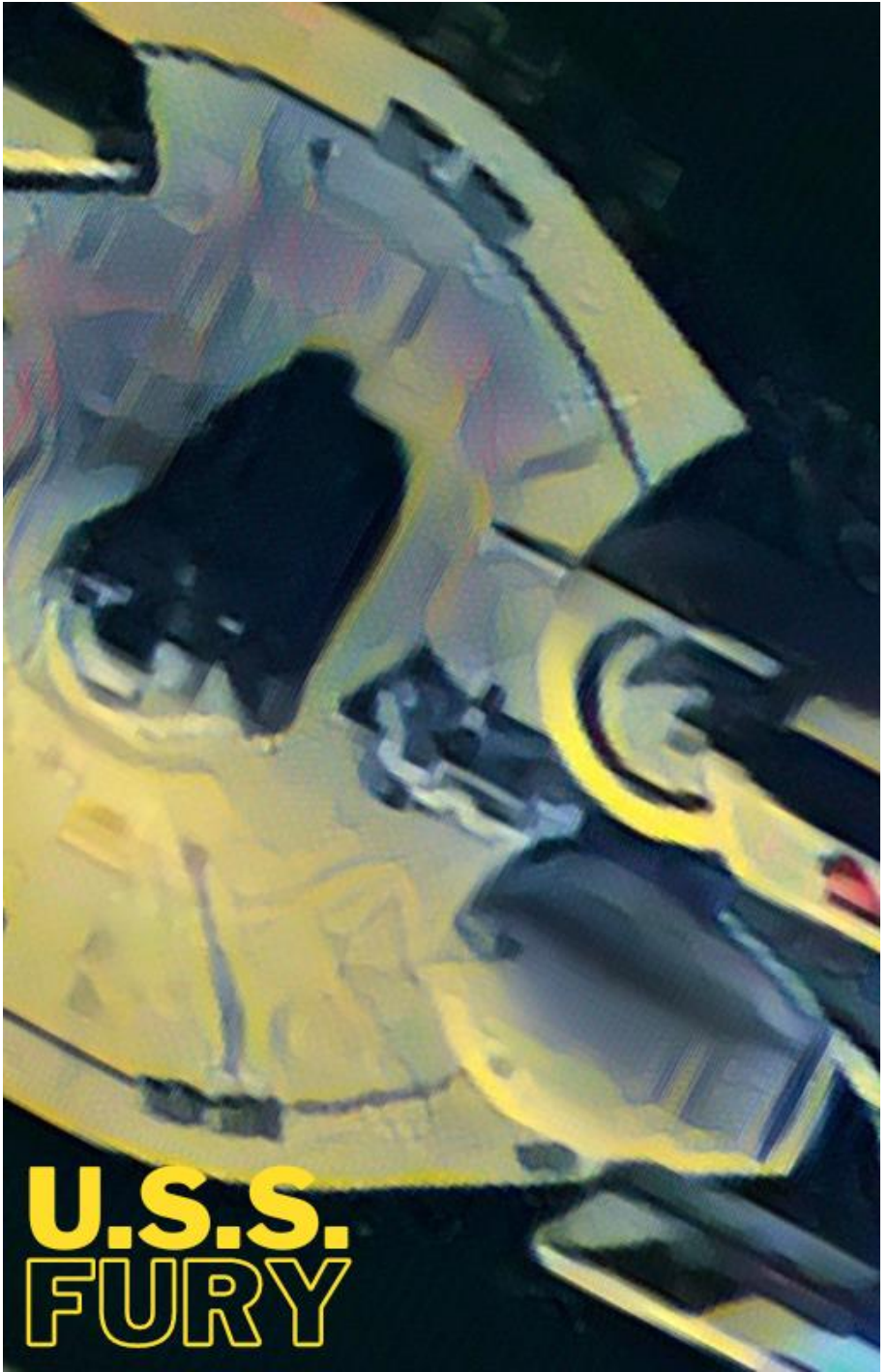
Shorh furled his thin white eyebrows and methodically stepped back towards his own seat. *Trudy* had no weapons. As Teague had stated, the runabout had only a basic deflector grid and without a portable subspace transmitter unit, she was only capable of short-range

communications. He glanced down at his status panel. Green across the board. A human idiom came to him just then...a saying Brian Harris had been fond of using during their time at the Academy: *in for a penny, in for a pound.*

“All secure?” Shorh looked from Tagir, still looking like a child with a new toy, to P’nom, who offered a slight nod and then forward to the young ensign awaiting his order. “Mister Dirlo, commit.”

Moira turned back to her controls and flipped a white tipped toggle switch up to indicate “Y” and without a word, jabbed at the knobby red “jelly” button below her status screen.

*Trudy* NAR-1331, the unique mishmash of obsolete Starfleet shuttle craft, came to a heading of 226.3 by 12.8 and engaged her miniature warp engine to disappear from the outskirts of the Gav-Garr asteroid belt in a quick white flash of light.



**U.S.S.**  
**FURY**

## **Rain / *lobh***

It was raining hard in San Francisco when Henry Wallace stepped off the secure transporter pad from the Federation Council Chambers in Paris, France. Commander Dazgin, Osip Evengii's replacement on the protective detail, walked with the Admiral from the transporter room to the threshold of the C-in-C's office. It wasn't quite 0600 hours. The hallways and administrative levels of Fleet Command were still operating in their hushed night-watch mode.

"Thank you, Commander, you can go and get yourself something to eat in the mess—I'll be working in my office for the next few hours." Henry barely glanced at the tall, muscular Benzite trailing him as he stepped into the reception area of the dark office.

"Sir, wouldn't you rather return home for some rest?" Dazgin stopped in the empty hallway just outside.

Henry slowed himself and exhaled. He didn't bother calling for the lights. The young man was thoughtful, dedicated and above all, professional. It hadn't been Henry's intention to be short with the commander. As he unclasped his red tunic's bib to let it fall open for the first time in hours, Admiral Wallace turned to regard the young Benzite standing in his doorway. A contrite expression settled on Henry's face as he considered how rude his behaviour might be considered by Benzite standards.

"Thank you, Commander Dazgin...it's been a long day for both of us. I'll get some work done here while you take some time for yourself. I've a cot if needs be."

Dazgin looked at the Admiral in the muted light and noted how tired and old the man suddenly appeared. The loss of Admiral Knot had shaken everyone, but Admiral Wallace appeared to be as consumed with grief now as he was weeks ago when the news first hit. As the new lead on the protective detail, it was Dazgin's sworn duty to ensure the Admiral's safety, but at that moment, as he regarded the sagging shoulders and downcast expression, Dazgin felt completely helpless to protect the great man from his grief and sorrow.

“Honestly, Commander, go and rest. I promise I’ll contact you if I plan on leaving anytime soon.”

Dazgin nodded his compliance. As the door hushed closed the commander was grateful he couldn’t see the despair in Admiral Wallace’s eyes in the darkness.

Henry stood in the dark for a few seconds imagining he could hear the young Benzite walk away to the mess where he might find some hot Bolian coffee, or fresh Danish pastries...

A pang of hunger ran through him. He paced confidently across the dark reception room and stepped towards the main doors to his own office. The faux oak panels hushed open at the admiral’s approach and Henry was bathed in a grey/blue pool of stormy pre-morning light. He stepped through the bulkhead which separated the reception room from the office and let the doors hush closed behind him.

The view from his office was usually awe inspiring. A panoramic look out across San Francisco Bay towards the iconic Golden Gate Bridge...on a clear day. Henry slowly peeled off his tunic and lay it down neatly atop the conference table. The garment was heavy under the weight of the various decorations, service pins, awards and finery. He left the lights off and squinted through the dark grey mist, fog, and clouds to count the twin line of warning lights speckling the unseen bridge, but very quickly gave up.

Rain roared against the massive windows, propelled by the cold gusts billeting in from the Pacific. Absently, his mind wandered back to the morning in Okinawa on the other side of the dark ocean where he and Thom had paid their final respects to Admiral Nogura. There was little to be done. Anything short of a renewed war with the Klingon Empire, or a surprise invasion from the Romulans wasn’t going to shake the Federation Council’s attention away from the growing political crisis between Vulcan and Andoria.

Henry stepped away from the window to take a seat behind his desk. The dull pre-dawn light struggled to pierce the thick grey storm clouds and Henry thought it might be well if the day didn’t grow any brighter than it was right at that moment. Rain drummed soothingly against the side of the building, occasionally whipping to a frenzied snare of chaos as the winds changed direction. The small silver bar he

kept pegged on his desk—the one Admiral Bautlin had offered him, glinted in the dim light.

Anger flared and then died away. He wanted to be briefed, but he needed T'Chou for that...T'Chou, who could not be trusted.

## Service / *Ahrifv*

Commander Donaldson was a short woman in her mid-thirties who wore her mouse-brown hair pulled back in a high, tight, and very serious bun. She was a square-jawed, plane-faced woman of staunch Anglo-Saxon decent who'd set her mind to a career in Starfleet shortly after her fifth birthday.

Her service record was distinguished. After graduating in the top 8% of her Academy class, she volunteered for an extended deep-space survey aboard the *USS Oliphant*, a first generation *Oberth*-class science ship. At the time Fleet Command was reluctant to allow a novice ensign to join a seasoned crew of veterans on a three-year mission that would test not only human endurance, but also, the very limits of what many felt was a small, underpowered starship. She succeeded in securing a posting after the Commandant of the Academy wrote in support of her request.

Two and half years into the *Oliphant's* mission—while on the return journey to the Starbase at Omicron II, they received a distress call from a Bolian freighter just beyond Kaldra IV. The *Oliphant* responded to discover the Bolians had been attacked by an unknown pair of marauders which had destroyed their engine compartment and raided their cargo bays. Captain Frank Bennett, an acknowledged master of Gravity Well dynamics, rushed in to begin evacuating the thirty-two surviving Bolians from the stricken freighter before its compromised reactor core overloaded. For all his scientific genius, Captain Bennett was an inexperienced tactical commander—having rushed in before conducting a broad-range sensor sweep.

As the *Oliphant* positioned herself just a thousand meters abeam of the Bolians to begin transporting survivors, one of the pirates suddenly warped into Bennett's field of operations. The *Oliphant's* Red Alert klaxon sounded. The bridge crew struggled to process the wave of tactical and defensive alarms overriding the scientific operating systems and programs they were accustomed to using. The pirates scanned the *Oberth*-class scout in a matter of seconds. There was nothing onboard worth taking. Just as Bennett called for screens, the

pirates unleashed a wave of energized plasma which slammed into the *Oliphant's* secondary hull. The small ship pitched wildly off her axis and the enemy vessel jumped to warp and was gone.

Lisa, now a Junior Lieutenant thanks to her exemplary work in the far-flung Krell system, was stationed in engineering to assist with power regulation during emergency transport operations. One moment she was manually controlling the ship's primary EPS feeds, the next she was picking herself up off the floor as engineering fell into darkness and chaos.

With a compound fracture to her right arm and the compartment flooding with acrid smoke, Lt. Donaldson tried to make sense of what had just happened. She was alone. Chief Y'abbu-D'apa was gone, as were the other engineers. An electrical fire was burning. Emergency lighting was only partially engaged. Lisa staggered towards the turbolift realizing she was in shock and in need of emergency treatment, but stopped when a flashing yellow panel caught her attention through the billowing smoke.

The strike had disabled the *Oliphant's* primary drive systems and severed the primary power feeds to the warp core's magnetic constrictors. With a useless arm, a concussion and struggling against the tremors and nausea brought on by shock, Lisa Donaldson climbed through the smoke, wedged herself between the ship's reaction chamber and the primary cooling conduits and manually initiated plasma flow to the constrictors from the secondary regulator circuits.

Captain Bennett was able to warp his ship out of the area only moments before the Bolian freighter exploded in an antimatter fireball. Donaldson was found nearly twenty minutes later, unconscious and suffering from extreme gamma exposure.

The *Oliphant* managed to rescue twenty-three Bolians before being attacked. Of the science vessel's hundred-person crew, fifteen were lost. The identity of the pirates was never determined. Bennett managed to get his ship as far as Marva III before having to cut power and scam the reactor. A long-range Cardassian tug out of Torros responded to the *Oliphant's* distress call and they towed Bennett and his crew over the border into Federation space.

Donaldson was awarded the Meritorious Service Star with clusters for actions above and beyond and elevated in rank to Lt. Commander in recognition of her selflessness and bravery. She spent nearly two years on Earth in hospital and another nine months in a rehabilitation clinic. Both lungs, her heart, kidneys, alimentary tract and spleen had to be replaced or regrown as a result of her gamma exposure. The damage to her brain had required drastic medical intervention. Most of her left lobe was comprised of cutting-edge bio-mechanical implants. Beneath the severe knot of mouse-brown hair atop her head was a mass of gruesome scar tissue.

It was expected that she would be discharged from service to find a peaceful civilian life following her harrowing ordeal; Lisa had other plans. She returned to service with her new rank and a new focus. She'd never again be able to step foot on a Starship and her dream of making captain had died. What she embraced now was a desire to spend every useful day of existence she had left in service to the Federation.

Twelve years later Commander Lisa Donaldson was attached to the special administrative/protective detail tasked with serving the Office of the Chief of Starfleet Operations.

## Spy / 'Nhrai

Maureen watched as Admiral T'Chou tried to lock his attaché case. He'd overstuffed it with too many PADDs and even as he was straining to hold its panels shut for the magnetic locks to engage, Maureen winced, expecting to hear the cracking and popping of the compressed data tablets within. A small frown appeared on Xao's face as he continued to push down on his load and then...a quiet hum as the magnets energized and the silver valise locked itself shut against the strain of Admiral T'Chou's accessories.

"I expect you've got your assistant toting your things, eh Bautlin?" Xao hefted his attaché case off the desk and fumbled with a shoulder strap concealed in the body of the silver container.

Maureen smiled. Xao took a strange pride in bragging he did things for himself; his entire career having been built upon the work and contributions of others. "No, Admiral T'Chou, I don't have an administrative assistant yet. Besides, I didn't need to bring anything overly superfluous to today's session."

"Oh...well, I don't expect Contemporaneous Affairs would have much call for..." Xao fumbled for words. He wasn't sure if the "superfluous" comment was some kind of dig, but he reminded himself that Maureen Bautlin had been instrumental to him during the "Upgrade" when he headed Starfleet Security.

"Contemporaneous Affairs deals in subtleties, Xao. I'm actually going to collect my new aide just now."

Xao smiled and motioned towards the nearest ramp to the dedicated transporter pads below the Council Chamber with an exaggerated flourish. "May I escort you to the transporter then?"

Maureen returned the friendly smile and walked shoulder to shoulder with the Acting Chief of Fleet Operations to the secure transporter room below. A short, plain-looking woman with a severe hairdo was waiting for Admiral T'Chou when the two admirals stepped into the wood-paneled vestibule adjoining the heavy-duty transporter pad and secure pattern buffer array. Xao shrugged off his bag and awkwardly passed it to the short commander.

“Admiral Maureen Bautlin, this is Commander Lisa Donaldson, the only reason Operations hasn’t completely fallen off the rails under my tenure.”

Maureen looked the younger woman in the eye. She’d been too busy liaising with the President’s office and key members of the Admiralty to subtly have Admiral Cahill returned to Mars and pull Admiral T’Chou into Thom Knot’s vacant seat to review the personnel changes in the Operations portfolio. She offered the serious looking woman a professional smile and noted the tip of a thick white scar peaking out from beneath the commander’s tight hairline.

“Admiral Bautlin, ma’am.” Lisa took the attaché case by its handle and let the shoulder strap retract back and out of sight.

“Well, Xao, it has been good seeing you. I’d like to arrange some time to discuss some points of concern regarding the Foxtrot Sector, when you get a chance.” Maureen nodded at Commander Donaldson before turning her full attention to Admiral T’Chou.

“Of course, Maureen. You know, the assistance you lent us in Security was very much appreciated...”

“Excuse me, sir?” Lisa stood ridged with the silver case held solidly in front of her. They were on a strict timeline as the Acting Chief of Ops had insisted on collecting the daily logistical data from LSC himself prior to returning to San Francisco for the day’s briefing.

“Oh, yes.” Xao turned towards Donaldson and nodded his understanding. The commander acknowledged both superior officers once again, then turned and headed through to the transporter room to furnish the Chief Petty Officer manning the controls with the appropriate security clearances and destination orders.

“I’m sorry, Maureen, I have to collect some sensitive data from Logistics before I head back to Headquarters.”

“LSC?” Maureen couldn’t help but smile and cock her head slightly.

“That’s right. Why?”

“I’m transporting to Sydney to collect my new aide from the Logistics and Strategies Compound.” She let a soft chuckle escape her. It was the first unguarded moment she’d had all day.

The two admirals walked into the transporter room together where Admiral Bautlin presented her credentials to the chief and all three officers were invited to take their places on the raised platform. Xao squirmed slightly in place beside the ridged Commander Donaldson on his right. Maureen took her place on his left and waited for the chief to energize the unit once the travel orders were independently confirmed.

“You know Maureen, Admiral Sellers has refused reassignment to Security. It’s likely I’ll be given Operations considering Thom’s...in light of what’s happened. I could put a word in. You’d be fabulous as head of Fleet Security.”

The Transporter Chief raised his head from a cowled screen on his control board and offered the admirals and the commander a broad smile. “Admiral T’Chou, Admiral Bautlin, your transit orders are confirmed.”

Xao smiled back at the young man and nodded happily.

“We’ll talk about it Xao, but Contemporaneous Affairs keeps me pretty busy,” said Maureen as the young man dressed in maroon and white coveralls behind the transport controls announced...

“Energizing.”

Maureen, Xao and Lisa found themselves awash in a cascading shower of all-consuming blue and white particles. The Transporter Chief and the two Starfleet Security men—dressed head to toe in full protective armour and sporting tactical phase pistols were suddenly bathed in ambient light. Less than five seconds later the transporter pad was empty and the only people in the room were the chief and his security detail. The admirals and the serious little commander were streaming towards Australia.

## Transit / Hsah'urrielh

(Two and a half weeks earlier.)

*Personal log...it is my sincerest hope that the Shrar and the surviving crews of both the Imperial Battlecruiser and my own Isadore, have been recovered.*

*From what Teague shared about his knowledge of Section 31; they see themselves as a branch of Starfleet, so logic would suggest that when they abducted the four of us, they rendered some kind of assistance to the others... P'nom might not share my interpretation of that logic, though.*

Shorh drew a long breath and turned to look back over his shoulder through the access port leading from *Trudy's* rear crew compartment, through the support section and on towards the foredeck where P'nom was monitoring their progress. He could see no sign of his crew. P'nom would be seated at the navigation station watching as the unique little runabout piloted itself along to a destination yet unknown. Moira Dirlo was squared away in her bunk behind a privacy shutter getting some much-needed sleep and Tagir Rhupp was below the main deck—squirming along the short Jeffries tube they'd discovered which accessed the “micro warp core”.

Satisfied that he had a few more moments of relative privacy, the once proud-to-the-point-of-arrogant Andorian turned back to the antiquated recorder built into the workstation they'd found in *Trudy's* aft section.

*We've been travelling at a steady warp 5.28 for nearly four days now with no clear indication of where Teague's 'runabout', as he called it, is taking us. All-in-all though this little ship is proving to be impressive. Chief Specialist Rhupp is in awe of the miniature warp core. Rhupp has apologized to me no fewer than six times that he's not a true engineer...constantly apologizing for what they are not, is a very human, very annoying trait. Nonetheless,*

*Tagir remains fascinated with the engine systems aboard this craft.*

*I've set my people on eight-hour rotations. Eight on the flightdeck to live monitor Trudy's progress and sound the alert when we arrive...wherever it is Teague intends to send us. Eight to sleep. Each one of us have been dealing with exhaustion since coming under attack and abandoning Isadore back in the Umoth Nebula, so another eight to eat, shower and find some personal time.*

Shorh paused again as the sound of Chief Rhupp dropping something in the cramped crawl space below the main deck echoed up from the open access hatch in the floor just inside the midsection of the runabout. He turned in the stiff, grey plastic Burke chair which had been paired to the workstation, to see if Rhupp was done below. He watched for a few seconds. There was no sign the human was going to emerge from the Jeffries tube where he'd taken one of the antique tricorders to investigate the intricate workings of *Trudy's* warp core.

Before returning to his log, Shorh listened to the ambient hum of the runabout's warp engine and the rhythmic pinging of *Trudy's* long range directional scanner and remembered his first trip to the Fleet Museum as a child. The *Constitution-class USS New Jersey NCC-1975* had just been opened to the public and the sound of that ancient pinging had rooted itself in that young Andorian boy's mind as the sound of Starfleet. A slight grin wormed its way onto his stern face. He turned back towards the ancient interface terminal with its four simple "jelly" buttons to wrap up his thoughts before Tagir came looking for a meal.

In the corner opposite Shorh rested the large field coil assembly they'd determined had been hard wired into the runabout's EPS grid for reasons yet unknown. The grin faded from Shorh's blue lips as his eyes passed over the bulky unit. P'nom had determined that the coil had been substituted for the long-range subspace transmitter. Its hulking grey and yellow bulk was the reason they didn't have the option of contacting Starfleet directly and discovering the disposition of their comrades, or their own status with the Fleet.

*Assuming Shrar has been recovered; whoever will be listening to these personal logs will be in possession of my records during our time as refugees after Isadore was attacked. I remain committed to my decision to resign my Starfleet commission. The others have chosen to join me in this...quest, on their own volition and against my strong objections. I am grateful for their loyalty. If there is a chance they can rejoin the service following this mission, I would heartily encourage Starfleet to recognize their determination and skill.*

*Dannar Teague pointed out that as a result of the disposition of Isadore and the involvement of Section 31, we're all likely to face court-martial upon our return. Currently there is nothing which causes me to doubt that. It is my intention to document this undertaking and thereby expose the truth behind the loss of Isadore, the loss of the USS Sheaffe and the deaths of my friend Commander Brian Harris and the hundreds of men and women aboard both vessels. Admiral U'Chtuklli and Section 31 are behind all of this. I will discover why. I will expose them all.*

The sound of Rhupp pulling himself awkwardly up and through the tight access hatch just beyond the aft compartment caused Shorh's right antenna to stand erect. The Andorian fingered a green "jelly" and saved his log to *Trudy's* server.

# WARBIRD VEJUL



## Visitor / Niehaenen

Sub-Commander Panerh kept his right hand firmly on the primary override switch wired into the side panel of his elevated station on the *Vejul's* bridge, just beside Commander Veeta's chair. The uhlan manning the complex tractor controls of the *Vejul* was starting to perspire as the Warbird hovered a scant three *k'vahrus* above the surface of the smaller Kea sun. The ship's impressive tractor emitter held a massive twenty-three-square-meter *ih'hedaes* panel in place as the sublieutenant at the *Vejul's* helm used the Warbird's ion thrusters to slowly descend along the narrow "safe" corridor the Eisen Lattice cast up from its impossible location on the surface of the sun. If either the ship, or the irreplaceable sheet of cladding should veer out of the corridor, the hellish inferno of superheated plasma and solar radiation would emulsify everything.

Panerh had only arrived in the Kea System when the *Vejul*, the last of the proto-type *Horo*-class Warbirds, had arrived to take up station three cycles ago. He was a young, ambitious officer who'd fiercely pursued promotion from his first day in the Fleet as an inexperienced uhlan. While serving aboard *Keras*-class Warbirds in the Ferros System he'd distinguished himself during a local uprising spurred by a disloyal sect of colonial rebels unhappy with a lack of representation on Romulus. He'd personally eliminated an armed transport of dissidents attempting to flee the central colony of Hanak-Vraner. He was awarded a field commission to quinturion for his quick thinking and swift action. Promotions came quickly after that.

His proven skills as a weapons officer and as a tactical coordinator earned him the rank of centurion and he'd found himself on the short-list for first officer qualification in the Keras Fleet. Shortly after training he was approached by a commander from the Tal Shiar and offered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to serve aboard the newest, cutting-edge vessel the Empire had ever produced. Overnight he'd gone from being just another loyal centurion putting down rebellions and policing the scant outer reaches of the Empire—to subcommander,

second-in-command of a *Horo*-class Warbird doing meaningful work together with the Tal Shiar.

The primary viewscreen displayed a tactical readout of the *Vejul*'s relative position above the Eisen Lattice on the surface of the sun. The narrow corridor of safe passage was depicted by two simple lines plotted along the minimal safe boundaries earlier science vessels had scouted when the project had begun in earnest some twenty cycles earlier. If for any reason it looked like the young man on tractor control couldn't complete his job, or otherwise ran into difficulty manipulating the cladding—Sub-Commander Panerh would take control and complete the task no matter the cost.

Panerh's uncommon green eyes were fixed on the young uhlan seated directly below and in front of his own raised station. The boy wore the standard silver tunic of the Imperial Navy with a simple silver-linked belt; not having yet earned the aiguillettes of any of the higher ranks. Panerh watched as beads of sweat collected at the young man's temples. His name was Tahai. He reminded Panerh of himself. He'd come aboard a cycle ago and had proven himself most capable. Though only a lowly uhlan, the boy was possessed of steady hands and impressive concentration, which made him the most reliable tractor operator aboard the ship.

Things were progressing well. *Vejul* was on pace to deliver her payload successfully; thankfully the sheet of *ih'hedaes* which the *V'Dara* had lost was nearly identical to this second panel. The Reman smiths on the surface of AK-hyi were in the process of casting an irregular section for what was to be the next sortie in the small fleet's continuing mission to completely block the vast aperture of the hated Eisen Lattice.

The project overall was now far behind projected timelines. The *V'Dara*'s failure had contributed to the lapsed productivity.

The *Vejul* continued to descend slowly. Her silhouette etched in green on the tactical screen steadily wobbled between the boundaries of their safe passage, marked in red, above the surface of the sun, which was depicted as a solid white field. Sub-Lieutenant Thira concerned himself with the ship. Uhlán Tahai concerned himself with the tractor beam. Sub-Commander Panerh focused on Tahai.

Commander Veeta was the first to notice a sudden yellow cluster of contacts approaching from astern.

Graviton radiation was still blindingly powerful throughout the Kea System. While the *Horo*-class ships had been equipped with the latest sensors and specifically designed to cut through graviton interference, they were limited to only short-range sensor returns. Before the *Vejul's* weapons officer could call out these unexpected contacts, Veeta was out of his chair and swiftly making his way to fire control.

"Maintain operations!" Veeta called to Panerh --who was still focused on Uhlán Tahai and hadn't noticed the three approaching contacts.

The uhlán at weapons used the secondary sensor array to focus on the incoming contacts as his commander stood towering over him. As per established protocol the weapons officer signaled for the communications operator to alert the *V'Dara* (the closest Warbird) of the incoming contacts.

## Collection / *Ilamne'edh*

Commander Rinadin had just given Yeoman Wynter his instructions on how she was to order his coffee from the Kingswood Coffee shop across the street from the Logistics Compound. Being Bolian, Rinadin was most particular how he took his brew and try as he might, he'd failed to successfully program the compound's food synthesizers with a satisfactory Bolian blend. The closest he'd come to finding a proper mocha locally was at the old shop run by a pair of geriatric humans he'd come to affectionately know as Marge and Daniel. As a bonus, Kingswood never closed. This gave Marge and Daniel an around-the-clock monopoly on the rotating shifts of Starfleet officers and personnel who seemed more content with eating real food and drinking real coffee than suffering the synthetic offerings on hand within the secure compound.

As he watched his young yeoman cross the boulevard to the security post at the compound's main entrance, an alarm began to chime from his bio-bracelet/chronometer. Standing in front of the massive floor-to-ceiling windows which fronted the reception hall for the compound, Rinadin consulted his watch; it was 0100 hours. He glanced up just as Wynter was passing under the harsh white gate lights to make her way across to Kingswood. Rinadin turned and began walking towards the secure lift which would take him to the compound's primary transporter room.

In a shower of blue and white energy particles Admiral Maureen Bautlin materialized on the long, narrow receiving pad on sublevel 3 of Sydney's LSC. With the transport cycle complete, she caught sight of Commander Rinadin standing beside a Chief Petty Officer operating the compound's transporter unit. Rinadin, a short, plump middle aged Bolian with a well-renowned flare for bureaucratic organization, looked shocked. Maureen smiled as she stepped down from the long receiving pad with the Acting Chief of Starfleet Operations and his stern little adjunct effortlessly toting a large silver attaché case beside him.

"Uh...Admiral T'Chou? This, this is quite a surprise! If I'd known you were..." Rinadin fumbled for words. He'd been on shift since 0800

the previous morning and was only here now to meet with Admiral Bautlin about the transfer of his chief of staff.

“If you’d have known I was coming you’d no doubt have gone through some elaborate preparations and put a lot of your hardworking staff to grief.” T’Chou took three confident strides towards the befuddled Bolian and offered the man a firm handshake and surreptitiously slipped the commander a personal comms chip.

Rinadin shook the admiral’s hand, then looked at the code chip. “It’s an honour of course sir...wh, what can I do?”

“Good man. Right to the point. As Chief of Ops, I appreciate that. I’m on my way to brief the C-in-C, I figured I’d stop by and pick up the secure data package myself; save you the trouble. Oh, that’s my personal comms channel. If you need anything, you give me a call. Donaldson?”

Commander Donaldson offered Maureen a polite nod and then advanced towards T’Chou and the dismayed Bolian.

“The data package? I...we were going to have Lt. Charr courier it to San Francisco at...” Rinadin, still holding the tacky chip, looked to the transporter chief.

“Oh!...uh, scheduled for planetary transport at 0200 our time, sir.” The young man looked ill at ease. The admiral seemed more like a used shuttle broker than a senior Flag Officer.

“Ah, Charr! I remember him from my time at Security. Good lad. Specialized training candidate as I recall. He’s made Lieutenant, already? Good for him! Well, let Kyle know he can stand down for this morning. Commander Donaldson here will take the package.”

The short woman with the plain brown hair stood at Admiral T’Chou’s side. Rinadin looked over to where Admiral Bautlin was standing and could see that she was content to wait her turn. “I’m sure the lieutenant will be grateful, sir...”

“Yes, yes Commander Rinadin, I’m aware this is irregular and that both Donaldson and I need to be *properly screened* before you can release the package. Can we just get on with it please? Admiral Wallace has had a long day too and I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

Rinadin shook his bald blue head slightly. He turned to Chief Koloch and asked the man to escort the admiral and his aide to the

security counter to validate their credentials. The Compound was operating with only a third of its daytime staff, a fact Rinadin felt nearly embarrassed by. Receiving Flag Officers after hours wasn't standard practice.

The young NCO led Admiral T'Chou and Commander Donaldson out of the transporter room. The security counter was one level above. Lt. Charr would be on-post preparing for his routine escort of the sensitive package to San Francisco. After the necessary security compliances were addressed, the lieutenant would see to the admiral's needs. As the double doors to the access corridor hushed closed, Rinadin blinked twice, remembering suddenly that his scheduled visitor was still waiting to be greeted. He awkwardly turned back to look at Maureen Bautlin and pocketed the chip.

"Admiral T'Chou has a way of keeping people on their toes, doesn't he?" She offered the LSC commander a genuine smile as she watched the Bolian try to compose himself.

"Ah, yes...well, that was unexpected."

"It was a surprise to me as well, Commander. Nonetheless, have the arrangements my office requested been put in place?" Maureen slowly moved towards Rinadin, who still looked shaken.

"Yes, ma'am, of course. We have a Class 3 shuttle standing by on our primary pad. Uh, you specified you didn't want a pilot?"

"That's right. I understand the lieutenant commander is a top-rated pilot?" Maureen said this as she passed Commander Rinadin and headed towards the transporter room's doors.

Rinadin exhaled and again shook his head slightly. It had been a long, long day. He quickly caught up with Admiral Bautlin and stepped out into the corridor with her. "Lt. Commander Todorokov is a top-rated pilot, ma'am, yes. I'm still a little unclear as to why I'm losing her?"

Maureen unfastened her shoulder strap and let her tunic's bib fall open. Without breaking her stride, she slipped her right hand into her uniform and retrieved the small PADD she'd prepared earlier in the day and handed it to Commander Rinadin. "I'm afraid she's needed at Contemporaneous Affairs, commander. Here's the official transfer orders. I'm sure Admiral T'Chou's people will get you a suitable replacement in short order. You could always *drop him a line.*"

Rinadin took the PADD and accompanied Admiral Bautlin into a waiting lift. The admiral's jape at Xao's tacky comms chip went over the Bolian's head.

"It's just, she's not even been here a full year yet and..."

"I appreciate that good help is hard to find commander, but Svetlana Todorokov is needed elsewhere. As this is all happening outside of standard timelines, I'm here to personally sign off on her transfer orders as required by policy." She held out her hand and waited for the chubby Bolian to confirm his orders with a thumb print and hand back the PADD.

Rinadin was about to make one last plea to have her find someone else when the comms panel in the lift sparked to life...his coffee had arrived.

## Abandoned / *Ehlu'eri*

(Two weeks earlier.)

*Trudy* had run smoothly for nearly ten days without the need for so much as a directional update from Moira or a routine diagnostic by Chief Rhupp. P'nom struggled to map the intricate operational system's pathways through the antique vessel's cutting-edge processor core. The little runabout looked as though it belonged in a museum, but under the skin she was possessed of servers, relays and a central computer core even more advanced than the systems found aboard *Isadore*. Teague's genius was irrefutable; it hummed and pulsed through the circuitry and glowed in the unbelievably tiny warp core. *Trudy* was locked onto a destination and there was nothing anyone aboard could do to cease her progress or wrest navigational control away from her preprogrammed course.

Shorh despised being a passenger.

Sensor returns were being fed directly to the onboard computer at a ridiculous rate of speed. It was all P'nom could do to note, at best, a third of what came across her monitors as the ship flitted deeper and deeper into the unknown. For nine days the small crew rotated between the forward command deck, the middeck sleeping bunks and head and the aft compartment with its modest food synthesiser, uncomfortable seating and odd field coil—which neither P'nom, nor Rhupp could discern a purpose for.

It was Moira's turn on the command deck. Shipboard chronometers, which appeared to have been synchronized with Earth's Spacedock, reported the time as being 0205 hours. Tagir and the captain were both in their bunks and P'nom was accessing *Trudy's* modest library tapes at the small workstation aft. Dirlo swung the navigational plot viewer from its dock against the bulkhead to the space just in front of her face. She was still trying to get used to the archaic control systems aboard their new vessel. As Moira keyed the sequence to power the orb-shaped viewer's oscillator, the field of streaking light and the blur of flashing plasma reactions cast down from the warp field

passing through normal space, suddenly ceased. *Trudy* dropped to sublight speed.

A starfield came into focus through the three narrow forward viewports and Moira instinctively pushed the viewer aside and began running telemetries.

“Captain! We’re...here?!”

Shorh sat up in his bunk and very nearly slammed his ruined antennae into the low bulkhead. Fortunately, his right antennae sensed the rapidly approaching ceiling of the black sleeping chamber and he raised his right arm to shield his head. He’d been half asleep. For a second, he wondered silently if he’d dreamt...

“Captain! P’nom!”

Shorh yawned and fumbled in total darkness with his left hand to find the release for his bunk’s privacy blind. The segmented plastic blind easily unclasped from its baseplate and the long blind quickly and silently accorded back upon itself letting the cabin lighting flood Shorh’s eyes as he swung his legs out and over the edge of his bed.

“Sir!” P’nom trotted past the captain as he pulled himself out of bed.

“Wha’s...what’s happening?” Tagir mumbled from his own bunk.

Shorh stood up and quickly found his boots (which were stowed in a cubby beside his bunk). “Station, chief.” He growled at Tagir, before moving to duck through the bulkhead and follow P’nom onto the command deck.

Ensign Dirlo was frantically manipulating the instruments at her navigation station and P’nom was calling out star vectors and chart references. Shorh glanced out the center view port and noted eerie green wisps of plasma and dust. Tagir bumped through the bulkhead and took up his post at the engineering terminal not five seconds behind Shorh. The man had clearly been in a heavy slumber when Dirlo had called out.

“Ensign Dirlo, report.” Shorh took his seat and began consulting his own limited instruments for telemetry. Both he and Tagir were dressed only in their sleeping shorts and black T-shirts, but there was no time for modesty.

“Captain, we dropped to impulse sixty-five seconds ago...I still don’t have navigational control.”

“I have a star fix, sir!” P’nom didn’t mean to interrupt the navigator, but she’d confirmed their location and had deduced their likely destination. The stress in her voice was apparent.

“Where are we?” Shorh turned in his seat to look at P’nom. He was unsettled to see the unease on her normally placid face.

“System TL-9139, sir,” croaked the half-Vulcan communications officer.

Shorh snapped back to Dirlo and watched as his navigator continued to work madly at her controls. “Mr. Rhupp, can we cut engines please?!” Dirlo was doing all she could to gain control of the ship but was clearly having no success.

“Negative, sir...no, no. Damn it!”

Shorh turned away from Moira to see that Tagir was just as frantically toggling and snapping his way across the panels lining *Trudy’s* engineering station. The man was now completely awake... “Chief?”

“Damn, damn, damn...nothing! I got nothing, Captain! We’re locked out. She’s proceeding at full impulse!” Tagir hammered his fists into the panels and quickly rose from his seat. His face was slick with panic sweat, and he looked like a bizarre toddler roused early from a nap in his wrinkled T-shirt and slightly too big sleeping shorts. His beard stood out at wild angles. “Permission to go below, sir? I might be able to shunt the feeds to the impulse generators.”

“Granted. P’nom, readings?” Shorh returned his attention to his own status panel. The ship was moving quickly. Warning lights were already glowing before P’nom could confirm the growing concentrations of baryon radiation.

Tagir had just unlocked the access hatch in the floor of the sleeping quarters middeck when a strange sound caught his attention. He left the hatch, which accessed the tight Jefferies tube leading to *Trudy’s* warp core and impulse engine reactor and stepped tentatively into the aft compartment. Through the long observation ports looking astern of the small ship, Tagir could see the telltale clouds of green

radiation flooding the space around them. Baryons killed just as effectively as Klingon disruptors. He didn't have time for this...but...

The mysterious field coil hummed and buzzed almost musically. Tagir didn't know what to make of it. Regardless, he had to get below!

"Is that...?" Shorh stared gobsmacked out the forward view ports.

"Yard 39, sir." whispered Moira.

"The concentration of baryon radiation should have killed us by now." said P'nom from her station.

*Trudy* glided into Shipyard 39, safely cocooned within a high-frequency plasma field. The little ship followed the preprogrammed course Danner Teague had prepared, past ghost ships and long forgotten hulks. She slowed and ran silent.

## **Wary / Haesemna**

The three-toned door chime roused Henry from his sleep. He'd been reviewing classified reports from the archives at his desk when his long day of work finally caught-up to him. He'd fallen into a dozing slumber in his chair. The Starfleet Commander-in-Chief leaned forward and quickly rubbed the sleep from his eyes and ran both hands over his hair to make himself presentable. The chirping tones sounded again.

"Yes, come!" Henry remained behind his desk; his formal tunic was across the room lying neatly folded atop the small conference table by the panoramic windows.

The double doors hushed open and in stepped Admiral T'Chou carrying his large silver attaché case. Henry cleared his throat and nodded slightly to greet his second-in-command, but he remained seated.

"Good morning, sir," chirped Xao as he swept into Admiral Wallace's well-appointed office. He was tired, but eager to demonstrate his dedication to the C-in-C.

Before Admiral T'Chou could make it to the sturdy leather wrapped chairs facing the enormous desk, Henry cleared his throat a second time and motioned towards the conference table without bothering to rise... "Please, stow your gear and have a seat by the windows, Admiral."

T'Chou grinned and nodded his understanding. Henry watched as the Acting Chief of Ops strode across the polished oak floorboards to make his way to the room's conference area. Only when Xao hefted his case up onto the table (a little too close to Henry's uniform tunic) did Admiral Wallace will himself to his feet. He could see that the morning sun had risen, but the heavy grey/black storm clouds were still drowning the Bay in steady sheets of rain.

Surreptitiously, Henry stroked the inlaid actuator for his desk's chronometer, and he allowed a tired grunt to escape his throat when he saw the pale blue display appear declaring that it was somehow 0805 hours.

"All well, sir?"

Henry moved smoothly around from behind his desk. The pale blue display terminated the moment he let his finger slide off the nearly invisible touch-screen control pad. “Yes. Thank you, Admiral T’Chou. You’re nearly an hour early for the daily briefing.”

“Ah, yes. Well, I thought as we were in Paris anyway—why not just beam over to Sydney and collect the data package from LSC and save their courier a trip.” Xao stifled a yawn and set about arranging a PADD and the black “red box” he’d collected in Australia containing the confidential data package for the morning’s Admiralty briefing.

Henry slowly made his way towards the table. His back ached. At his age, sleeping anywhere other than his own bed was tantamount to a hazardous activity. His knees popped and as he passed the recessed display shelf, he caught sight of himself in an antique mirror he’d been given on the day he was promoted to captain more than fifteen years earlier by Admiral Cartwright. His mostly grey hair was a mess, and he had dark bags under his once piercing blue eyes.

“Admiral T’Chou, I appreciate your...efforts, but...”

Xao smiled at the older man and shook his head in an almost conspiratorial manner. “Not at all Admiral Wallace and please, when decorum permits, call me Xao.”

Henry stopped and drew a long breath to keep from saying something he might regret. Somehow, he’d napped for nearly two hours, but he felt even more exhausted now...and he realized he was starving.

“A moment please, Admiral.” Wallace moved towards the oak-clad doors leading to the reception area and expected to find his lieutenant manning her post. As the doors hushed open, he was greeted by a slightly nervous looking Benzite.

“Admiral Wallace, sir! I apologize, Admiral T’Chou insisted on entering. I told him you were resting and that perhaps waiting until closer to the scheduled briefing time...” Commander Dazgin too, was tired, but he hid any sign of fatigue the admiral might notice.

“That’s, that’s fine, Commander. Where’s the lieutenant?”

“She just stepped next door, sir, to use the facilities.” Dazgin took no comfort in Admiral Wallace’s acceptance of Admiral T’Chou’s intrusion.

“Ah, well when she returns could we perhaps get her to fetch...” Henry trailed off as his tall, bald-headed Benzite adjunct abruptly turned away from him to retrieve something from the low table ringed by a grey leather sofa and two austere armchairs in the middle of the reception room.

“A thermal carafe of Bolian brew and an assortment of scones and biscuits, sir. They didn’t have the *blueberry twists* you enjoy this morning. I know you don’t care for the offerings the food synthesizers provide. I apologize again.”

A smile lit Henry’s face for the first time since returning from the Council Session earlier that morning. He gratefully accepted the tray offered and thanked the young man for his thoughtfulness. Thom had been right to be impressed with the professional dedication of the Benzite officer, thought Henry as he turned back towards his uninvited guest waiting inside the office.

“Would you like...a ham and cheese biscuit, Admiral T’Chou?” asked Henry.

“Oh, please yes. Is that coffee? I’ll have a cup of that as well.”

Henry swallowed a rather barbed quip and set about arranging a biscuit on one of the four side plates Dazgin had liberated from the mess. He took a biscuit for himself and then poured two large mugs of Bolian brew. “Cream, Admiral?”

“No, thank you, Henry. I take it black, the way nature intended.”

Wallace gritted his teeth and poured two cups of coffee. He was half expecting Xao to proffer up yet another of his gauche comms chips like some travelling salesman. “Why exactly did you take it upon yourself to retrieve the data package again, Admiral T’Chou?”

Xao happily took his plate and coffee. “As I said, we were in Paris anyway—so why not, eh? I got speaking with Maureen Bautlin, she was heading to LSC herself, believe it or not. Besides, never hurts to keep the troops on their toes. I used to do spot inspections all the time when I headed up Security.”

*Bautlin.* Henry slowly took a seat across from the chubby little man. He was aware of what kind of nuisance T’Chou had been in Security. Had it not been for the fact that Thom considered the man a close friend; Henry wondered if Xao T’Chou’s career would be nearly

as impressive. He waited for the man to take a bite of his biscuit and have a swallow of coffee before continuing...

“Wasn’t it a little difficult breaching protocol to retrieve the red box?”

“I should say so. They had me there for nearly an hour—retina scans, DNA matches, independent third-party verifications. Still, good to see the safeguards are in place.” Xao took a second bite of his biscuit and washed it back with a mouthful of nearly scalding hot coffee. “Mmm, I wanted to discuss the Cardassian situation with you before Sellers and the rest of them get their hands in and start muddying the waters, as it were.”

Henry took a pull off his coffee. The aroma, the full-bodied flavour, usually so satisfying, did little for him at that moment. “You’ve reviewed the data then?”

“Of course, Henry. What kind of partner would I be if I wasn’t ready and anticipating your needs?”

Wallace took another mouthful of coffee instead of responding to T’Chou’s possibly rhetorical question. Then calmly, serenely, he asked: “Are the Cardassians still moving personnel and equipment off Alpha 441?”

“Well...yes. Yes, they are, but...”

“Is the Umoth Nebula still burning?”

“Uh the, the...yes. We’re calling it the *Badlands*, now...”

“No sign of *Isadore*. No indications of increased hostility along the Tzenkethi border with the Andorian task force?”

“No, actually the Andorians have recalled all but two frigates and a wing of Raiders...”

“So, no war there. The Klingons?”

“The Klingons?”

“Yes, Admiral T’Chou. Are the Klingons likely to launch an attack on us?”

Xao felt his stomach churn. He was suddenly very uncomfortable. “No, sir...no Klingon attack...”

“Romulans?”

“No, nothing...nothing about the Romulans...”

“Well then, I should think our briefing this morning will focus on Captain Baker’s latest reports, the disposition of Captain Evengii and our Fleet assets. Likely scenarios around Andoria proper, as that’s where the bulk of those recalled Imperial Guard ships are congregating to pen-in the *Fury* and *Meni T’Pra*, wouldn’t you say?”

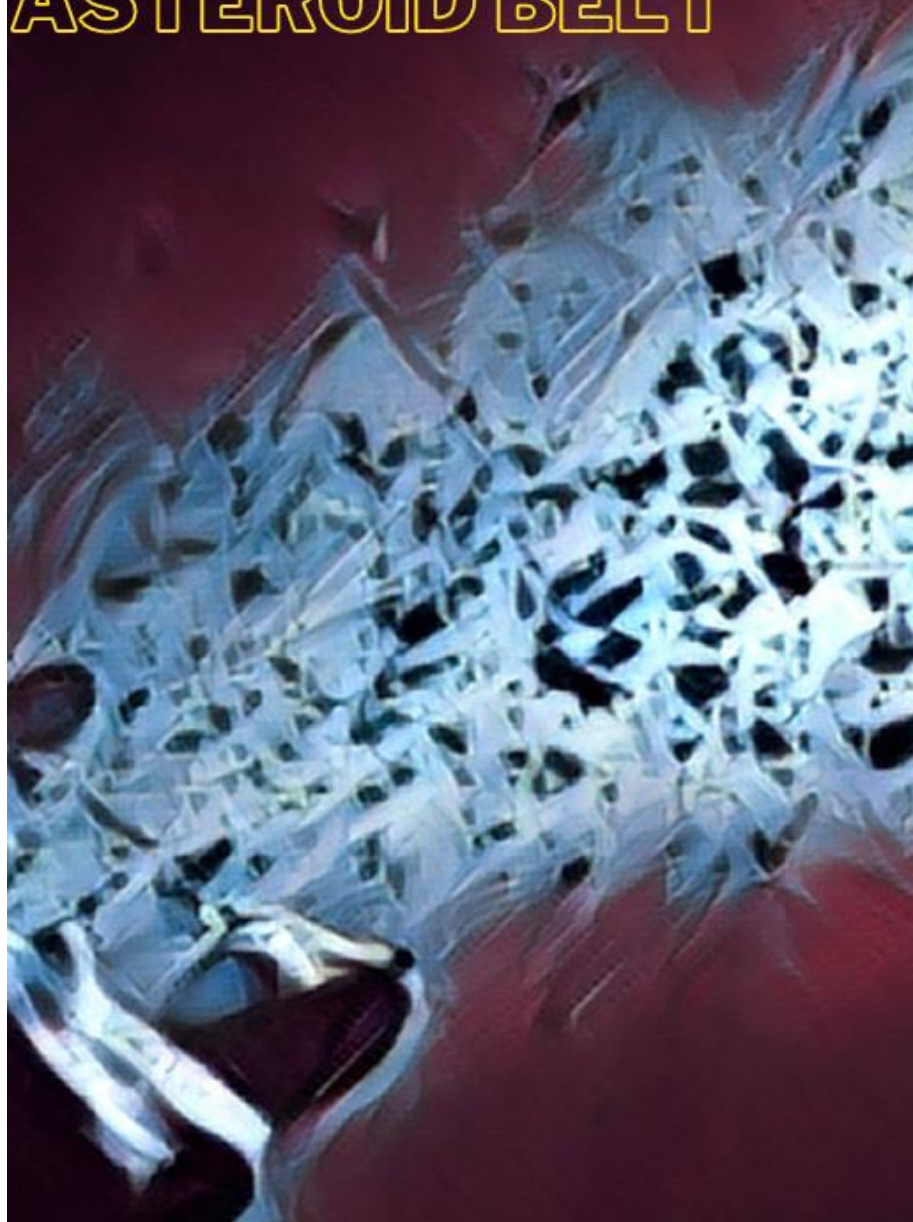
Xao blinked several times before managing to collect his thoughts... “Of course, Hen, er, Admiral Wallace, sir.”

Henry considered dressing the lesser man down, but the other admirals would be arriving shortly, and he didn’t need a Chief of Ops blithering like a scolded child in front of the others. “We had a mutual friend die under questionable circumstances. I would think that should be our primary focus at this moment, yes?”

“Oh...yes, sir. Thomas, of course. Yes.”

# **GAV-GARR**

## **ASTEROID BELT**



## A Guest / E Pinhere

“Tactical, status?” Tenaj pushed his spine into the hard back plate of his command chair and narrowed his focus on the *V’Dara’s* main viewer.

“Screens engaged, forward disruptor bank charged and ready, Commander.”

Tenaj grunted his approval. His dark eyes danced in the white and yellow light cast by the tactical display depicting the approaching contacts relative to the *V’Dara’s* position just outside of the exclusion zone above the Eism Lattice. Graviton interference was still a critical concern more than twenty cycles after the sudden appearance of the alien structure and the destruction of AK-gva. Even the *Horo-class* Warbird with her state-of-the-art sensors and specialized dynamic degeneration field transducers struggled to cut through the heavy interference.

“Sub-Commander Vroli, contact status?”

Vroli, Tenaj’s second-in-command, consulted his station at the master weapons post to double-check the latest returns. “Three contacts approaching, commander. No returns on weapons, identification transponders, or type. Distance: twelve thousand *k’vahrus*. They appear to be in no great hurry. I make their velocity to be less than one-quarter sublight standard.” Vroli confirmed that the *V’Dara’s* primary disruptor bank was indeed powered and ready to fire.

“Communications?”

“Ambient graviton interference is making subspace communications impossible at this range, Commander. If they’re Imperial vessels we should gain some contact at the eight to six thousand *k’vahrus* range,” answered the uhlan seated to Commander Tanaj’s left.

Tenaj did the arithmetic in his head and plotted the point on the tactical display where the contacts and the *V’Dara*, presently advancing on their quarry at three-quarters sublight standard, would meet. The *Valmaika*, the oldest of the *Horo-class* Warbirds, was on the far side of AK-hyi where she’d been preparing to have her massive tractor emitter

realigned. She had only just now signaled she was getting underway to assist. Tenaj calculated that Commander Nendixa would arrive at full speed, ten minutes after the *V'Dara* would contact the incoming ships.

“Uhlan Cholux, begin broadcasting standard Imperial proximity warnings and challenges for identification. Sub-Commander Vroli, stand ready on disruptors. Navigator, maintain present course and speed.”

All three officers responded simultaneously as the *V'Dara* cut through the graviton heavy nothingness between the vulnerable *Vejul* and the approaching vessels. Tenaj, still indignant in light of the *V'Dara*'s failure to perform its assigned task and the loss of an entire panel of cladding, remained wholly focused on the simplified tactical display. It would take the *V'Dara* a *siuren* and half to close the gap...a *siuren* and half to either establish contact with and warn-off the unknowns or blow them to pieces. Tenaj was professional enough to be comfortable with either option he flew towards.

At eight thousand three hundred and five *k'vahrus*, Sub-Commander Vroli announced: “Receiving telemetry, Commander Tenaj.”

“Report.” Tenaj remained focused on the three triangles growing closer to the winged raptor icon representing the *V'Dara* on the tactical screen.

“They broadcast Imperial Naval signatures, commander. Two *Keras*-class Warbirds and a heavy scout...*Talon*-class.”

“Communications, anything?” Tenaj watched the readouts tick down the *k'vahrus*.

“Stand by,” came the reply from the uhlan at work at the communications station. Background static warbled and snapped across the preferred secure channel Imperial Naval vessels used as their standard ship-to-ship carrier frequencies.

Tenaj watched as they crossed the seven thousand *k'vahrus* mark. Sub-Commander Vroli remained ready at fire control. If these guests didn't identify themselves by fifty-five thousand *k'vahrus*, Tenaj would order an increase to full sublight standard and commit the *V'Dara* to an attack run.

At six thousand *k'vahrus*, Vroli reported he had no telemetry on the weapons status of the incoming Warbirds. Tenaj readied himself to engage.

“Commander, incoming transmission from the scout vessel.”

At fifty-eight hundred *k'vahrus*, Tenaj signaled for Vroli to lock disruptors. “Report.”

“Commander, they say Enriov Dar has arrived and is to be escorted to Tikot Ketor, immediately. They are transmitting the correct encryption to our challenge.” Uhlán Cholux reported earnestly.

“Stand down disruptors, Vroli. Maintain a lock on the lead contact.”

## Reunited / *Daose'khre'riov*

(Hours earlier.)

The younger woman was tall.

Maureen was somewhat surprised to see that the lieutenant commander was at least five centimetres taller than she was expecting. So off putting was this disparity in expected height that it took Admiral Bautlin a full three seconds to realize that her “new” assistant was also now a flaxen blond. As Maureen stepped into the upper suite of offices and archive vaults from the lift, she was also struck by the young woman’s smile. The toothy grin that beamed from the younger woman’s face was brilliant, white and possessed of impressively large teeth. Maureen hadn’t paid a lot of attention to the smile before, but it was shocking in its radiance now.

“Thank you, Commander Rinadin. I can take it from here.” Maureen said over her shoulder as a smile instinctively came to her own face as she approached the other woman.

Rinadin, still somewhat confused as to why the Chief of Operations had suddenly appeared without notice, nodded and remained in the lift to traverse the two levels back down to the security counter to attend Admiral T’Chou.

The lift’s doors hushed closed.

“Ma’am, Lieutenant Commander Todorokov reporting as ordered.” The young woman extended her right hand and presented Admiral Bautlin with a PADD displaying a copy of her transfer orders.

Maureen took the pad without looking at it and sighed. “Lieutenant Commander, eh? Not bad. I see you’ve had a few other...upgrades, as well.”

“The DNA resequencing was a lot, but the leg extensions and dental replacements were the hardest things to deal with,” Svetlana said in a hushed tone.

They were alone, but LSC was replete with security monitors owing to the sensitive nature of the data collected and organized in the massive complex from the various secure subspace relays linking the

Federation's Capitol Planet with assets across the Alpha and Beta Quadrants.

"I noticed you're out of uniform." It was Maureen's turn to hand something over.

Svetlana tentatively accepted the unknown item from the admiral and smiled even wider when she looked to find a small silver bar with three red hash marks in her hand.

## Ghosts / Aehallhs

(Two weeks earlier.)

“Three contacts coming up to starboard,” P’nom announced from her seat in front of the runabout’s primary telemetry display.

Both Tagir and Shorh rose from their seats and moved to peer out of *Trudy’s* narrow, forward facing view ports. There was no practical viewscreen to take in the sights. The old F-class shuttles *Trudy* had been fashioned from offered only the pilot/navigator a small, domed viewer on a swing arm they could position directly in front of their face while operating the craft. Moira Dirlo had her face gently pressed against the small viewer now.

“My God, look at that!” Tagir ran his left hand down his growing black beard excitedly as an old service platform came into view. Three dark starships were attached to the platform by delicate looking umbilicals.

“What are those, *Edisons?*” asked Shorh, almost immediately embarrassed at the childish wonder in his voice.

“No, no... *Walkers!* *Walker*-class. Look at those nacelles, long and flat. They had their bridges located on the dorsal side of their saucers! My God!” Tagir moved awkwardly around Shorh and peered out the starboard port to get a better look.

“P’nom, our status?” asked Shorh, taking a step back from the central viewport. They were at the mercy of a preprogrammed course and traversing a section of space which should have killed them all fifteen minutes ago.

“Still no practical control, sir. The plasma field remains operational and baryon readings within our, our *shield*, are negligible.” P’nom was wholly focussed on the limited returns she could glean from *Trudy’s* onboard systems. Derelict starships held little interest for her.

“Ensign?” Shorh watched as the last of the starships drifted past and out of sight. Ordinarily they’d not be able to make anything out by simply looking out the runabout’s windows; however, so irradiated with baryons was the surrounding space that an eerie green glow illuminated

everything within a thousand kilometers of *Trudy* as she slipped through the radioactive soup.

“We’ve dropped to less than a quarter impulse. Heading remains unchanged. We have another contact coming up to port...and something big, roughly twelve hundred kilometers ahead. Still dead stick.” Moira kept her face buried in her viewer.

Tagir pushed past Shorh once again. “Watch it, Chief! Close quarters!” Shorh snapped as the man, still dressed in nothing but his sleeping clothes, nearly knocked him off-balance.

“Sorry, sir...it’s just, that looks like, it can’t be!”

Shorh, annoyed though he was, caught sight of the next platform they were coming up on and his eyes went wide... “The *Asiatic*.”

P’nom turned away from her panels for the first time and glimpsed the hulking vessel coming up on their forward portside. She was dark and lifeless. She dwarfed the platform she was moored to and in P’nom’s mind she looked like an ancient zeppelin from Earth at the end of a string some child might hope to find a bright balloon tied to.

“*Nimitz*-class heavy cruiser,” whispered Tagir.

“She was sistership to *Europa*; lost with all hands at the Battle of the Binary Stars,” P’nom volunteered.

“There were only three. They were the flagships of the Fleet until the *Constitutions* came online. *Nimitz* was destroyed over Krios three months after the war began,” Tagir shared while not daring to look away from the eerie hulk. “Last of her kind.”

Shorh pulled himself away from the sight of the massive ship and resumed his seat. As fascinating as all this was, they were still hostages to Teague’s runabout and in a region of space well known to be fatally toxic. “Alright chief, that’s enough. Station.”

Tagir marvelled at the sight of *Asiatic*’s dark, sleek and massive hull as they came closer and closer to passing the old cruiser. Without verbally acknowledging the captain’s command, he willed himself to return to his own station in front of the runabout’s engineering instrument panel.

“Warp core is powered down, sir. Impulse reactor looks to be cycling down as well. I’d guess we’re close to wherever it is this thing is taking us,” Tagir croaked.

“Confirmed, Captain. We’re approaching a complex of drydocks,” reported Dirlo, her face still in front of her viewer.

Shorh fought the urge to stand and peer out the window. He needed his people working, not sightseeing. “More ships?”

“I can make out only the first two pens, sir...they look empty.” Moira glanced down at her controls. The runabout was still locked into its preprogrammed course.

She could feel the captain’s eyes burning into the back of her head. She didn’t have to turn around to know that he was waiting for more information. Neither did she need to see Tagir’s face to know that he too was likely hanging off his seat desperate for more details. Moira gripped the black rubber handle hanging from the bottom of her little viewing dome and twisted its grip gently to the right to attenuate the magnification.

“I can just make out...another dock; looks heavily damaged.”

“The official investigation into the disaster at Yard 39 found that the flow regulators aboard a *Sheppard*-class starship failed, causing a catastrophic failure in its active Eaves-Beyer type warp reactor and sparked a nucleonic fusion event resulting in a flood of heavy baryons which irradiated...”

“Yes P’nom, every first-year cadet at Starfleet Academy knows about what happened here,” interrupted Tagir as he gave into temptation and once again rose to peer out of *Trudy*’s forward view ports.

“My point, Captain Ch’orithron, is that we may be approaching the epicenter of that event. Without full access to sensors there’s no way to tell how concentrated the baryons we are about to pass through are.” P’nom’s voice remained calm and steady, but she was angry at being cut off by the half naked ape-of-man she’d barely known aboard *Isadore* but was now forced to count amongst her intimates.

Shorh willed himself to remain placid. His anxiety at not being able to control anything since giving the order to engage Teague’s program back in the Gav-Garr belt had only increased. “Chief, go and

see to that field coil in the back. It's the only thing keeping us alive at the moment..."

Tagir pulled himself away from the window for a second time. He had the look of a rueful five-year-old, but he silently nodded at his captain and ducked through the open bulkhead to make his way aft.

"...and chief, grab your overalls on your way past the sleeping births," called Shorh. He'd get properly dressed himself once he knew his crew was safe.

## **Ascent / Ehkea**

“Did you enjoy your time in Australia, Jose?” asked Maureen from her seat beside the lieutenant commander piloting the small shuttle into low orbit to rendezvous with Spacedock.

“Ma’am?” responded Todorokov without taking her eyes off her instruments.

“Apologies, I meant Svetlana.” Part of Lt. Bull’s *clandestine reassignment* had involved the inclusion of several basic psychic blocks put in place to keep her from unintentionally revealing her previous identity to anyone. While she might recognize the name “Jose Bull” and even know that once she was “Jose Bull”; she’d forever be incapable of saying such out loud.

“The duration of my deployment was shorter than I expected, ma’am.”

Maureen looked at the young woman. The physical changes were remarkable. Of course, the intelligent, warm, brown eyes were mostly the same. “It was necessary, Svetlana. I’m sorry.”

“No need to apologize, ma’am. I’ve gone from ensign to lieutenant commander in less than two years. Who else can say that?” Svetlana smiled at that thought.

Maureen caught sight of the big white teeth reflected in the shuttle’s transparent aluminum forward view port. The light from the woman’s big teeth was brighter than the reflection glinting off the small silver bar pinned to her uniform just below her delta brooch.

“You’ve done well. We were concerned this last-minute change of orders might affect the modular frequency system you were developing.”

“It was a bit of a challenge to be honest, ma’am. I had to program a remote frequency inducer and tie it to the primary bypass resonance node to ensure we could covertly pull copies of incoming data transmissions and stream them remotely to our receiving assemblies aboard K3.” Svetlana said this as she began transmitting clearance codes to Spacedock Command to gain access to one of the secondary shuttle bays.

“Yes, well aside from Operative Demby...sorry, Captain Demby; you’re the most technically gifted asset we have at Contemporaneous Affairs.”

“Captain Demby?” Svetlana turned.

“Things have progressed. She’s waiting to transport us aboard 93 once we dock.” Maureen was eager to get back to Jupiter and secure the LSC feeds.

## ***Zhat Vash / Zhat Vash***

The *Vejul* took five and a half hours to slowly lower and position the twenty-four square meter sheet of *ih'hedaes* cladding alongside the waiting coupling beam attached to a slightly older sheet of shielding. Once the panel had been guided into place by an advanced survey team of five Remans, a self-sustaining magnetic locking system was engaged to hold the *ih'hedaes* firmly to the coupling beam. *Vejul* remained at a tenuous altitude of just one eighth of a *k'vahru* above the gapping aperture in the Eisen Lattice as a full crew of twelve Remans in EV suits worked with plasma torches to reenforce the seam between the plates. The *Vejul's* tractor beam remained active at a tenth of its full power to regulate the gravimetric forces at play over the aperture and provide stability to the Remans while they worked.

Panel by panel, piece by piece for more than twenty cycles and still the aperture was a gapping menace. The work was slow. Ketor was committed to seeing his task completed and had projected total blockage of the aperture in no less than sixty to sixty-five cycles. The delays suffered so far had greatly extended those projections. He'd been kept informed of the developing situation between the *V'Dara* and the incoming ships, but remained committed to seeing the panel installed no matter the cost. Commander Veeta kept the crew of the *Vejul* focused and on-task.

Once the crew of Reman jointers reported a solid seam, Commander Veeta methodically ordered the Warbird to ascend slowly up the narrow channel of protected space above the Eisen Lattice until they were clear of the star's corona and free to navigate. The *V'Dara* had escorted the two *Keras*-class Warbirds and the smaller scout away from the Kea suns and into a high orbit above AK-hyi. The *Vejul* engaged her sub-light engines and made directly for a parallel orbit above the rocky planetoid which had become a Reman mining world following the obliteration of AK-gva.

From his accustomed place at the observation ports ringing the *Vejul's* bridge, Tikot Ketor could make out the two smaller Warbirds silently hanging in space above AK-hyi. The *V'Dara* and now the *Vejul*

had taken up position just behind and two *k'vahrus* above the smaller *Keras*-class Warbirds. From these advantageous positions both *Horo*-class Warbirds could unleash crippling disruptor fire on their visitors with little risk of damage.

“Enriov Dar’s ship has landed at the primary pad at the Complex on AK-hyi, Rekkhai,” reported Commander Veeta, stepping away from his command chair to show proper respect to Tikot Ketor.

“I will transport directly to my office,” Ketor responded without bothering to make eye contact with the commander.

Tikot turned away from the view down towards the two green Warbirds skimming along helplessly below the *Vejul*’s disruptors and made his way to the lift. Seconds later he was materializing on the receiving pad cloistered in a recessed alcove in his *de facto* home on AK-hyi. As the swirling conflagration of green and white energy faded the view of his black polished desk with the two stiff-backed chairs facing it came into focus. Ketor found himself unmoved by the presence of Caithlin Dar, comfortably seated behind his desk, a spray of tablets and progress reports spread out before her.

“Enriov Dar. Why have you interrupted my work?” Ketor stepped off the transport pad and walked confidently towards the Tal Shiar admiral sitting at his desk.

“It’s good to see you as well, Nelohk,” Caithlin purred as she dropped a non-descript tablet to clatter sharply against the desk’s polished top.

Tikot froze in place. The sound of his true name was jarring.

“Surely you don’t mean to say that it is my arrival that has thrown you off schedule, rekkhai? Do they still call you rekkhai?” Caithlin had been aware of the status of the *Votol* and had just been appraised of the failure of the *V’Dara* and the loss of an entire panel.

“They feel it necessary to attach some honorific to my position here; rekkhai works as well as anything else. May I enquire why you have chosen to arrive here unannounced, Enriov Dar?” Tikot hoped that Dar was here in her role as a Tal Shiar vice admiral as opposed to her true...

“Address me as my *brother* should, Nelohk.” Caithlin kept her seat and let the left side of her mouth pull itself up into a slight smile.

Ketor shifted his weight from one foot to the other, thinking. He drew a breath then proceeded towards one of the stiff chairs facing his desk. His gait was less confident. She wasn't here on Tal Shiar business. He pulled the tall grey chair away from the desk and took a seat before exhaling gently and locking eyes with the woman seated at his place.

"*Thehau, sister.* Of course, I am honoured to greet you in the midst of my labours." Tikot bowed his head slightly, but kept his eyes locked on Dar's own.

"There, that's better. How does your work proceed, Nelohk?"

"I've appraised both the Senate, the Continuing Committee and the Tal Shiar of our issues with the *VotoI* and the business with the Federation's Starfleet vessel."

"Yes, we're aware. It is unfortunate the incursion cost us a Warbird. The commander of the *VotoI* was...?"

"Perished in the engagement."

"Ah yes, so he did." Dar studied the man's face, watching for any sign of emotional upheaval and was quietly relieved when she saw none.

"I requested a replacement Warbird more than a cycle ago. I cannot meet projections overtaking the remaining *Horos*." Ketor was uncomfortable sitting on the wrong side of his desk. The fact that it was Caithlin Dar, Thehau, his *sister* in the Zhat Vash who had shared with him the Admonition and inducted him into the Order, sitting across from him was no comfort.

"That, my *brother*, is why I am here." She smiled when she saw the man's face light up with sudden hope.

"We are to receive a replacement for the *VotoI*?" Tikot ventured.

"There will be no further *Horo*-class Warbirds launched for the foreseeable future, I'm afraid. We've concerns regarding the artificial singularity drive systems." The light which had just filled Ketor with hope was dashed.

"I...I don't understand. The new drive systems work perfectly. Certainly, we've had no issues with our *Horos*."

"Certainly. The technology is sound, I'm told. That is why I am here, Nelohk. I must have your *Vejul*. For the Praetor, you understand."

“The Praetor? What does the Praetor need with my flagship? What does any of this have to do with my work here?”

“The Praetor must have a suitable capital ship. The *Tomed* is tasked with a vital mission in the Federation’s *Fox Trot* Sector and will not be available to serve as the Empire’s flagship. We need a vessel that projects grandeur, strength and technological superiority—the *Vejul* will meet our needs.”

Tikot slowly shook his head. In the hierarchy of the Tal Shiar, Dar’s rank of *enriov* (vice admiral) far outstripped his own *ssiebh* (colonel) rank, but as he was on a Senate approved top-priority sortie of long duration, not even an *enriov* could interfere with his mandate. If Dar had come not as an officer of the Tal Shiar, but as a representative of the Zhat Vash, he as a *brother* and operative would be bound by oath and by duty to acquiesce to any request his *sister* might make.

“How...how is this a matter for the Zhat Vash, *sister*?” asked Ketor.

“You recalculated your projections for completion following the loss of *Votol*, did you not?” She knew he had. She’d read his reports a cycle ago and only just now, upon arriving in his office, did she find a copy of those same projections in his desk.

“With the loss of the *Votol*, provided the remaining Warbirds remain in good operating condition, I calculate 98% to 99% coverage of the Eism Lattice aperture in roughly fifty-five to sixty cycles...further technological advancements notwithstanding.”

“Yes, and if the *Votol* were replaced today?”

“Perhaps fifty to fifty-five cycles. We’re already having issues with the others.”

“Yes, I’m aware. I have in orbit two *Keras*-class Warbirds. You may name them whatever you wish. They’re fresh from the yards at Unroth.”

“*Keras*-class vessels don’t have the requisite power to...”

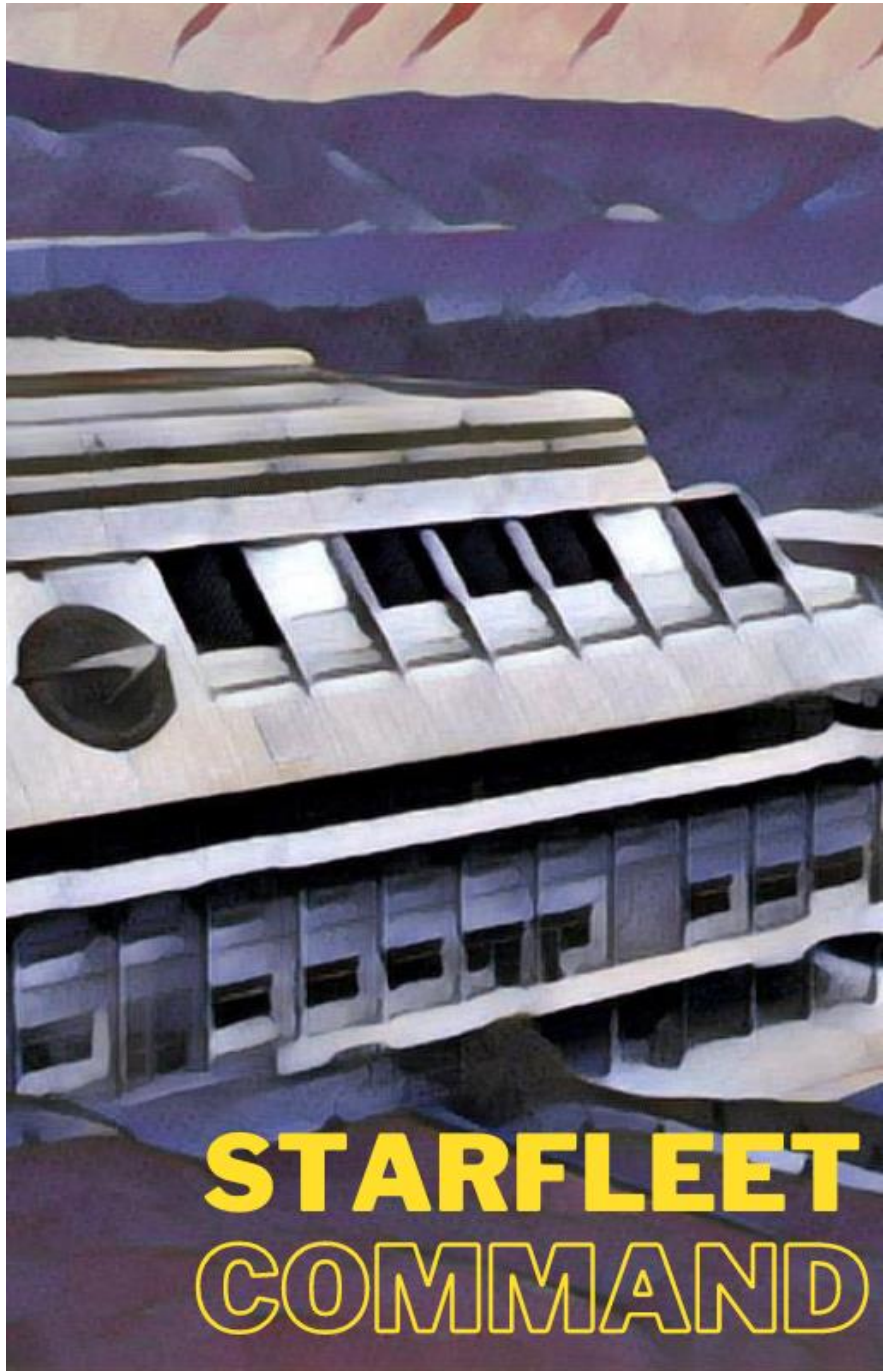
“These two ships have no disruptors, no secondary defensive screens and spartan onboard amenities, an overly simplified bridge and control configuration; surely you can find some of your favourite Remans to man them and keep the loyal Romulan personnel aboard your remaining *Horos* to affect much needed maintenance and repairs.”

The Reman situation needed to be dealt with while she was here as well, Dar reminded herself.

Tikot sat dumbfounded, unsure what to say. No Reman would ever man an Imperial ship. The comment was meant as a cutting insult to the unique relationship he'd fostered amongst the Remans of AK-hyi.

Caithlin could see her *brother* perhaps wasn't understanding the situation...

"You will turn the *Vejul* over to my Sub-Commander presently aboard the primary *Keras* in orbit. He and his men will crew her back to Romulus for the Praetor. You then will continue with your work using these new ships which have been outfitted with tractor plants similar to those aboard the *Vejul*. With them, you can get back on track." She pushed back from the desk and calmly waited for his compliance.



# STARFLEET COMMAND

## An Apt Ship / *Rrhiet Khina*

(Two weeks ago.)

*Trudy* crept through the ruined skeleton of the shattered dock where presumably the ill-fated vessel carrying a faulty Eaves-Beyer reactor tore herself apart in an instant and the resulting uncontrolled baryon fusion event sullied everything around Yard 39. Slowly the systems aboard the runabout began returning to manual control. She was still locked into a preprogrammed flight path, but P'nom suddenly had access to nearly the full suite of external sensors. She began feverishly recording impossibly high baryon radiation levels just beyond *Trudy's* shields.

Shorh and Dirlo both sat in complete silence as the eerie green glow from the baryon-rich space just beyond their tiny craft bubbled and churned around chunks of debris, derelict worker bees and cargo pods. Rhupp was below surveying the impulse reactor and taking readings from the computer core in the hope of finding some way to break *Trudy* out of her restrictive flight path. He'd had no luck, but didn't dare cut power, lest the thrumming field coil quit, and their protective shield should fall away.

They passed a trio of *Cardenas*-class ships.

"There, up ahead..." said Moira from her seat at the navigation station.

Shorh raised himself up slightly to get a better look out of the forward viewports just as Tagir ducked back into the forward control deck. Rhupp, now dressed in his prized red jump suit, ran the back of his hand across his brow and squinted to see what they were coming up on.

"Station 39," Shorh said hoarsely.

Passing two dark and frozen-looking transport shuttles, *Trudy* came within eight hundred meters of the haunted looking station. 39 was an unremarkable service station originally designed by the Tanugans and adapted by Starfleet to serve as a standard-type support and research base for interplanetary research and supply. As the

runabout drew closer and closer to the lifeless station, Moira began thumbing her emergency arrest actuators hoping to prevent a collision.

The others watched in silence as the looming bulk of station 39 filled the viewports. Each of them braced for an impact that seemed imminent. Then suddenly, *Trudy's* retro thrusters fired, her dorsal port maneuvering thrusters activated. Her nose edged up and past the station to bring one final skeletal space dock, unseen behind the dark station, into view.

“What the hells is that?” Shorh whispered, unintentionally borrowing his old friend’s favourite expletive.

“It looks like a piece of a ship,” answered Moira from her seat.

At first Shorh thought they were heading towards the ruined remains of some damaged ship, but as they grew closer and the green glow illuminated the pen some three hundred kilometers ahead of them, Tagir Rhupp sprang to his feet and called out.

“That’s a saucer from a *Connie*! First-generation, no doubt about it! What have they done to it?”

Moira grunted. Her scope was of little use. The optical feeds had been locked into mid-range returns and *Trudy* was now too close to the looming grey saucer for her little viewer to reveal anything more than a fuzzy grey/black blur.

“I am detecting a high-frequency plasma field emanating from the approaching vessel, similar to our own.” P’nom calmly called out. She was the only one of the three still seated and focused on her instruments.

“Those are J3 type nacelles...” Tagir pressed his nose against the transparent aluminum of the view port. He could just make out the nearly white housings of the two nacelles recessed in the saucer either side of the dark bridge module. The full-sized nacelles were nearly three generations newer than the flat grey saucer section they were mounted in.

*Trudy* dropped below the looming saucer. As the little runabout passed along the saucer’s ventral side, both Tagir and Shorh peered up and marvelled at the odd vessel. The nacelles, which were nearly as long as the saucer’s full diameter, weren’t mounted to the vessel.

They were fit into two long channels cut through the saucer itself and held in place by what appeared to be axles fore and aft.

The runabout cleared the shadow of the great disc and arched around dramatically to bring its nose in line with a waiting shuttle bay. *Trudy* then docked herself aboard the mysterious half-ship they'd found; all while Tagir expounded on the fact that no *Constitution*-class starship ever had a shuttle bay positioned between its aft impulse plants.

P'nom confirmed that a tractor beam had been activated aboard the waiting vessel to assist them in their docking, but there were no life signs aboard. Shorh was uneasy. He left P'nom in command while he ducked aft to don his own coveralls.

## Siblings in Cause / *Aerrha Zhat*

She rose from behind the large desk and paced methodically towards Nelohk. He was still trying to puzzle out what it was she expected of him. As she grazed by his left shoulder, she remarked: “You’ve been too long away from Romulus, brother. Come, sit.” Dar moved to a simple stone bench resting against the far wall of the office and waited for him to join her.

With stiff legs and an unshielded air of hesitancy, Ketor pulled himself out of the chair and moved to join the admiral upon the short, intimate bench. Her hair was piled high upon her head, pinned meticulously in place with onyx pins and interwoven with a string of vibrant Rigelian flame gems—a gift from her human husband, no doubt. She was immaculately dressed and groomed. Not a stitch out of place. Not a hair askew.

“My duty is here, *sister*. You know that.” Ketor croaked as Dar shifted her hips slightly and her lithe thigh rubbed against his leg.

“Yes, of course. More than twenty cycles out here, alone.”

“The work is of paramount importance. It is my sacred duty to...”

“Safeguard us all from that which the Admonition has foretold. I know, Nelohk. I know. Still, there are some of our Order who feel the strain may have become too much for you.” Caithlin fluttered her long eyelashes at Ketor, who was sitting bolt upright beside her on the short bench.

“Who in the Order!?” He snapped his head around to look the admiral square in the eyes. She was batting her eyelids towards him for some reason—a ridiculous habit learnt from her time with the human.

“Sister Thatir, for one. Of course, sister Ulaihk has also voiced deep concerns about a man taking on so critical a mission as this, but you know that.” She smiled at the incensed look on Nelohk’s face. Men were so easily manipulated. Romulan men could be led by their pride as easily as human men could be led by their libidos.

“Sister Ulaihk has always doubted my worthiness. She was the only one of the Matriarchal Council to oppose my indoctrination into the Zhat Vash!”

“Yes, Nelohk. She was. Nonetheless, you’ve proven yourself a devout and tireless brother. There were those on the Council who wanted to see you fail, just to bring me down for having stood behind your candidacy. I knew you would not fail me. You managed the Admonition and threw yourself into this work without hesitation. You have proven yourself a loyal Romulan.”

Ketor took a few short breaths and tried to drive the image of the hateful hag, Ulaihk from his mind’s eye. Dar had always been supportive of him—but in the end the Zhat Vash was a Matriarchy. The handful of *brothers* who received the Admonition second-hand from their *sisters* were operatives and honoured peers, but they were still men. Could Thehau Dar, his *sister*, the woman who chose him from the ranks of the Tal Shiar to join the elite and ancient Order of the Zhat Vash, be in league with Ulaihk? Could all this be a play to remove him from the Eisan Lattice so that Ulaihk, or one of the others could move in and claim responsibility for completing the task he'd spent more than a quarter of his life at?

“We are behind schedule, *sister*...the Starfleet incursion fouled things terribly, but if I could just get a replacement for the *Votol* and time to address the maintenance requirements of the...”

Caithlin put her arm around Ketor’s rock hard shoulders and pulled him close to her. He was ridged and tense. Romulans did not warm to physical displays of affection or comfort outside of their pair-bonds, but as she held him and gently began to rock back and forth, she could feel him relax.

“Ssshhhh, *brother*. You will give me the *Vejul*. I have brought you new, capable ships to continue this vital work and no one will take this task away from you, I promise.”

“Those ships...are so small...”

“*Brother*, we’ve experienced the Admonition together. We’ve shared our true names with one and other. You have no cause not to trust me. A great change is at hand with regards to the Empire’s policy regarding the Federation. There will be no further interruptions to your

work, not by Starfleet, not by the Empire itself. I must have the *Vejul* for the Praetor.”

Tikot pulled away from Dar gently. There were things she wasn't sharing with him. That was obvious. The notion of surrendering the newest and least compromised *Horo*-class Warbird still did not sit well.

“How is it you can promise no further Starfleet interference? Or Imperial involvement for that matter?”

She smiled at Nelohk the way she might smile at a disbelieving child and shook her head. Her *brother* had no knowledge of the failure at Khitomer. He didn't know the Federation had made formal alliances with the Klingon Empire. All he knew was that he was tasked with blockading a portal to Hell and that task was slipping away from him.

“Have we not gleaned amazing knowledge from the Eison Lattice, *brother*? Are the forced singularity drives aboard all the *Horo*-class Warbirds not derived from the revelations taken from the study of the Lattice?”

“They are...”

“Nelohk, did you read the analysis of the Trilithium compounds discovered around the base of the Lattice? The very substance that allows that structure to exist on the surface of a sun?”

Ketor cleared his throat. He was no scientist, but the findings had been explained to him cycles ago when they first began planning how best to close the aperture from which so much destruction had already erupted.

“I...yes, it was explained in very broad terms how the substance appears to inhibit fusion and stabilize portions of a sun's surface to allow a structure to rest directly upon a star.”

“Yes, and though we understand the compound's effects, we still cannot determine how to apply it in such a manner as to permit only partial inhibition. All our tests and simulations result in complete nuclear inhibition; it is a compound which destroys stars. Imagine what could happen if the Starfleet, or the Klingon Empire should get their hands on such knowledge.”

The thought of a Trilithium weapon shook Tikot to his core.

“We know the Federation have already tempted fate by nearly unleashing the unspeakable synthetic lifeforms forewarned in the

Admonition at the battle of Xahea. We know what came through the Eish Lattice all those cycles ago and destroyed an entire planet. There is too much at stake here for us to quarrel amongst ourselves. Agreed?" She leaned back and looked at him.

Tikot shook his head. He still got flashes of the Admonition from time to time. Thehau had shared the warning with him through what the Vulcans would call a mindmeld. Men could not experience the Admonition first-hand and survive. Many of the *sisters* who worked and studied to become Zhat Vash were themselves driven mad upon exposure to the powerful psychic warning. Many would-be brothers were similarly driven mad when exposed second-hand.

"It is necessary?" was all Ketor could manage.

"It is *brother*," purred Dar.

Before anything more could be said a sharp trilling pulled Ketor off the bench. The operations center was signalling an alert.

## Change / Ehtea

Svetlana found her station on the command deck aboard *K3* to be not dissimilar to the interface terminals she'd mastered in another life while stationed at Headquarters in the Deployment Resources section. She recognized most of the operatives working around her at the various panels and computer screens, but realized quickly that few of them had any notion of who she was. The journey from Spacedock back to Jupiter aboard *93* had taken less than an hour. She'd spent most of that time in an empty cabin studying encrypted log-in protocols supplied by Admiral Bautlin.

"Have you managed to tune the actuator around the interplexing oscillator?"

Startled, Svetlana turned away from her screens to see Captain Demby standing behind her molded plastic chair. She was dressed entirely in black, just as the operatives had always been at Deployment Resources; except the uniform she wore was patterned after the standard Starfleet maroon tunics commonplace aboard Starships and Starbases.

"Oh...yes, the auxiliary frequency system transmitter had to be routed through an active flux generator, but I've established a stable, untraceable uplink from Sydney to our own onboard passive subspace receiver assembly."

Demby looked down at the strange face of the blond woman dressed in Starfleet reds and cocked an eyebrow. She herself had been rated in the top 5% of computer technicians in the entire fleet before joining Section 31, but Jose Bull's almost preternatural abilities with coding and computer science far outstripped Demby's own.

Svetlana smiled up at Demby's incredulous look, recalling how they'd once spent hours discussing alternative programming and matrix configurations in another life. "It took some doing, but we now have access to all data packages streamed through Sydney."

Demby saw something vaguely familiar in the smile and let herself relax. "Very good then, commander. If your done and that link is stable, report to the admiral."

“Yes, captain.” Svetlana let her smile recede and respectfully rose from her station. It would take time to get to know everyone again, or to let them get to know the new her.

Demby offered the tall blond woman a professional nod and continued towards the central command post. Two operatives were busy taking readings of *K3*'s unique shield emissions and plotting possible cycle gaps. Teague had expired before sharing how he helped the *guests* aboard Space Dock 17 transport clear of the protective bubble surrounding *K3* and the immense scrapyards beyond. To Demby's mind a micro gap in the station's shield cycle was the most likely explanation. As to where Captain Ch'orithron and his crewmen had gotten to, remained a mystery for now.

Svetlana approached the admiral's office and found the single panel door hushed open automatically at her approach. She stepped into the room and found Maureen Bautlin standing in front of a large view port gazing out at the angry red storm on the face of Jupiter.

“*a-hem...* Captain Demby told me to report, ma'am.”

Maureen kept her attention fixed on the storm far beyond the panel of transparent aluminum. “Have you established the uplink, Lieutenant Commander?”

“Yes, ma'am. It's stable and untraceable. As of now we have access to everything LSC handles.” Svetlana felt the atmosphere shift gently behind her as the office door hushed closed.

Maureen thought back to the last time she'd seen U'Chtukilli face-to-face and realized it'd been right here, in this room, when he'd come to audit her after Moddax had tried so desperately to slit her throat. He'd been more than a mentor to her; something more akin to a father figure, really. She missed him desperately. The sound of the office door closing pulled her mind back to the present and she slowly turned away from Jupiter to look across at the young blond woman she'd brought back from Earth.

“Any issues fitting in with the others?” She'd shared that Moddax was no longer around during their flight from Earth and the blond woman had seemed pleased with that.

Svetlana blinked twice thinking how best to answer, trying to remember if it was Admiral Bautlin who preferred short concise

monosyllabic responses, or if that had been Admiral U'Chtukilli. Trying to recall such minutiae from her past life was difficult; like peering into a murky bowl of dirty water and trying to see bottom. "No...no issues ma'am."

"Good. I've arranged for you to draw a Section uniform from stores. As of now your rank is that of full commander. They'll provide you with the appropriate rank insignia for your Starfleet tunic as well." Maureen studied the pretty young woman and wondered absently if Jose...if Svetlana, thought of her as something of a mentor now.

Svetlana looked at the admiral, dressed in her black tunic, her starburst rank insignia neatly embroidered into the black fabric of her shoulder strap, and smiled. She'd made commander. It was all worth it.

## The Departed / Ye Yytaera

Commander Donaldson stood overlooking the floor of the Fleet Command Center from Admiral T'Chou's office. Fleet deployment updates were live streaming to the tactical boards below. She was still familiarizing herself with the intricacies of the Command Center, but in the short time she'd found herself as primary aide to the Acting Chief of Operations, Lisa had absorbed a great deal.

She watched as a flight of four *Oberth*-class science ships updated their position along the border between the Typhon and Sierra Sectors. Two *Constellations* were reporting in from the farthest reaches of the Omicron Sector where they were to take up exploration and patrol duties out of Archer IV. Several other *Constellations* were on approach to Mars. Since the 'Upgrade' concluded the new fleet of *Constellation* starships hastily assembled and scrambled to prepare for a possible Romulan attack had been slowly rotated back to the Sol System for upgrades and modular modifications at Utopia Planitia.

Lisa, barely tall enough to see directly below her place in T'Chou's office to the central workstation below (where a select team of young officers worked to coordinate with specific ships of interest) appeared to the men and women working on the floor as little more than a square jawed jack-o-lantern peering down at them. Only the commander's head could be seen from below. How she was seen by others mattered little to Donaldson—so long as she was respected. She'd caught on to the coded shorthand used to denote various vessels and contacts of interest on the main board quickly. The officers working the boards and screens of the Command Center had quickly come to admire the serious and intelligent woman.

What interested Donaldson most was the cluster of alpha-numeric identifiers gathering in the Corinth System at the far end of the Vulcan Sector. Four *Excelsior*-class starships, three *Mirandas* and two *Constellations*...all forming up for a run at Andoria, if necessary. A cluster of slightly different identifiers streamed along the Andorian side of the border. Lisa could denote heavy Frigates, Raiders and support vessels. There were seven confirmed Frigates now. Two more had

arrived in the hours since she and the admiral had left to attend the Council Session. The Raiders were harder to pinpoint this far out. Estimates ranged between twenty and thirty of the dangerous little Andorian warships.

The Frigates mostly stayed in fixed positions at the outermost perimeter of Andoria's planetary defensive grid. The Raiders though—the Raiders appeared and disappeared regularly. They undulated back and forth between the larger Frigates and the two unique Starfleet identifiers in orbit above Andoria itself—*USS Fury* and *USS Meni T'Pra*. Lisa rubbed her eyes and drew a deep breath. She was tired.

In a flurry of huffs and puffs, Xao T'Chou swept into the room directly from the morning briefing with the rest of the Admiralty. He muttered and kept his eyes cast down at his feet as he shook his head in frustrated anger. Donaldson spun away from her place at the window and stepped to the far side of the admiral's desk, her assigned place. T'Chou stomped past the square-jawed woman without acknowledging her and tore at the bib of his tunic. He was tired. He was hot. He'd just been spoken to like a child by the C-in-C and he wanted badly to beam home and go to bed.

"Son of a...who does he think he's talking...?!" Xao continued to paw at the strap holding his tunic closed. In his frustration he neglected to twist the small golden toggle just below the glinting, golden starburst that denoted the rank of admiral.

"Sir." Donaldson kept her place but managed to put enough bass in her voice to snap T'Chou out of his tantrum.

Suddenly embarrassed, Xao cleared his throat and with a shaking hand let the front of his tunic flop open. "Donaldson, yes...good, good...*cough*. Where are we?"

"Two more Imperial Frigates on station since this...er, yesterday morning, sir."

T'Chou yawned and motioned for Lisa to continue.

"The *Acis* and her sister ship, the *Galatea* are systems-ready to lead our extraction force into Andorian space. The feeling is the Andorians won't fire on Federation ships and if done quickly, the chances of escorting the *Fury* and *Meni T'Pra* back into the Vulcan Sector are high..."

“I know all that, Donaldson! I just briefed the C-in-C for the love of...the ground? Have we got our intelligence from the ground yet? Do we know how many of our people are on Andoria?”

“No, sir. We just have Captain Baker’s last report: Captain Evengii, Commander Eldridge, possibly others, are reported to still be on the surface. Anyone on the planet would be left behind if we commit to *Grab-and-Go* now.”

Xao yawned again. Wallace had been clear—no action until the Council weighed in. In no way were they to risk endangering the officers or crews of the two hostage starships. Xao slumped in his chair. He didn’t know who the officer of the watch was, but he was ready for bed.

“They’re pulling their top-flight ships back from the Tzenkethi border. The Cardassians are still mobilizing off Alpha 441, we should perhaps...”

“Go home, Donaldson. Get some sleep. Wallace isn’t interested in Cardies right now. Thom’s dead. That’s all that matters to any of them.”



**U.S.S.**  
OLIPHANT

## Dinner / *Kuhaos'ellaer*

Caithlin Dar checked her reflection one final time in the mirror before stepping out of her well-appointed cabin aboard the *Talon*-class scout ship she used for personal transport. Ketor had ended their meeting abruptly when his command operations center had signalled an alert. Both agreed to meet later for a formal dinner. A warren of dim rooms had been prepared hastily for the enriov and her staff, but Caithlin had insisted on remaining aboard her own vessel while on AK-hyi. She'd dismissed the grim-looking Reman soldiers assigned to provide security for the landing pad where her ship rested and deployed a contingent of Romulan uhlans under command of a centurion to secure her vessel in this hive of Reman vulgarity.

She'd changed into a formal charcoal-coloured tunic adorned with the collar decorations denoting her rank as an enriov of the Tal Shiar. Her hair remained fixed in its elaborate "up" position and the stones *Sinjin* had gifted her on their fifth anniversary, flashed and sparkled when they caught the light. She opted to leave her duty belt and disruptor stowed aboard the *Vollo*. Taking a gun to dinner was gauche.

Sub-Commander Sohon was waiting to escort Enriov Dar from the *Vollo* to dinner at the small scout ship's gangway.

"Enriov, the ship is secure. Centurion Thohauk reports all access points to the landing pad are shuttered and under armed guard." Sohon stood at ridged attention as the older woman walked towards her.

Dar nodded at her Sub-Commander. She'd personally selected the professional, cold, calculating woman to serve as bodyguard three cycles earlier. She was in all regards the ideal Romulan. The two women set off towards the lift which would ferry them to the dining hall deep within AK-hyi in silence. Sohon's silver battle tunic glowed in the dim artificial light of the caverns. She wore two sleek disruptors in low holsters on either side of her silver belt and a double-corded aiguillette hung around her shoulders.

The uhlans had done their job well. Neither the enriov, nor her escort came across a single Reman during the quick trip from the

landing pad, down the lift and along the central corridor leading to the large dining hall, which doubled as AK-hyi's central meeting chamber. Two baby-faced uhlans from Ketor's contingent had been posted outside of the hall's secondary entrance and they snapped to attention as Enriov Dar approached. Caithlin and Sohon passed by the drab-looking children without a word and stepped into the chamber to find themselves in the company of two uniformed commanders and a half dozen young Romulans dressed in black as porters.

Dar made her way to the head of the oblong *ih'hedaes* table and surveyed the room. Sohon stood silently to Dar's left. The two commanders stood respectfully behind their places at the table further down to Dar's left and right. Caithlin was about to inquire as to Ketor's whereabouts when he suddenly appeared from behind an outcropping alongside what appeared to be the hall's main entrance—which of course, was a false door.

Tikot too, had taken the time to freshen his appearance and change into more appropriate attire. He wore an old-style metallic gold and black patterned tunic with deep maroon uniform pants and a matching shoulder drape hung neatly over his right shoulder denoting his one-time position in the Tal Shiar as a *ssiebh*. He'd not worn his old uniform since taking his vows with the Zhat Vash. He was quietly pleased that the out-of-date regalia still fit perfectly.

Dar's eyes narrowed at the sight of Ketor. His choice in attire was fine. It was quaint even. Caithlin quite approved of her *brother's* choice, even taking the time to affix the small polished black triangle to his shoulder drape denoting the simple, elegant sign of the Tal Shiar. Modern uniforms had replaced the drapes with various linked aiguillettes and while sleek, they lacked a certain romance in Dar's opinion. What she didn't approve of was the appearance of the nearly two-and-half-meter-tall Reman standing behind her *brother*.

The creature was hideous. Its pale, slimy-looking skin, shone garishly in the artificial light of the chamber...light Caithlin only then realized had been toned-down from what one might expect in a Romulan installation. The Reman wore a tight-fitting black and purple battle suit. A heavy-duty belt was slung around its waist, but Dar was relieved to note the holster affixed to the beast's belt was empty.

“Enriov Dar, allow me to welcome you to AK-hyi and introduce my primary adjuncts, Commander Tenaj of the Warbird *V’Dara*, and Commander Veeta of the Warbird *Vejul*.” Tikot moved to his place at the opposite end of the table from his *sister* and gestured to the men standing to either side of the dining table.

Both commanders respectfully bowed towards Dar as they were introduced and clutched their right fists to their chests. Caithlin nodded at each man in turn as the Reman took up a place beside Commander Veeta.

“This of course, is Alhe Mivik, our host.” Ketor gracefully stretched out his left hand and motioned towards the towering Reman.

Mivik looked the short woman with the strange hair in the eye and growled low in his throat.

Caitlin kept her face placid and met the Reman’s eyes. She looked at it as she might regard a mongrel vole. The rock that was AK-hyi and the filthy mines that riddled its *ih’hedaes*-streaked bowels were *technically* this thing’s own to command.

“Gentlemen, my adjunct, Sub-Commander Sohon.” The three men and the beast briefly regarded Sohon, and all of their eyes settled on the twin disruptors she wore. Caitlin waited a heartbeat to be sure they’d seen that Sohon was armed before bidding them to take their seats.

As soon as the party had seated themselves the team of young porters stepped forward to serve the dinner’s planned aperitif. Both Commanders and Ketor gladly accepted the offered glasses of Romulan ale. The beast refused and was given a cup of Altair water as a substitute. Once all seated had their glasses (and cup) in-hand, Tikot rose and offered the traditional toast:

“*Ei e’haraaintuh na’hwiufvteh, emeihet!*”

“*Ei e’haraaintuh na’hwiufvteh, emeihet!*” repeated the other Romulans seated around the table as they raised their glasses and took a polite sip of their ale. The Reman said nothing, but greedily gulped down its water and motioned for a refill before Dar could open the dinner with the traditional greeting.

Cathlin kept an emotionless, cold expression fixed to her face as she rose from her place of honour at the head of the table and Ketor

slowly found his seat at the far end opposite. He knew well how most Romulans viewed Remans and made no attempt to mask something close to childish delight on his own face as Mivik snarled and waited for the porter to refill his cup.

“*Jolan tru,*” Caithlin said as she raised her glass again and offered all gathered her wishes for them to find peace...the Reman guzzled down a second cup of Altair water, and her *brother* had a smirk hanging on his lips. It was disgraceful.

Bringing Nelohk around to acquiesce to her request to seize the *Vejul* had been relatively simple. As Zhat Vash, it was his duty to serve. Comfortably getting the regular Romulan officers to surrender their Warbird would take slightly more in-depth explanations. Apparently, she'd have to share her explanations with the *thing* dear Nelohk had brought to dinner as well. If they'd been but twelve parsecs closer to the central systems of the Empire, she could simply order Veeta to surrender his command knowing the Tal Shiar's shadows would enforce any such order immediately at the first sign of resistance. They were, however, isolated on the fringes of the Empire. These were loyal Romulans fanatically dedicated to their task. Explanation rather than persuasion was the key here.

## Voyage / *Mos'havrae*

(Three days earlier.)

The aft compartment of the *Trudy* had been swept clean of all superfluous debris, equipment and litter. The modest padding from the single bench beneath the runabout's aft view ports and the seat and cushioned back from the single workstation's chair had been removed to be deep cleaned as well. Amidship, all the storage bins had been cleaned out and even the sonic shower had been stripped and cleaned by Chief Rhupp. The four bunks had been turned over and their mattresses and bedding cleaned and refreshed.

Shorh sat motionless in the hard chair facing the workstation. The onboard computer was functioning, and the secure file the *Isadore's* former captain had created to store his detailed testimonials was open and waiting. The silence of the small craft was nearly deafening. Both *Trudy's* warp and impulse plants had been completely powered down. Rhupp had discovered how to run a complete system diagnostic and had locked the runabout's central processor into a long-run cycle. The only sound, which wasn't really a sound at all—more of a vibration, came from the large field coil fitted into the aft cabin. Rhupp had tied *Trudy's* grid into an external charge point and was slowly replenishing not only the field coil, but the runabout's onboard batteries as well.

Dirlo and P'nom were on the bridge. Rhupp was inventorying the contents of *Trudy's* storage bins just beyond the small grey ship. Shorh leaned to his left and peered out one of the large aft viewports and spotted Tagir at work over a small collection of powerpacks and one of the antique tricorders they'd discovered. Satisfied that he wouldn't be disturbed, Shorh extended a single blue finger and triggered the recording function on the workstation by pressing a red "jelly" button...

*Personal log, Shorh Ch'orithron. It has been nearly two weeks since we were taken to Yard 39 by the preprogrammed autopilot*

*Dannar Teague's small runabout had locked into upon departing its hangar. As documented, this vessel was equipped with an unfamiliar coil assembly which generated an energy field sufficient to shield us from the fatal effects of the baryon radiation which has for decades made Yard 39 inaccessible.*

*We find ourselves aboard a larger vessel...a Starship of unique design. Doubtless this odd vessel is the work of Dannar Teague and is tied to his lifelong ambition to achieve true Transwarp speed. The limited sensor logs this small runabout was able to collect regarding this larger ship have been downloaded into these files.*

*This ship appears to have been constructed from the primary hull of a first-generation Constitution-class starship. From the exterior this saucer appears to be "vintage" for lack of a better term; however, as with the Teague's unique runabout the obsolete appearance of this craft is only skin deep. Two cutouts have been carefully carved through all decks either side of the dorsal central conning tower and ventral planetary sensor to accommodate the length and breadth of two modern J3 type nacelles. These are mounted to axial stabilizers fore and aft and can be manipulated from the helm station on the bridge. When not in use both nacelles 'rest' horizontally within these cut-outs and are not visibly detectable unless viewed directly from either the X- or Y-axis. When powered and engaged to bring the saucer to warp both nacelles rotate on their stabilizers and stand erect.*

*There is a single shuttle bay located between the saucer's impulse plants. Upon first encountering this ship our runabout was guided automatically into this shuttle bay and secured. This single bay is only just wide enough to accommodate Mr. Teague's runabout as there are six larger versions of the field coil we discovered aboard the 'Trudy'—three aside to the port and starboard of small landing area afforded "Trudy".*

*I go into detail here as I cannot know what the final disposition of this ship...or this crew may be. We have two functional, if old, tricorders. Owing to our need to rely on these tools I've asked*

*my crew to use them sparingly. As a result, I'm taking the time to describe what we've seen so far to save our limited scanning and recording abilities should greater issues arise.*

Shorh paused and leaned back in his seat. He wanted to be as complete as possible in his reporting of events. Touching the now bulging base of his left antennae with the tip of his fingers he thought about how much detail he should include. He gently rubbed his forehead below his wound. The sprig was dead. P'nom had severed the nerve a few days ago when it became clear there was no way to save the antennae. He'd have to have it amputated once all this was over.

Shorh twisted at the waist to stretch his back and scoffed. They all very well might be dead before all of *this* was over. Beyond the transparent aluminum viewport Rhupp was in the process of field-stripping the antique phaser rifle they'd discovered aboard *Trudy*. Shorh returned to his log...

*We quickly discovered that this larger vessel was like nothing any of us had ever seen before. Chief Rhupp, our resident expert on antiquated ships and gear, has found nothing relative to the aged spaceframe this craft appears to have been carved out of. A standard Constitution-class saucer of this vintage should have 11 decks. This vessel has a shuttle bay connected to a single long corridor which ramps up into the conning tower where we've discovered her bridge. There are no other decks or open areas that we've been able to detect. There are no turbo lifts, only a basic moving conveyer to expedite the trip between the shuttle bay and the bridge. Every square meter of internal space has been crammed with integrated solid-state processors and computer servers, sensor modules, a completely closed warp reactor pod, batteries, energizers and redundant systems and backup cores.*

*There are no cabins, no crew amenities of any kind. We've determined that the corridor leading from the shuttle bay to the bridge is a passageway cut through a solid block of duranium*

some eight square meters in diameter. P'nom has found similar duranium shielding in most of the bulkheads abutting the shuttle bay and the bridge as well. We speculate that this is meant to serve as shielding from any radiological emanations from the nacelles which are incorporated into the body of the saucer. It seems Trudy is meant to serve as this ship's living quarters. The bridge layout of this ship is completely unique as well. There's a minimal command chair mounted to a platform center deck. The helm seat is three meters in front of the command chair and faces a single, long counter of flat-screened terminals. Two handles molded into circular indentations in the terminal allow the helmsman to pivot the nacelles either in unison, or individually to any articulation desired in a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree range of motion while at warp. At impulse the nacelles are locked into their horizontal, "0" position and the helmsman can pull back on these handles—freeing a section of terminal to serve as a yolk from which the entire saucer can be manually piloted as easily as one might expect to handle a recreational shuttlepod.

There are two more stations on either side of the helm. One appears to handle operations, computer interface, sensors, communications and internal monitors—while the other plots navigational solutions, fire control and systems outputs. We've discovered several busports buffered along the terminal's back panels where we speculate other equipment might be interfaced with the ship for programming or repair purposes, but we've found no evidence of additional hardware anywhere onboard. The only item of note discovered aboard this saucer ship was found midway along the corridor leading from the shuttle bay to the bridge, a portable transport unit. There are two small receiving pads and a standard mobile buffer with hookups for EPS conversion. There are no standard EPS access ports to be found aboard the saucer—but P'nom has pointed out that a compatible port can be found aboard the Trudy and speculates that the unit was intended for our unarmed runabout.

*Upon first boarding this ship we established the saucer was shielded from the baryon radiation as our runabout had been and proceeded to the bridge. We quickly found the only operational piece of command equipment was a reader-port for the isolinear disc Teague had given us before helping us escape Space Dock 17. The disc Teague had said, contained a third of his “BRAIN” multitronic operating system. As previously noted, we had no control over our runabout once we plugged Teague’s other disc into its computer and none of us were eager to cede control to another pre-programmed route—but as it appeared to be the only way to get anything aboard this ship to work, we had little choice.*

*I am pleased to report that the disc unlocked some control features of the saucer. Our immediate concern was clearing Yard 39 before our shielding gave out. Once clear, we plotted a course for the Typhon Expanse—as we know Brian was sent to investigate a graviton event there. Coincidentally, once clear of Yard 39 our systems reported a ‘contact’ in unclaimed space between the Expanse and the Altair System. Teague did say he’d installed the final third of his system aboard some freighter and that the computer would seek out this final piece of software to restore “BRAIN” to full operating capacity, so...*

*We’re proceeding at Warp 9.85 towards this contact while we all get acquainted with this strange vessel. The speed of this saucer is remarkable. Ensign Dirlo has stated, she flies smoother at high speed. In the meantime, P’nom is monitoring standard frequencies for news of possible pursers. So far, she has been unable to tune in any Starfleet secure channels...*

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The trilling climax to Giiar Molix’s Third Symphony boomed through the command pod aboard the *Gunnlaugur*. Gixr was leaning back at the old freighter’s navigation station humming along to the *sessica* section as the Symphony plateaued and held their sharp notes for a beat, before sliding back to ramble into the famous composition’s

final movement. There were words to accompany the grand music, of course. The recording Gixr favoured didn't feature the choral accompaniment. Giiar had been Gixr's grandfather. The Third Symphony celebrated the birth of Giiar's twins; an extremely rare event on Edos. Most families limited themselves to a single child, but when the Gods blessed a family with twins entire communities came together in celebration of the miracle.

Gixr's father had studied hard and applied himself to the engineering departments of all three levels of the Edosian Educational Conservatory and had earned himself a prime position among the Architectural Confederacy. Gixr's uncle though had taken a very different path in life. Uncle Arex had applied to the United Federation of Planets' Starfleet Academy. While Edos was not formally a member of the Federation, Arex was accepted and had a long career as a Starfleet officer. Gixr's mother and father didn't speak of Uncle Arex, or his life away from Edos. When Gixr too felt the pull of the stars his only regret at leaving to join the Kalean Logistical Consortium and sign on to the *Kamak* was the knowledge that he'd broken his parents' hearts.

*Gunnlaugur* was leading three Altarian salvage tugs through unclaimed space. The ancient freighter's hold was empty. The sleek, beautiful little light-pod racer *Hawk* had been abandoned for scrap back on Lothra Minor. Alone in the darkness, sat Riadir Preed—the Trill pod racer who'd literally bet everything on his skill and *Hawk*'s rebuilt engine, and lost. Preed was supposed to be sleeping, but the haunted hold where his racer had once been cared for had become something of a sacred space for him. He found the empty bay comforting. He soothed himself with the knowledge that soon he and Marteinn would be racing once again. The sound of the Edosian's music echoed softly off the bare metal bulkheads.

Marteinn, the gruff old Tiburon engineer, was aboard the lead tug slowly following *Gunnlaugur* through the vast nothingness. Marteinn had been Preed's Pit Boss. The two had been partners for years and had worked hard investing everything they had into tuning and maintaining *Hawk*, evening winning the LRL Championship a few years earlier. Things for the two had been progressing well. After

Preed's incredible Championship season there was even talk of them being signed to one of the major Race Teams...and then they met *Dannar Mann* and their fortunes quickly and drastically changed.

All three men came together in a shared moment of desperation. They struck a partnership to salvage a derelict for the Altair II Scrap Yards which would fund Preed and Marteinn's return to racing and help Gixr clear a debt and avoid a painful death. Marteinn's son held a senior post with the Scrappers and vouched for the trio. Grudgingly they'd been supplied with three automated tugs to fetch their salvage back to Altair II for payment. The Scrappers would risk none of their people. Marteinn had spent most of the voyage bouncing between tugs performing maintenance.

Gixr sat back in his seat with his eyes closed, oblivious to *Gunnlaugur's* long-range proximity alert. Before the music could reach its end a giant saucer suddenly dropped out of warp and hung ominously above the ancient little freighter's nose. Gixr nearly tumbled out of his seat when he opened his eyes.

"Gods!" He swatted the audio panel with his left arm, triggered the arrest signal with his right and threw the *Gunnlaugur* into full reverse. "Preed! Preed, get up here!"

## Resignation / *Ifryylhedh*

Henry awoke just after 1400 hours. He hadn't the ambition to return to his residence to seek a few hours sleep following his nearly twenty-hour marathon day spread over two continents/divided between the Admiralty and the Federation Council. He'd contacted his wife after that morning's briefing and explained he'd rest at the office and see her for dinner that evening at *Scoma's*—he'd made them a reservation for 1830.

In a small antechamber off the conference area in his office there was a comfortable cot and a trim sonic shower and head. The respite room was not dissimilar to the Academy rooms senior cadets were furnished with; small but functional. Henry didn't often make use of the chamber, opting rather to sleep in his own bed whenever possible, but the exhaustion had hit him like a wall, and he was grateful for the convenience.

He had a brief shower and changed into a fresh uniform. There were always two fresh uniforms stowed in the respite room, should the need arise. As he checked his reflection in the small mirror above the recessed sink next to the sonic shower, he looked over his shoulder and out the small circular porthole in the wall above the head. It was still raining.

Dressed and somewhat refreshed, Admiral Henry Wallace, Starfleet Commander-in-Chief, stepped out of his modest den and into the dull grey light of day. The conference table was still littered with the collection of PADDs the morning's briefing had demanded. Henry looked at the clutter and sighed. The Cardassians were being far too active out at Alpha 441 and the Klingons were still ghosting patrols along the Neutral Zone. None of it really mattered though. The focus was on Andoria and the disposition of the *Fury* and *Meni T'Pra*. At a time when the Fleet should be concentrating its newly replenished resources on the questionable goings-on in the Romulan Empire—they were mobilizing to liberate personnel from member worlds.

Ludicrous.

He moved to his desk, where the classified files concerning the El Aurian incident were still in his personal server. The President had said things were in motion and very soon he would be expected to tactfully resign...it occurred to him, and not for the first time, that retirement might not be such a bad thing in the end after all.

## Exposition / *Lyrr-t'ddreen*

Svetlana could not hide her delight in hearing that in less than a year she'd managed to rise in rank from lieutenant to full commander. She managed to hold her body still as the admiral slowly took a seat behind her desk, but there was no way she could not smile at the news.

"I'm pleased you're happy, Commander," the admiral said in a flat tone as she made herself comfortable in her large office chair.

"Yes ma'am, very much so. Thank you, ma'am." Svetlana drew three quick breaths to regain her emotional control. She'd spent weeks learning intensive emotion-related self-regulation techniques when she was first recruited to join Deployment Resources on Earth. The last thing she wanted to do was make Admiral Bautlin doubt her decision.

The admiral cracked and offered Svetlana a slight smile and beckoned her to approach and take a seat.

"There's a classified briefing file in the main computer for you. Now that you've addressed our uplink needs, take the time to review the file and be prepared to return to Starfleet Headquarters with me in twenty hours."

Todorokov sat down across the desk from the admiral. The brilliant smile had vanished. "I had some time while I was waiting for the relay confirmation...you wish me to encode a field mimic module and conceal it within the Chief of Operation's secure planetary data server?" Svetlana had only managed to read a quarter of the operational brief that had been prepared for her, but her mind was already hard at work as to how she might accomplish such a preposterous task.

"Your enthusiasm is appreciated, Svetlana. I would ask that you take the time to review the entire file before getting too far ahead in your planning though." Bautlin switched on her desktop terminal and reviewed her timelines.

"Of course, Admiral." Commander Todorokov paused, holding back a flurry of questions which had occurred to her concerning what she'd read so far.

Bautlin confirmed that Captain Demby would have 93 prepped and ready for a return trip to Earth in just over twenty hours. The new sensor net deployed throughout the Sol System was essentially blind to Section 31's small fleet. Even the heavy cruiser *N12* was invisible to the net. Still, in order to approach either Earth, or Spacedock unnoticed, 93 would be best to make her approach to within transporter range by the far side of the moon to obscure any possible visual pickups.

"Go on Commander, please." Maureen switched her terminal off. She had no doubt the blonde officer seated before her would be able to absorb the pertinent information and code something appropriately effective in the time allotted.

"Sorry, ma'am...it's just, I happened to notice that we are getting a live feed from Admiral Wallace's office...surely..."

The admiral drew a bemused breath and smiled slightly. "Our business from here-on-out will be with Admiral T'Chou. The C-in-C will be stepping down shortly."

A cold wave of shock washed over Todorokov like ice water, but she maintained her composure. The signal the other operatives were monitoring from Wallace's office was a secure, simple, subspace transmission. Svetlana deduced that someone, possibly Admiral Bautlin herself, had managed to plant an old-fashioned '*bug*' somewhere Wallace didn't suspect. With a secure link with the LSC data stream and this '*bug*' there was no foreseeable benefit to any further surveillance. The risk of discovery far outweighed any potential benefit, but...

"Stepping down? Then T'Chou will become the new C-in-C?" Svetlana had just pushed the question past her lips when the sudden, light and remarkably young sounding giggle that erupted from the admiral, startled her once again.

"Oh heavens, let's hope not! No, no Jos...er, sorry, Svetlana. No. T'Chou is a useful idiot, nothing more. Read the file and you'll see I'm only asking for a short-term program. Four weeks operational time, no more." The admiral stood.

A passive transference multiplexer would be much simpler to code than something permanent. A small wave of relief crashed deep

within Svetlana's extraordinary mind. Then more questions began forming. She watched as Admiral Bautlin walked around her desk to escort her out of the office.

“Read the brief, commander. Go get your uniforms sorted, then read the brief. We leave in twenty hours. I need you ready, clear?”

She rose and allowed the admiral to walk her towards the door panel. “Yes, ma'am, clear.”

“Ha! T'Chou, C-in-C? Can you imagine? My God!”

The door hushed open, and Svetlana stepped out into the corridor.



**NAR 1331**

**TRICORDER**

## Soup Course / *Gletten Hsouh*

Hot plomeek soup was gingerly ladled from twin tureens with wide brims etched with impressions of the Imperial crest interspersed with the angular familial crest of the Praetor himself. As the dinner's honoured guest, Admiral Dar was served first. Only after the admiral's bowl was filled did the young, black-uniformed porter at the opposite end of the table ladle a bowlful of soup into Tikot Ketor's bowl. The first black-clad porter moved gracefully from the admiral's bowl to Commander Veeta's, followed by another porter trailing with the tureen. In lockstep the second set of porters glided from Ketor's place to Commander Tenaj's. Sohon and the Reman would be served last.

Caithlin waited patiently while the bowls were all filled with piping hot beige soup. She noted the slightly overpowering scent of *viinerine*...or perhaps it was the odour of the Reman quaffing across the table. She glanced down at the delicate porcelain bowl and as the young Romulan who'd first served her *brother* finished serving Sohon. She took up her spoon. Once the admiral had taken her first morsel the others began spooning up their own plomeek.

The flavour of the soup was too rich for Caithlin's palate. Whoever Ketor had chosen to prepare the evening's meal had taken liberties with the spices. She noted the two commanders and Sohon ate their soup in the dignified, restrained, yet efficient manner as befit members of the Imperial Navy. The Reman slurped and clattered its spoon between bowl and fang-riddled mouth like an animal.

Like herself, Ketor had taken a single, obligatory spoonful, but was not interested in eating. She gently lay her polished silver spoon across the breadth of her porcelain bowl to indicate she was finished with the soup and watched as Ketor did the same. From either end of the chamber the young porters approached silently and removed the dishes. The others continued to eat.

"The urgent business that called you away earlier Colonel Ketor, anything that should concern me?" Caithlin asked as she sat up straight in her chair and brought her hands together in front of her. The polished

stone table was still warm from where her uneaten bowl of soup had rested.

Ketor drew a short breath and placed his own hands palms down on the table in front of himself. “One of our outermost sensor markers registered a contact.”

“Nothing serious, I trust?” Caithlin could smell the distinct odour of *doakhi* weed in the offing and noticed the young porters were preparing to serve the second course.

“It was an intermittent contact, there one instant, gone the next...”

“Ssiebh, the outer marker?!” Commander Tenaj let his spoon clink against the bottom of his now empty bowl.

Ketor kept his eyes locked on the admiral. It was the first time in twenty cycles anyone had addressed him by rank. Ketor addressed the commander of the Warbird *V’Dara*...

“I am no longer a colonel, Commander Tenaj. It was an intermittent contact. We’re monitoring all markers, and we are prepared. We do have other Warbirds capable of responding.”

Dar watched the young commander’s face contort at Ketor’s words. Her *brother* may not care to claim any official military superiority over the Imperial officers, but he was certainly respected. As the porters wheeled out a trolley with the salad course, she decided the discussion about the *Vejul* could wait a few moments.

“Was this a vessel of some kind, colonel?” Despite what he’d insisted to Tenaj, Ketor was still a *ssiebh* with the Tal Shiar. Like herself, his obligations to the Empire persisted despite his sworn vows to the Zhat Vash. The Zhat Vash after all, was the zenith of the Tal Shiar.

“It would seem doubtful, Enriov Dar,” responded Ketor in a flat tone.

Caithlin noticed Commander Tenaj shifting slightly in his seat and she turned to him and asked for a military perspective.

“Admiral, with respect...” Tenaj looked from Dar to Ketor and back to the admiral. “The outer markers were deployed beyond the debris field to cover the approach the Federation intruder had used to creep into our space.”

“I see. These markers then are reliable?”

“The gravitons make any sensor returns in this system suspect, admiral. We should not be dismissive of any such contact though. The Federation may attempt to attack again...”

“Commander Tenaj!” Ketor shut his mouth quickly, biting his lower lip. He’d not intended to snap quite so viciously. He bristled slightly and demurely withdrew his hands to his lap.

The porters were just about to begin serving the salad, but the young men had frozen in place when Ketor had exploded. Veeta sat silently in his seat, respectfully waiting to hear what Ketor had to say. Sub-Commander Sohon had kicked her chair a few centimeters back from the table to give herself clearance to protect the admiral, if necessary. Mivik simply growled and barked in low tones towards the young men dressed in black—he wanted another bowl of soup; he didn’t eat salad.

Ketor deftly let the tip of his tongue braise the plush of his lower lip to see if he could taste blood. He’d not broken the skin. He cast his eyes towards his lap for a second, drew a breath, then continued in a more measured tone. The young porters began laying out the salad plates in the same manner as they’d served the soup.

“Commander Tenaj, the admiral is aware of the particulars of the attack. I assure you. We are monitoring the situation, and I have Commanders Ariekh and Nendixa on alert just in case. The *Valai* and the *Valmaika* are quite capable of responding to any issue.”

A small porcelain plate of *doakhi* weed salad appeared in front of Enriov Dar and not two seconds later an identical porcelain plate of heavily oiled and over-seasoned salad was resting in front of Ssiebh Ketor. Slender two-pronged Romulan salad forks, embossed with the twin worlds of Romulus and Remus on their fanning handles were also provided. From a concealed side port where the tureens and salad trolley had appeared, came yet another young Romulan outfitted in a black porter’s uniform. He carried another porcelain bowl of steaming soup on a tray for Mivik.

“Are these Warbirds not required to work at the Eise Lattice, ssiebh?” Caithlin made herself look extra sincere as the porter served Sohon and Mivik seized his second bowl of soup.

Tikot brought his hands back up to the table. Nobody could eat until the admiral first sampled the course. Mivik held his soup in both hands and growled.

“We lost a panel earlier owing to...” Ketor glanced at Tenaj quickly. “Critical malfunction. It will take Mivik’s people some time to forge a new one. Our *Horo*-class Warbirds are now free to address outstanding maintenance issues and patrol our field of operation.”

Caithlin sighed, drew up her fork slowly and lingered for a moment as the sound of the Reman’s rolling stomach gurgled audibly from the end of the table. She was about to take a bite of salad when her *brother* continued...

“Of course, of greater import might be the disposition of our newest *Horo*, yes?”

Commander Veeta lost interest in his salad and looked from Ketor to Dar in confused silence. What did his ship, the *Vejul*, have to do with anything?

## Fleet Deployment / *Galae Mos'hemaera*

Xao rolled over in a heap of sheets and bedding and snorted his eyes open. His wife, Yumi, had complained about his snoring for years. Snoring himself awake had become a common occurrence. He struggled to free his arms from a twisted blanket and kicked one of Yumi's decorative pillows to the floor with a nearly spasmodic twitch of his left leg. The pudgy, middle-aged man hauled himself to a sitting position and rubbed the sleep from his eyes with the soft palms of both hands. He'd set his alarm for...wait...had he set his alarm?

T'Chou pushed himself out of bed in a panic. He was only supposed to have a few hours nap and then get back to HQ. The bedroom was nearly pitch-black. He'd had the windows shuttered the moment he transported in after the morning's disastrous briefing so he could get right to sleep. Yumi was out for the day with Rosa and Gladys Knot, Thom's widow and daughter.

"Computer, time?!"

A soft pair of chirps signaled the apartment's computer had acknowledged the request and on the wall opposite the raised queen-sized bed, the time appeared in bright blue digits: 1455 hours. Xao cursed quietly wrestled himself free of a pink Afghan throw. The apartment was provided by Starfleet, but Yumi had gone out of her way to make the space feel like 'home'. The Acting Chief of Fleet Operations called for the shutters to be retracted and found himself gazing out across the San Francisco skyline. It was still raining.

The uniform he'd shed earlier was strewn on the floor. He padded to the bedroom's double-wide closet and pulled a fresh white undershirt over his naked upper torso. It was one of the new-style uniform shirts—no irritating collar. There was no time for a shower. Xao grabbed a fresh pair of pants and fumbled into them before snagging the only clean maroon tunic hanging on his side of the wardrobe. He'd need socks, but first...

"Computer, tie-in to secure server SFCOO-00107-B-13."

On the wall opposite the bed the bright blue clock (now reading: 1505 hours) disappeared and a single word followed by a blinking cursor appeared: WORKING|...WORKING|...WORKING|...

Xao jammed his white shirt into the top of his slightly too snug uniform pants as the apartment's computer worked to establish a link with the office. He was just adjusting his seat when the face of a bright young man appeared on the bedroom wall: "Starfleet Command Secure, how may I direct...?"

The young man on comms duty stopped speaking and for a moment and just stared at the sight of Xao T'Chou jamming his hand down the back of his pants, barefoot, soft belly hanging over his pants and maroon tunic hanging open...

"Damn it, Yumi!" Xao stood up and quickly did up his tunic. Yumi had been chatting with Rosa and had left the bedroom's comms unit on visual.

"Admiral T'Chou?"

"Just put me through to whoever the hell is minding my office, specialist," growled Xao as he pulled at his uniform and tried not to look completely embarrassed.

The wall went blank and Xao moved towards the settings control pad mounted below the flush mounted two-way screen. Before he could manually tick the visual broadcast feature off, another face suddenly appeared.

"Admiral?"

Xao sighed in relief. "Donaldson, thank goodness!"

Commander Donaldson was seated in the office at the primary workstation. She was wearing a fresh uniform. Her hair was pulled back and piled high in a loose bun.

"I thought I told you to go home?" Xao pulled his tunic closed and fastened his belt. He was mortified.

"You did sir, I took two hours and then got back to work."

Xao exhaled and stifled the urge to simply scream his frustration away. Of course, if Donaldson had been in the office for a few hours, his own tardiness might not have been noticed. Now dressed in all but his socks and boots, Admiral T'Chou focussed on what needed addressing.

“Has anyone been asking for me, Commander?”

Donaldson shook her head. No one had called-in for the admiral specifically. It was understood that both the Acting Chief of Ops and the C-in-C would have limited availability for the remainder of the day owing to their heavy schedule the previous twenty-plus hours.

“Nothing from Admiral Wallace, then?”

“No, sir. Admiral Wallace isn’t taking appointments. He’s been in his office since this morning.”

“Fine then, it’s fine, uh, the...the present Fleet deployment status?”

“Sir, this may be a secure channel; however, I will not disseminate sensitive information to an unsecure civilian terminal...”

“Right, right, you’re right, Commander. Forgive me, I’m still quite tired. Tell me then, uh...*grab-and-go*? Still clear?” Xao began looking around the floor for where he’d left his socks. It just occurred to him that Yumi had mentioned the apartment’s laundry processor had gone offline at some point yesterday, another indignity to be suffered.

Lisa kept her face blank as she watched the Chief of Ops begin pacing barefoot around his unkempt bedroom. The philosophy she’d had to quickly adopt since being assigned to Admiral T’Chou was to respect the rank, even if she found it difficult to respect the man. She wasn’t about to jeopardize operational security. T’Chou’s attempt to *cleverly* ask about the strategic readiness of the task force preparing to invade Andorian space to liberate the *Fury* and *Meni T’Pra*, did not impress her.

“Status unchanged, sir.”

Xao spotted the toe of one of his socks poking out from a crumpled trouser leg on the floor just out of view of the comms panel. “Uh huh...uh, what...what have I got today exactly, then?”

“We have a brief to file concerning the Council Session. That needs to be done before 1800. Admiral Sellers will be copying his updates sometime this afternoon so we can...” Lisa caught herself short and stopped before getting specific about the logistics of coordinating the *Oberth* arm of the Fleet. “So, we can understand what’s taking place there. Unless anything unexpected comes up, there’s just tomorrow’s lunch with Admiral Bautlin to prep for.”

Xao sighed with quiet relief. His fear was Wallace would be demanding something, but the C-in-C had gone dark. Likely the old man was too tired to kick up a fuss. There really wasn't a lot to do to prep for Maureen, she usually came to such meetings bringing him useful pieces of information and helpful suggestions; truly, she was a good friend. Now sure that his second sock must be concealed somewhere within his dirty pants, Xao settled on a course of action.

"I'll tell you what, Donaldson: you hold the fort. I'll put together that brief from my home terminal, no issue filing remote, uh...put Sellers' stuff on my server and I'll be by in, oh...two hours? We'll get dinner in the Officer's Mess and whatever we need for tomorrow can sort itself, good?" Yumi would be gone until the evening anyway.

## Chance Meeting / *Daendle Tempaeti*

(Three days earlier.)

“Chief, what can you tell me about their tactical status?” Their own access to the saucer’s limited tactical systems did not inspire confidence.

Rhupp passed his left hand across the smooth panel directly in front of him. The saucer’s sensors went to work scanning the approaching vessels. A window appeared on Tagir’s terminal, and a series of bullet points began to appear in rapid succession.

“Neither the tugs, nor that little freighter are running with shields. The tugs all appear to be the same design. Heavy ion engines. Massive tractor emitters. Incapable of faster than light travel. All three have forward facing focused energy emitters...”

“Phasers, or disruptors?” Shorh kept his focus on the small freighter.

“Lasers, sir. Likely for salvage activities.” Tagir advanced the readout his station had generated and continued... “The freighter does have an older warp plant. Minimal shields. Two forward facing launch bays...”

“Photon torpedoes?”

“No, likely some kind of missiles. The bays aren’t shielded. They’re glorified release tubes, really. Should I raise our shields?” Tagir had sorted through most of the basic functions of his station over the last few days.

Shorh watched as the three tugs towing the wreck of the *Sheaffe* drew closer and closer to them. Before he could ask for a distance check, or for a channel to be opened, Ensign Dirlo spoke-up.

“The freighter has come to a full stop, thirty-five hundred meters off our ventral bow. The tugs still have control over the *Sheaffe*, their forward momentum is rapidly slowing, seventy-one hundred meters and closing.”

“Thank you, ensign. Hold your position but be ready to move. P’nom, any signals, or scans from them?”

The half-Vulcan communications specialist turned from her section of the long black control terminal and locked eyes with her Andorian captain. Dressed in the vintage red coveralls she looked ridiculously small and young. “Captain, you should see this...”

Shorh pushed himself out of the command chair and moved directly to P’nom’s station at the right end of the long black terminal. A single line of text flashed repeatedly on the young woman’s screens:

DATA CONFIRMED. DOWNLOAD? Y/N.

DATA CONFIRMED. DOWNLOAD? Y/N.

DATA CONFIRMED. DOWNLOAD? Y/N.

“It just came up, sir. I can’t access any other screens.” P’nom glanced around at the spartan grey metal walls and smooth bulkhead panels. The saucer offered nothing in the way of auxiliary controls that they’d been able to find in the week since coming aboard.

“Wha...?! Sir, I just lost my screen as well!” Tagir swiped his hands over his terminal several times, but everyone of his control surfaces matched P’nom’s:

DATA CONFIRMED. DOWNLOAD? Y/N.

DATA CONFIRMED. DOWNLOAD? Y/N.

DATA CONFIRMED. DOWNLOAD? Y/N.

Shorh spun around to look along the black terminal, past Dirlo, to where Tagir was now frantically trying to clear his screens. By contrast to P’nom, Rhupp looked like a Parrises Squares champion in his almost form-fitting red jumper. Teague’s help had been somewhat double-edged thus far.

“Dirlo, do you still have control?” Shorh was standing between Moira at the helm and P’nom. The terminal in front of his helmsman was completely black.

Moira had lost all telemetry readouts. She gently twisted the grip in her right hand and felt a hum run through her from the impulse plant as she throttled-up the saucer’s deuterium flow. She’d learned how to pilot the odd craft over the previous few days and knew they’d be in no danger of engaging the actual impulse engines, so long as she didn’t release the lock controlled through her left-hand grip.

“I...I do have control, sir. No telemetry though, screens are down.”

“Tharay Witch!” Shorh shouted as he stood up straight and took a step back to get a better view of the control terminal.

Tagir, Moira and P’nom all gapped at Shorh, completely lost as to what to do and not understanding the odd curse their Andorian captain had just roared towards the bulkheads.

The longer they hung nose-to-nose with the small collection of alien vessels without communicating or taking charge; the less likely they were to have a positive outcome.

“The Tharay Witch!? The demon that guards the under-ice route to the afterlife. Tharay sh’Zula was once a Queen before the First Age. The tale goes she hoarded so many valuables in life that when her time to die came, the polar winds couldn’t move her across the churning sea and the way was frozen and closed for all. She became a demon all Andorians would have to deal with in order to move on, below the ice...”

Shorh stepped up to his empty seat and checked his own small black status panel...nothing.

“She keeps three chests in her ice water mansion. Two have jewels, one has a curse. You must open each one in a certain order to get through and move on. If you open them in the wrong order, you’re damned for eternity. I think Teague’s ships are the equivalent to Tharay’s chests.”

Shorh sat heavily in his seat and was at a loss as to how best to proceed.

“Sir, while I see your somewhat clumsy analogy; I would point-out that while we had no control over the runabout once we loaded Mr. Teague’s program, we were delivered safely to Yard 39. Once aboard this vessel we agreed to follow the contact course and we have come, fortuitously I might add, upon the very vessel we were seeking in our quest to expose the nefarious actors responsible for the present situation. Surely it would be logical to download whatever it is Mr. Teague’s saucer has locked onto?”

Shorh looked past P’nom and surveyed the long black terminal from her end to Rhupp’s. Nothing had changed.

“Prompt the download, P’nom. Dirlo, stand ready.” Shorh silently prepared for the ice.

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“Preed! Preed, get up here!” Gixr’s voice screamed over the internal speakers in the bowels of *Gunnlaugur’s* empty cargo hold.

Riadir snapped his head up and turned to look at the rusted comms speaker. He’d been coddling a blue intake flashing from one of the storage bins Martein still kept in the empty hold. The flashing was for *Hawk’s* secondary starboard vent port. He knew this because of the shape and because the portside vent port would have been painted yellow. A few random pieces and spare parts were all he had left of his little pod. He could feel *Gunnlaugur’s* primary impulse engine shudder and spin-down...something was very wrong.

Preed tossed the blue flashing he’d been examining back into the grimy bin and ducked through the tight bulkhead hatch to make his way forward. The deck plates below his feet shuddered and he knew the retros were firing. He dashed through the messy living compartment just back of the command deck. He swept a long sprawl of sandy coloured hair out of his eyes with his left hand and grabbed his faded blue and yellow pit jacket from a hook by his bunk with his right.

Sliding his left arm into the left sleeve of his jacket in a single fluid thrust—Preed burst through the narrow opening in the bulkhead which separated the living compartment from where Gixr was frantically working all three of his arms at *Gunnlaugur’s* primary control station. Riadir then thrust his right arm down into the free hanging sleeve and shrugged his well-worn jacket up and across his shoulders with a long-practiced flourish. He was about to demand what Gixr was howling about, when the sight of the alien craft looming above caught his full attention.

“By the Guardians...who are they?!” Riadir moved in behind Gixr’s seat and braced himself against the bulkheads as he peered through the narrow viewport to look at the massive saucer blocking their route.

“I don’t know! They just dropped out of warp! What do they want?!!” Gixr confirmed the retros had arrested their progress and checked to see the relative position of the trailing tugs.

“Have they signalled?” Preed pushed back from Gixr’s station and slowly shuffled backwards until he felt the hard seat at the engineering station bump against the back of his legs. He awkwardly lowered himself into the seat and nearly cracked his head against the rear bulkhead. He couldn’t take his eyes off the ominous saucer.

“I think...I think they’re scanning us...” Gixr’s yellow eyes flashed from the viewport to his primary monitor, to his auxiliary screens. The old freighter was being washed over by waves of benign relay signals.

“Has Marteinn called in?” asked Preed.

Gixr reached ahead of himself with his thoracic arm and toggled up the freighter’s primary relay grid. The small status screen to the left of the young Edosian’s main viewer flickered to life and confirmed *Gunnlaugur* was still tied to the transceivers of each of the three automated tugs. He craned his neck to the right and called back to Riadir: “Link stable...should I? Should I signal the alien?”

“You’re sure Marteinn hasn’t called in?”

“He was working in the automation compartment; he might not even realize the tugs are stopping. Want me to signal him?”

“Who are they!?” Riadir leaned forward and tried to make out any features on the strange saucer.

“I think...” Gixr returned his attention to the viewport and rubbed his eyes with his right hand.

“What? You think what, Gixr!?”

“I think it might be a Starfleet ship.” Gixr swept his right hand up towards the alien and rubbed his long chin with his thoracic hand. His left hand rested pensively on the primary flow regulator.

“Nah, I mean...where’s the rest of it?” Preed squinted out the viewport.

Gixr confirmed the arrest command had been properly received by all three of massive tugs the Scrapers had made their little trio responsible for. The tugs were nearly at a full stop. The wreck was still secure.

“Should I contact Mr. Marteinn?” the Edosian asked again. He was nearly certain they were looking at some sort of Starfleet ship, but he wasn’t going to get into a debate with the fiery Trill pilot over it.

“...no?...No. There’s no point. He can’t do anything from where he is.”

Riadir turned towards the engineering displays and auxiliary controls. They had only a single mercurite rocket aboard and two unreliable launch tubes. Still, if the aliens didn’t make clear what they wanted soon, Preed wanted to have some way to protect their prize. Literally everything was riding on the three odd friends bringing the massive derelict in for salvage. He swept his long hair out of his face again—he badly needed a haircut. He powered on the status panel. *Brain* would be able to offer some...

“Wait a second...” Preed leaned over the back of the engineering terminal to survey the nest of coaxial cables and fibre patch cords.

“What is it!?” Gixr called back as he spotted Preed climbing around.

Gixr pushed himself up and skuttled out from his control station. With all three of his legs braced low and wide, he had no need to steady himself against the bulkheads. A wave of panic was building within his narrow chest. The sight of Preed hunched over the terminal checking basic patch cords was hardly reassuring. Gixr was about to repeat his question when Riadir whipped his head up and spun to face him eye-to-eye.

“Where’s *Brain*!? Gixr, where’s *Brain*?”

Gixr looked past Preed’s wide questioning eyes—to the engineering status panel. The interface screens were blank. Suddenly more than half the systems panels on the command deck were dark and silent.

“*Brain?...Brain?!*” For the first time since boarding the freighter with Riadir and Marteinn at Lothra Minor, the onboard A.I. didn’t respond.

Without the automated assistance of Dannar Mann’s operating system, the prospects of just running *Gunnlaugur* and the three laden tugs safely to their delivery point grew exponentially more difficult.

“I...I don’t understand. *Brain*!?”

Riadir was about to yell at the young Edosian to resume his station when an incoming transmission lit up the grimy communications

relay panel. Preed drew a shaky breath, then nodded at Gixr. The Edosian reached across the back of the chair he'd just clamoured out of and opened a channel...

"Unidentified freighter, this is...Captain Shorh Ch'onithron of the Starship *Virgo*. We mean you no harm. We request a dialogue concerning the vessel you have in tow. Please respond."

Preed sat back down at the engineering station and made one last sweep for the A.I. program Mann had installed more than a cycle ago. *Brain* was gone. He powered the freighter's ancient shield generator and gave Gixr a grim nod.

The young Edosian resumed his seat and settled himself in front of the command deck's small viewscreen. He swept his sharp yellow eyes across all the status panels, secondary screens and sensor readouts to confirm the trio of tugs keyed to *Gunnlaugur's* control, had come to a full and safe stop. They were ninety parsecs from anything. He moved his central hand towards the transmit trigger, passing over the auto-load actuator for the forward missile tubes, and toggled *on*.

"This, uh, this is *Gunnlaugur*. I'm Gixr, hello...?"

# EISN LATTICE



## ***Appetizer / Rhae***

Caithlin took a tentative bite of her cold salad expecting it to be as unpalatable as the soup had been. To her surprise the *doakhi* weed had a lively, acidic dressing which danced on her tongue and stung the inside of her mouth. The sickly-sweet odour had been misleading. The flavour was sharp and pleasing; almost of a tart relish Dar might expect to enjoy at a hunt's feast. The others slowly began eating their own salads as the admiral swallowed her first bite.

Mivik dispensed with the formality of table wear and simply cradled his second bowl of soup in huge claw-like hands and guzzled the spicy sludge hungrily.

Caithlin refrained from speaking her mind concerning the disgusting Reman sharing the evening's feast as she quickly surveyed the small party. Ketor was silently eating, focusing on his salad plate and avoiding eye contact with anyone. Commander Tenaj was playing with his salad using the sharp tines of his long fork as a sort of torture implement. Veeta hadn't touched his appetizer. Dar was sure not to make eye contact with him just yet. Beside her, Sub-Commander Sohon was chewing a mouthful of salad with a content expression on her face. Caithlin noted her protective escort had left a noticeable space between herself and the table to have free access to either of the slim disruptors she wore at her thighs. Dar waited for the younger woman to finish what was in her mouth before leaning slightly in her direction and whispering a quiet instruction.

Sohon nodded her understanding. Without a word she pushed her chair further back from the table and rose in a graceful, fluid motion and paced directly to the outcropping where the porters, dressed in black, stood waiting to collect the salad plates and bring on the entrée.

Mivik belched and lowered his bowl as the young woman in the silver uniform drifted away from the table. He'd never seen disruptors as trim and streamlined as the ones this young girl wore on her belt. He liked them.

“I must say, Colonel, I’ve never had a simple salad dressed so...interestingly.” Caithlin directed her attention to the end of the table where Ketor lay his fork aside his plate and smiled.

“The meal has been especially prepared to compliment the entrée, Enriov. Fresh slaughtered *gax* from the ranges outside T’hak Lat, on Pi.”

“*Gax*? Well, I am in for something of a...” (Mivik burped again and grunted expectantly for the meat course he could now smell on the air.) “...treat. Commander Veeta, you’ve not touched your plate. Please unburden yourself.”

“Thank you, Enriov Dar. May I ask what your presence here has to do with the *Vejul*?” Veeta met the admiral’s eyes for only the briefest of seconds when she invited him to address her, then cast his gaze low as he bowed respectfully once the question had left his lips.

Caithlin had reviewed the Tal Shiar files on all Ketor’s people. Veeta was a widower from the Hartlhei Province in the northern steppes of Romulus’ primary continent. He was eighty cycles old and a career officer. After his wife had died of *Fethraie* fever during an excursion south twenty-five cycles earlier, Veeta had left Romulus for deep space duty and had never returned. He had two grown daughters, neither of whom had married. Cullika, a records clerk for the Hartlhei Ministry of Fealty, and Carika, a data clerk for one of the province’s minor barristers.

She deftly slipped a small mouthful of salad into her mouth and chewed silently for a few seconds. Sohon returned to the table, resumed her seat and offered Dar a subtle nod.

“A reasonable question, Commander. What I am about to share is not to leave this chamber on pain of death.”

Veeta raised his head and settled back in his chair to listen. His salad remained intact in front of him. Tenaj dabbed the corners of his mouth with a silver patterned napkin, then sat back to listen to what the admiral was about to share. At the end of the table Ssiebh Ketor gently rested his long two-pronged fork across his empty plate and offered his undivided attention. Even the Reman seemed to have restrained itself and settled back in its chair to listen. Dar could see her *brother* had

prompted this direct discourse to intentionally allow her to be done with the business as quickly as possible.

The sight of Ketor in the old uniform, sporting the traditional Tal Shiar decoration, pleased her.

“I have come with two specially modified *Keras*-class Warbirds, Commander Veeta. They’ve been equipped with tractor plants of comparable ability to those aboard the *Vejul* and the other *Horo*-class ships presently employed here.”

Mivik leaned towards Ketor at the far end of the table and grumbled something into the colonel’s ear. Tikot responded in the bastardized low tongue of the Remans and the black clad nightmare settled back in its seat, grumbling quietly to itself. Caithlin assumed the beast was complaining that the *gax* was getting cold.

“With respect, Admiral, what has this to do with our Warbirds?” Commander Tenaj leaned forward slightly on his elbows and brought his hands together just in front of his face.

Caithlin’s left eyebrow raised. Sub-Commander Sohon let her own arms hang loosely at her sides—ever at the ready.

Tenaj was a young man, not yet fifty and already a full commander with an impressive action record. He was unmarried, as most of the officers serving in this select Tal Shiar/Imperial Navy venture were. He did have a mother and father still living in the south of Korthre Province in Setrisa City. They were wholly dependent on their Imperial pensions to survive. Tenaj had distinguished himself as an uhlan by outmaneuvering a Tholian Marauder around the moons of Haolii V. The man was a tactician. He worked well with others he trusted; willing to thrust to allow his comrades to retreat and attack from safety. He did this now by pressing Dar directly while the older Veeta sat back and prepared the follow-on salvo.

“These two new ships will replace both the *Votol* and *Vejul*. Their crew of specially trained engineers and service men will secure and crew *Vejul* on her return voyage with me to Romulus.” Dar watched as Tenaj’s face twitched almost imperceptibly. It was Veeta’s turn to rejoin the offensive.

“Romulus? Why would you take the *Vejul* to Romulus? She’s needed here,” ventured Commander Veeta.

Veeta wore his commander's pin on the left side of his silver uniform's raised collar. The decoration was cast in a dull pewter finish which made the pin appear slightly grimy in the dim light of the dining hall. From his place across from Veeta, Tenaj's matching decoration was slightly more reflective. There was a difference of decades between the two commanders and their accoutrements. From where Dar sat the difference between the two men was stark.

"The Praetor requires a new flag ship. The *Tomed*, equipped with our first functional artificial singularity drive has become obsolete. The *Horos* are the way forward. Each of these vessels represent the very best of Romulan engineering. Their drive systems were perfected after cycles studying the Eison Lattice you are all tasked with capping. The Praetor will be seen aboard one of these grand ships."

Veeta drew a long breath and narrowed his eyes. Tenaj leaned forward once again, but when Sub-Commander Sohon shifted in her seat to allow one of her slim disruptors to hang free, he placed both hands on the table and remained silent.

"Practical economic realities mean we do not have any *Horo*-class vessels ready for the Praetor's use currently. For that reason, the *Vejul* will be transported to Romulus."

"Enriov Dar, surely the Praetor can make do with the *Tomed* until a suitable..."

Dar shook her head and Veeta fell silent.

"Very soon the *Tomed* will be engaged in a final mission which will secure our long border with the Federation and give the Empire a tactical advantage unlike any we've ever enjoyed in the centuries long entanglement we've tolerated with the Starfleet and the lesser species of the quadrant."

Ketor stirred slightly in his seat. Sohon had bid the porters to secure the room and remain in the kitchens until summoned. Tikot could feel the pangs of hunger beginning to stir within his own belly and was growing concerned that Mivik might not be able to behave himself for too much longer.

"I would point out, Admiral, we've already suffered at the hands of the Starfleet. Perhaps some other..." Tenaj suddenly felt all eyes

on him, including Veeta's. He let his voice die and cast his glance down to his hands.

"The Starfleet will be in possession of what's left of *Tomed* gentlemen. They will believe that the secret of our forced-singularity drive has miraculously been proffered up to them. The *Horos* are the future of our Fleet. They will expand our Empire a hundred-fold and once this rather time-sensitive operation is complete, we will have a free hand to make any future for ourselves we dare envision."

"How?" Veeta's natural curiosity was peaked. The admiral was making a political speech and while he valued propaganda as much as any Romulan, he wanted to know exactly why he was to surrender his ship.

"A cataclysm of change has been arranged. A cataclysm that will have repercussions for both the Empire and the Federation. I can't go into detail, but the *Tomed* will ignite that cataclysm. Our borders will be completely secure from Starfleet and even Klingon incursions."

"Starfleet and Klingon?" muttered Tenaj.

"The Klingons will become the Federation's burden; neutered, impotent through the bonds they chose to forge with the humans. We have more important matters to attend to. So, let us conclude this conversation and agree to secure the *Vejul* tomorrow morning. Now, let's enjoy some *gax*. PORTERS!"

## **Brinksmanship / Jhoi**

*Captain Grant Baker, personal log. The Andorians have dispatched several vessels from the surface equipped with high frequency subspace monitoring equipment. As previously stated, the concern was that the Andorians were monitoring our ship-to-shore communications with Starfleet as well as our ship-to-ship relays with the USS Meni T'Pra. It seems now that we greatly underestimated the Imperial Guard.*

*Two older Raiders have been patrolling between both the Meni T'Pra and Fury for several hours now. Both Chief Engineer Kelly and Commander Syrk believed these older vessels equipped with broadband monitoring equipment were simply listening in on our communications; however, we've just now realized how wrong we were.*

*At 1845 hours we received what for all intents and purposes appeared to be a priority message from Starfleet Command instructing me to transport to the surface with my senior staff to commence face-to-face talks with the Andorian Chancellor to secure safe passage out of Andorian space. It would appear Commander Tchullmar and the officers aboard the Meni T'Pra received the same transmission. Mr. Syrk monitored a radiation spike from the Meni T'Pra and confirmed that several ship-to-surface transports had been executed in short order.*

*The directive received seemed incongruent with the thinking shared so far by Fleet Command. The orders appeared genuine, but both Mr. Syrk and myself were skeptical and we agreed we would seek confirmation—monitored subspace frequencies be damned. Before we got the chance to respond, Mr. Syrk noted a fluctuation in the Meni T'Pra's Chambers Coil—which quickly led to the discovery that the orders were in fact generated and sent by the Imperial Guard.*

*Mr. Kelly had been working on a ploy to simulate a core breach aboard the Meni T'Pra which was to clear out our Andorian babysitters and allow both ships to warp out. With*

*communications severely compromised there's no way to attempt that now. Mr. Kelly isn't familiar enough with Fury's new reactor to attempt such a ruse with this newer ship. As things stand, it appears the Meni T'Pra is now without a command crew and any thoughts of both vessels working together to break away...are well and truly dashed.*

*We've received two more priority messages instructing us to essentially surrender Fury. The last order was signed by the Federation President herself—our Andorian counterparts in the Guard seem to have developed a sense of humour...*

## Archives / Irrhfaihrs

Henry replicated a hot cup of sludge which the latest Starfleet engineers had certified as coffee. The admiral winced as he took a short pull from the simple grey ceramic mug which had formed only a second and a half before the swirling particles of hot liquid within the wall mounted unit. The mug and limited variety of other crockery the unit could produce had been patterned from the set Henry favoured in his own home. As far as ceramics went, the replicator did a superb job. The coffee was another matter.

The nap had been necessary following the nearly twenty-one-hour marathon he'd been on, but now the trick would be getting back into a proper rhythm so he could function properly tomorrow. It was late afternoon. The briefing earlier that morning had covered the most pressing issues concerning the situation over Andoria and the rest of the Admiralty had been prepared to operate independently until the next day's brief. Henry took another sip. It tasted awful, but the caffeine was already starting to surge along his bloodstream.

The terminal on his desk was powered on and several new updates were available for his review.

Admiral Sellers had dispatched a flight of *Oberth*-class science vessels to monitor the conflagration of the Umoth Nebula. The official dispatches now referred to the area as "the Badlands". While Henry was aware of the origins of the massive field of plasma storms—the official line was *Starfleet was unclear as to the cause of the calamity and had dispatched science vessels to research and monitor the situation*. The *Oberth* Fleet fell under Sellers' command and with a sublime mind for strategy, the admiral in charge of Starfleet Science had positioned no fewer than eight ships within easy monitoring distance of Alpha 441. For the time being the Science Division was the tip-of-the-spear when it came to monitoring the curious Cardassian movements on the fringes of Federation space.

An updated copy of *Grab-and-Go*, the tactical plan to liberate the stranded *Fury* and *Meni T'Pra* was also awaiting Admiral Wallace's attention. The task force remained on station, but there had been no

direct communication with either of the ships in orbit above Andoria. Even the most hawkish admirals within the joint Security/Operations planning group were doubtful of a casualty-free outcome. The fact that Thom's body and Eldridge and Captain Evengii would be left in the hands of the Andorians should *Grab-and-Go* proceed, was enough to sour Wallace on green-lighting the op.

Henry placed the ceramic mug beside the pegged service bar Maureen Bautlin had *gifted* him. The terminal updated in real time before his eyes. A brief from Operations. Henry opened the file and took a seat. A detailed report of the Fleet's deployment across two quadrants appeared. For all the new builds launched during the 'Upgrade' it boggled Henry's mind to think of how scant their coverage still was. Most of the "heavy" assets (*Mirandas* and *Excelsior*-class starships) were on patrol along the Federation/Klingon border and several areas of interest skirting the shared Neutral Zone between the Federation/Klingon and Romulan Star Empire.

There were four new *Constellation*-class cruisers within rapid recall distance of Earth. Two were presently being outfitted with modules at Utopia Planitia and the other two were proceeding to different deep space assignments at low warp. Henry ran his finger along the screen and noted each of the vessels' names and registry numbers. They didn't mean anything to him. He slowly scrolled down the list of deployments...the *Victory* was eight parsecs outside of Archer IV. The list was neat, up-to-date and comprehensive. Clearly the work of Commander Donaldson, thought Henry to himself as he was about to close the file...

...two ships were listed as inactive. The *Brisbane*, a first-generation *Miranda* and the *USS Mississauga*, the third *Constellation* to be put into service. Both were in Space Dock undergoing repairs to their drive systems. Thom had kept Henry in the loop on these two ships. One had serious fatigue in her reaction chamber and required a new core and the *Constellation* had developed a fault in her impulse plant which had baffled the minds at TPD. Henry frowned. He'd have words with Hibiki about the *Mississauga*. If TPD couldn't fix the engine plant they'd better just replace the unit altogether and get the ship back online.

The brief concluded with updates on the first *Excelsior*-class ship TPD was responsible for building. Construction of the *Nogura* had been delayed by an estimated six weeks. Henry didn't bother opening the detailed file on the issues afflicting what would become the replacement for *USS Isadore*. Hibiki had assured him TPD could manage taking over the NNEC load; it was starting to look like his old friend had bitten off more than he could chew.

The Yards at Rigel VII were on schedule to deliver three new *Mirandas* by year's end. Henry was pleased that the NNEC infrastructure continued to operate even in the absence of Dannar Teague. Still, the need for starships was far more immediate than projections and delays might allow (of equal concern was severe personnel shortage across the fleet). The Romulan question was still very much up-in-the-air and the Cardassian maneuvers at the opposite end of the Federation were a growing concern.

The President had stated the Romulans were not going to be a concern for much longer... Henry switched off his terminal and gently slid his mug of coffee away. It was nearly 1815 hours. He had dinner reservations for 1830.

The grey rainy sky above San Francisco Bay was growing dim. Thom was dead. The Vulcans and Andorians were draining the Fleet's resources away from external concerns and the growing political unrest was rapidly blinding the Council itself to the threats growing at every corner of the Federation. The President had penned him in. Maureen Bautlin and her damned Section 31...

Henry pushed himself up from behind his desk. His eyes were locked on the small silver decoration Bautlin had suggested he *put on*. There were things moving behind the scenes, controlling not only the President and the Council, but the Fleet itself...controlling him. Wallace balled his right hand into a fist and for just a second, wanted very much to smash the hateful silver pin with the three red hash marks.

He sighed and flexed his right hand open and closed three times. Anger wasn't the answer. He had a duty. Thom was dead, but Thom died while seeing to his duty. Wallace would be damned if he failed in seeing out his own duty. He'd poured over the confidential files related to the El Aurian incident...Bautlin's suggestion.

Hostile cybernetic creatures possessed of baffling technology driven to absorb living organisms and retrofit alien technology to augment their own.

The files were heavily redacted. The surviving El Aurians had been scattered to the furthest Federation outposts and colonies where they'd been sworn to secrecy concerning the creatures who'd driven them from their home system. There were a handful of strategic suggestions a small group of experts had cobbled together. Some obscure reference to another classified incident even Henry couldn't access concerning a battle at the close of the Klingon War. Most alarmingly there was a notation referencing a pre-Federation Starfleet report concerning an incident in the Arctic—an incident Ambassador Sestrick had mentioned but failed to find any evidence of.

Henry powered down his terminals and locked his personal computer before shutting the office lights off. He was tired. Everything had become tedious and draining. He watched the rain run down the large windows at the far end of his office where the conference table sat empty.

Ten minutes later, Admiral Wallace along with Commander Dazgin were on their way to meet Mrs. Wallace for dinner.



## Digestifs / Ddiffli

The *delvan* pudding had been a sticky-sweet surprise for Admiral Dar. It had been a favourite of hers from childhood.

“I must say Nelohk, your chef out did himself with that splendid entrée, and the *delvan* pudding was very nearly divine.” Caithlin reclined on the plush grey *chez* in her quarters aboard the scout ship she’d customized for her personal use.

Nelohk Ketor drained the last of the pale blue ale from his fluted glass and savoured the warm, spicy flavour as the potent alcohol ran down his esophagus and mixed with the rich meal he’d just enjoyed. The entrée had been served and consumed in silence. The *gax* had been perfectly braised and roasted.

“I’m gratified you enjoyed the meal, Thehau.”

Tikot had invited the admiral to his personal suite for a digestif and some private conversation, but Enriov Dar wasn’t comfortable surrounded by Remans in a Reman facility. She had insisted they retire to the *Vollo*. Sohon stood guard in the corridor just behind the closed door.

“I was somewhat surprised that Veeta so easily surrendered his command, *sister*.” Ketor moved to sit opposite the admiral in a comfortable grey armchair. The living area of the admiral’s suite was small, but luxurious compared to the stark warren of caves he’d lived in for decades.

“Commander Veeta is a loyal Romulan. He is aware of his duty.”

“His duty, or the threat of the Tal Shiar?” Ketor adjusted himself slightly and glanced around the small cabin. Aside from the *chez*, the armchair, a low ebonite table between two and a matching credenza, the room was void of furnishings.

“Just so, *brother*. The uniform inspires a certain earnest desire for compliance and overt expressions of loyalty to the Empire. You cut rather a fine figure in your own uniform tonight. I gather your men have never seen you in yours?” She sipped her own glass of ale slowly.

“They are aware that I’m attached to the Tal, though tonight was the first time they’ve seen me in any uniform.” He badly wanted a second glass of ale.

“So, they don’t know you’re Zhat Vash, then?”

“Our Order is but a whisper. That is our strength. They know that they are to follow my instructions. Their obedience is enough.”

“Obedience, is it? What of the Reman filth? I cautioned you fifteen cycles ago about letting those dangerous animals become ingrained here...and yet?”

“Mivik and his people are essential to the success of this project, *sister*. I will not commit mass murder because you feel Remans are disposable and easily replaced.”

“Remans are tools. They are easily replaced, *brother*.” Caithlin cradled the half-full glass of ale in her hands and smiled at her *brother*. They’d had this discussion many times and yet Ketor could still not see the Remans for what they were. Changing the subject, she purred: “Veeta very much wishes to join the ranks of the Tal.”

“Still, he acquiesced with rather scant details concerning the *Vejul*.”

Dar finished her ale. Then rose and refilled both glasses. “I don’t think Commander Veeta’s acquiescence is really what you’re interested in, Nelohk. Is it?”

Ketor gulped his second ale and savoured the cordial, velvety liquid as it played on his taste buds and a pleasant warmth slowly bloomed behind his ears. “Perhaps not. You spoke of a plan to neutralize the Starfleet and contain the Klingons?”

“You know what came through the Eison Lattice. Would it surprise you to hear that *they* appeared on the human home world more than a century ago?”

Ketor closed his eyes and for just a fraction of a second the Admonition flared behind his eye lids. He shook his head and swallowed another mouthful of ale.

“In their polar region. They discovered two cybernetic creatures. There were deaths and a pursuit...the earth men managed to destroy a modified vessel the creatures had stolen.”

“Your husband told you this?”

“Nearly forty cycles ago at Xahea, at the close of the Federation/Klingon War, the humans battled a synthetic intelligence they dubiously called *Control*.” She left the question about St. John Talbot unanswered. “Thirty some cycles ago, a few cycles before AK-gva was destroyed, we tracked an immense energy field which appeared on the fringes of the Klingon Empire. Do you recall?”

“I was assigned to internal affairs on Romulus. I recall the concern the Committee had regarding the intruder. It destroyed a flight of Klingon warships before...”

“Before entering Federation space, where it destroyed a massive communications hub and made a direct approach to Earth itself. At the heart of that phenomenon was a synthetic, living machine.” Dar paused and waited to hear anything Ketor might have to say. He sat silently, wholly fixed on her. “Eighteen cycles ago the Starfleet intercepted an energy ribbon on the fringes of the Sol System. They rescued a handful of refugees fleeing some holocaust in the Delta Quadrant. Humans have been flirting with the very *evil* we are sworn to defeat for more than a century. They meddle and provoke and foster what the Admonition has warned generations of our sisters and brothers will be the end of all life, everywhere.”

“What does the seizure of our Warbird have to do with any of this?” Ketor could feel the ale inebriating his senses slowly.

“I’ve learned a great deal about humans. Their drive to explore...”

Ketor leaned forward and blurted: “Humans are weak, pathetic, disease-prone tiny creatures! They live half as long and are slaves to their twisted notions of individuality! What has this to do with the Lattice, or the Admonition!?”

“I read your report concerning the interrogation of...Arthur Bradley, was it? Humans are frail; yet their strengths are incalculable.”

“Did your husband send that Starfleet ship to wreak havoc here?” Ketor was leaning forward in the chair with both hands digging into the plush arms savagely. The ale had loosened his inhibitions.

“I have worked with a diplomat, a man called Nompel, to arrange an event which will guarantee our security here until your task is done. Share this with no one...”

“The *Tomed* will be destroyed. It will wipe out a Federation colony, or significant outpost. The Federation will seize the wreckage. With dead citizens in one hand, and the remains of *Tomed* in the other, the Federation will demand compensation, and a treaty will be signed. We will formally recognize sovereign Federation borders and will vow not to cross them. They will vow not to develop or implement cloaking technology. The Neutral Zone will be greatly expanded, and a non-aggression clause will be endorsed by both sides. We will have leave to attend to more pressing matters.

“The Praetor will need to show our enemies a glimpse of our strength—the *Vejul*. They’ll eagerly leave us in peace; not wishing to test an unseen fleet of *Horo*-class Warbirds. You’ll continue this work. The Praetor will be free to modernize the Fleet and secure new territories in unclaimed space.

“We will push our frontiers towards the Delta Quadrant and fortify the Empire against the coming *evil*.”

Ketor sank back into the chair. “Evil?”

“Nelohk, the transmission from inside the Lattice originated somewhere in the Delta Quadrant. The cybernetic creatures the humans discovered on their world a century ago transmitted a homing message towards the Delta Quadrant. The massive energy field which cut through Klingon space and on towards Earth was projected to have come from the Delta Quadrant. The refugees and the bizarre energy ribbon, both came from the Delta Quadrant. I can’t speak to the specifics of the battle of Xahea; however, I would speculate some Delta Quadrant connection to be likely.”

“The Admonition warns us of a coming evil. The end of everything...”

“An evil many in our Order feel will surge at us from the Delta Quadrant. It is time to fortify the Empire, *brother*. It is time to build and prepare. If there were time, we’d have a fleet of new Warbirds at the ready, but we don’t. We need the limited resources we have at hand to stave off our traditional adversaries and secure the Empire. Do you understand?”

Ketor considered all that had been said and slowly touched the small black triangle pinned to his old uniform. “This man, Nompel?”

“A politico seeking redemption. A go-between with a useful contact within the Starfleet’s analogous version of the Tal Shiar. He’ll be silenced when it’s time.”

“I see...” His *sister* obviously wasn’t going to discuss her human husband, whom Ketor knew was a member of this *‘analogous version of the Tal Shiar’*.

“It was only a matter of time until the graviton wave attracted the attention of our enemies. The Praetor and the Senate did all they could to protect this site. The Klingons were easily provoked. They pulled their Federation allies into a meaningless buildup of forces at the far end of the Empire while you worked. Other stratagems were employed and greater diversions at the far end of the quadrant were arranged at some expense in latinum to further stretch our enemy’s resources; but we’ve delayed and diverted all we can. Our reserves are spent.”

Ketor slowly rose from his seat. He had to accept Dar’s word for the goings on beyond Ak-hyi.

“The men aboard the *Keras*-class ships will transfer to the *Vejul* in the morning. I will take my leave then...but I’ll see to it a case of proper ale is left in your quarters, *brother*.” ...*and the Reman situation will be brought to a head somehow*. Dar didn’t bother saying aloud.

## Bluffing / *Ta taeresam*

(Three days earlier.)

The bridge seemed to vibrate for a second as P'nom initiated the requested download. Before Shorh could regret his decision to allow his young communications officer to blindly respond to the mysterious prompt, the lighting level rose by three lumens. The long black terminal shared by all three of Shorh's people suddenly populated with graphics, readouts and hidden screens. The dull grey bulkheads seemed to hum, and a series of translucent panels suddenly appeared and began running diagnostics and systems checks.

Tagir pushed back from the small screen he had been using to monitor the saucer's propulsion systems, engineering telemetry, and tactical platforms when the entire breadth of the polished black terminal lit up with screens and returns.

"What in the Hell?!"

>Systems Check...VIRGO 1.0: All systems nominal. *Brain* online.

"P'nom, report?!" Shorh leaned forward in his command chair and focused on the line of semitransparent script crawling along the bottom of the main viewer.

"It appears as though we have uploaded the final third of Mr. Teague's multitronic operating system, Captain." P'nom consulted the sudden abundance of operational data streaming before her on the previously black control surfaces.

"*Brain?*" The conversation he had with Teague aboard Space Dock 17 came back to the forefront of Shorh's mind as he tried to assess what his next move might be.

>Hello, Captain Shorh. How may I help?

"*Captain Shorh...?*" *That's what Teague had called me*, thought Shorh to himself.

"*Brain?* You know me?"

>Of course, Captain Shorh. Mr. Teague has programed me to grant you full systems access to *Virgo*.

Shorh listened to the artificially generated voice answer him from hidden speakers somewhere in the upper bulkheads. As *Brain* spoke, a semitransparent script of the computer's speech crawled along the bottom of the main viewer in time. Beyond the crawl of text floated the small, ancient freighter and slightly astern of her, the three massive tugs with the derelict *USS Sheaffe* in tow. Time was ticking away. Shorh realized they'd just pulled the final third of Teague's operating system from the strange little ship and whoever was aboard the freighter was likely getting anxious.

"P'nom, open a channel..."

P'nom moved her hand gently over a new panel which appeared before her and activated *Virgo's* ship-to-ship transmitter. "Channel open, Captain."

"Unidentified freighter, this is...Captain Shorh Ch'onithron of the Starship *Virgo*. We mean you no harm. We request a dialogue concerning the vessel you have in tow. Please respond." Shorh looked towards Tagir, who had turned his attention to the plethora of new screens available to him. He wanted a tactical report.

"This, uh, this is *Gunnlaugur*. I'm Gixr, hello...?"

Tagir found the screen he wanted. With a swipe of a finger, he cast the tactical systems status panel to a translucent square in the upper lefthand corner of the viewscreen. With *Brain* online the controls in front of both Rhupp and P'nom had become incredibly responsive and very intuitive.

"Mr. Gixr, I'm afraid we're not receiving your visual signal. How do you receive?" Shorh rose from his seat and studied the small screen Rhupp had thrown up.

According to *Brain*, the saucer—*Virgo*, was armed with a single forward-facing photon torpedo tube and three old-style phaser emitters in keeping with the apparent age of the ship's superstructure. Tagir had soused out earlier in the week that the ship did have phasers, but he'd been unable to confirm any sort of torpedo system. Shorh frowned as he reviewed the ordinance inventory displayed. His right antennae curled into a tight little fist as he read there were twelve projectiles onboard, all probes of various descriptions, no torpedoes. The phaser banks at least were reading at full power.

“No, no...just Gixr...ah...”

“This is Riadir Preed, why have you blockaded us?!”

Shorh mouthed the word “screens” towards Tagir. Half a second later Virgo’s defensive screens came up. Had he been on the bridge of *Isadore*, Shorh would have had twelve different preprogrammed tactical patterns and bluffs to choose from, as it was, he found himself *flying by the seat of his pants* (an expression Brian Harris was fond of using during their time together aboard the *Victory*).

“I’m sorry, Mr. Preed? You’re still not transmitting visually.”

“We’re...having issues with our internal systems. You’re fortunate we were able to stop our legal convoy, Starfleet!”

Shorh sighed and slowly sat down again. Downloading *Brain* from the freighter likely crippled their onboard systems. Teague had mentioned he’d outfitted an unassuming freighter with his operating system to imprint the qualities of some test pilot he’d hired to fly his experimental Transwarp vessel, *Virgo 2.0*...

“Are you the commander of this convoy, then?” Shorh was careful not to identify himself as a representative of Starfleet; that this Preed and Gixr had mistaken *Virgo* for a Starfleet vessel was simply good fortune.

“I’m one of the primary backers of this legal salvage operation. We’re operating out of Altair II on Scrapper License AP-844-7993. You have no jurisdiction here, Starfleet!”

No visual communication meant this Preed wouldn’t see Shorh and his sparse crew in their vintage red coveralls. Shorh sighed again and motioned to P’nom to mute the open channel.

“Channel deaf, Captain,” reported P’nom.

“Can we scan *Sheaffe* from this position, Lieutenant?” asked Shorh.

“Negative, sir. The heavy tow beams from those automated tugs make it impossible to get scans of any use.

“I see. Channel open, please.”

A soft chirp gave an audible cue to let Shorh know he was once again transmitting to the pair of anxious characters aboard the decrepit freighter.

“Gixr, Mr. Preed...we’re interested in the vessel you’ve salvaged. I understand your claims on the hull are likely valid; I simply ask for you to allow us to run some detailed scans and answer some questions concerning where and when you discovered the vessel.” Shorh narrowed his eyes and focused on the distant hulk of the *Sheaffe*.

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“What’s he mean?!” Preed leaned over Gixr’s slim shoulder and swept his eyes over the primary systems panel. Only half of the indicator lights looked to be working.

“I...I think he means he wants to know where we got the Starship, Riadir.”

Of the three normally green short-range sensor indicators only one seemed to have power flowing to it—it started flashing a disconcerting shade of amber. Gixr looked down in horror and immediately began toggling the impulse reactor restart sequence.

“What are you doing Gixr!?” demanded Preed.

“That’s weapons lock! They’ve got a weapons lock on us!”

Riadir shook his head. “Gixr, they’ve charged their deflector screens. That’s not a weapons lock.” Riadir looked back to the engineering terminal. Everything was dark. There was no sign of *Brain*.

“*Gunnlaugur*, this is *Virgo*, how do you copy?”

The voice of the Starfleet captain was strong and confident. Gixr rubbed his chin anxiously with his thoracic hand and kicked back the startup sequence he was in a panic to initiate. Only a third of *Gunnlaugur*’s instruments were functioning. They were at the mercy of this mysterious Captain Ch’onithron. “What should we do, Mr. Preed?”

Riadir walked back to the engineering post and resumed his seat. The terminal Mr. Mann had rigged up for *Brain* to interact with the crew was dark and useless. Even the communications array was struggling to maintain ship-to-ship audio with the looming saucer overhead. There was no way they’d be able to contact Martein even if it could help...oddly they still had remote access to the three tugs’ control systems.

“You’re sure that’s a Starfleet ship, Gixr?” Preed asked as he called up the basic tug control menu on his station’s only operational monitor.

“Absolutely. I mean the saucer, that’s Starfleet. You can see that surely, yes?” Gixr reached forward and hit the tactical panel with his right fist. Nothing happened. They only had one rocket aboard anyway.

“Well, let’s not keep the captain waiting, open the channel.”

Gixr reached up with his left hand and opened the rudimentary ship-to-ship transmission circuits and signalled to Preed to let him know they were transmitting.

“Captain Chorithon, this is Preed, what exactly is it you want from us?”

“It’s pronounced Ch’onithron. We have been searching for that ship for some time...”

“By interstellar laws of salvage, we laid claim to her free and clear, Captain.” Riadir knew there was nothing he could do to stop the superior vessel from taking their prize. If Gixr was right though, and this Ch’onithron was Starfleet, there might be a chance to treat with this man and somehow come away with their prize intact.

“We’ve conceded that, Mr. Preed. Understand though, that ship and her crew disappeared some time ago and was presumed lost. May we conduct some scans of the vessel? I assure you that your claim to the hulk is not presently in dispute.”

“*Not presently,*” Riadir didn’t like the sound of that. “Very well, scan it. Then be on your way.”

“We will need you to release the ship from the tractor beams, first. Our equipment won’t damage the vessel in any way; however, we can’t collect any useable data while the tractor emitters are powered.”

Without having to be asked, Gixr reached up and muted the channel. He turned in his seat to face Riadir sitting at the engineering post. “We should call Marteinn, maybe set a course...”

“How, Gixr? We’re crippled.” Riadir sent the signal for the tugs to terminate their tractors. Eight seconds later the hull of the late *USS Sheaffe* was hanging free in space. Preed could only imagine the fit Marteinn was likely throwing aboard the lead tug.

The flashing amber light on Gixr's panel began to blink blue as the energy detected emanating from the great saucer hanging above the little freighter changed in amplitudes and frequencies. Both the Trill and the young Edosian sat in a numb silence. Everything had been going so well—now they were completely helpless and at the mercy of strangers.

Twenty long minutes passed.

“*Virgo* to *Gunnlaugur*, thank you for your cooperation. Did you find the vessel in the vicinity of a binary star system, or possibly a brown dwarf? Were there any indications of survivors?”

Preed nodded at Gixr, and the channel was opened again. Preed motioned for Gixr to respond as he'd been the one to originally discover the wreck.

“Uh, yes...four parsecs from the circumbinary stars at Beta-TS 4645-002. There, there were no lifeforms...some remains, but the hull was decompressed. It was very close to Romy territory.” Gixr didn't know why he added the last bit about Romulans.

Two more long minutes passed... “If you conduct a complete reboot, you will regain normal operation over your vessel. I'm afraid your AI is offline for good.” With that, *Virgo* jumped to warp.

After rebooting, Gixr and Preed got underway half an hour later.

## Salon D'Observation / *Mniohr dhiamn Idraere'edh*

She sat quietly at the head of the long mahogany conference table in the Salon D'Observation. Five PADDs were neatly laid out in front of her. Two of the PADDs contained reviews of the previous day's Council Session. The third was a request from Ambassador Sestrick to have the Office of the President appoint a Special Investigator to audit Starfleet Archives regarding records from the 22<sup>nd</sup> Century which the ambassador insisted had been removed. An appeal from Chancellor Ch'Sharo urging the President to quash what he felt were "outrageous and inflammatory" Vulcan demands to hobble the Imperial Guard, was on the fourth PADD. The final PADD simply contained some of the President's own musings.

The balcony doors were open to allow the morning air to circulate within the austere room. The day had started unseasonably cool and foggy, but as the sun slowly crawled across the sky there was the promise of a pleasant afternoon to come. Mornings were peaceful. The President found she focused best in the early hours. She had come to savor the sweet, quiet window of time before the day closed in around her with meetings, debates and drudgery.

Ambassador Sestrick was like a *sehlat* with a bone. Her issue with Starfleet Archives went back to her time as Vulcan's representative to Earth during the 'Upgrade'. It was a nuisance request. What did it matter that Sestrick couldn't find some century-old report from the Arctic? Besides, Sarek was back and Sestrick was recalled to Vulcan.

A musical chime rang out from the carefully concealed comms panel built into the mahogany panelled wall separating the Salon from the President's formal office.

"Enter."

The door at the far end of the breezy Salon hushed open and in stepped Dronda Illedieh, the President's personal attaché. Dronda had been with the President for years, going all the way back to Delta.

"Madam President, good morning." Dronda was a short woman with a pleasing, round face and a sing-song voice.

“Good morning, Drona. What do you have for me?” The President didn’t bother to rise from her seat and only barely made eye contact with her oldest confidant.

“A *red box*, ma’am. Your eyes only.” Drona, dressed in a dark blue suit handed a black PADD to the President without saying anything further.

The President thanked the younger woman and dismissed her. Once Drona had returned to the office, a simple verbal command prompted the Salon’s dedicated computer to shutter the massive windows, seal all three points of entrance and egress and erect a dampening field around the entire room.

She set the black PADD down on the table in front of her and provided the retina scan, thumbprint and micro-cellular scan required to unlock the device.

The air in the room quickly grew stale. Nothing moved. She read in silence the detailed report which had been sent to her from the realm of shadows she’d grown far too comfortable with. Confirmation that she would be attending Algeron IV in short order to meet with the Praetor of the Romulan Star Empire to sign the treaty which would stay the Romulan threat to the Federation and her allies. The details were precise and would not change. As she read, she committed each line to memory as the device was programmed to delete all data once displayed and then self-destruct.

The terms were clear.

The new Neutral Zone was clearly laid out and illustrated by several star charts included in the material. Romulus would win parsecs of empty space by way of Zone expansions into previously recognized Federation territory, but they were prepared to guarantee complete respect for sovereign borders in exchange.

The Klingons would be the Federation’s responsibility; their aggressions would be seen as Federation aggressions and dealt with accordingly.

As the President scrolled through the items surrounding restrictions and exceptions, she began planning the requisite summit she’d have to host to explain the new realities of politics in the Quadrant with Azetbur. The Praetor had no intention of treating with the Klingons.

It would fall to the Federation President to bring the Chancellor in line. As it stood, Azetbur was presiding over a weak council and a depleted Defense Force. The Klingons had still not fully recovered from the Praxis disaster. As the first female Chancellor since L'Rell, Azetbur needed powerful friends. Three challengers for the leadership of the Council had emerged and Azetbur's tenure would soon be ending.

She reached the end of the data package and placed the black PADD on a small silver tray she'd used to carry the other PADDs over from her office. She waited until she heard a hiss and smelt the foul whiff of ozone and burning plastic before ordering the computer to stand down from secure mode. The windows cleared and the morning daylight flooded the room. The balcony doors gently opened on automated hinges and the cool, damp morning breeze swept into the room and dispelled the warm, stale atmosphere.

# **KERAS-CLASS** “WORKBIRDS”



## **Red Storm / *Mneani Hvei'khenn***

Maureen opened her eyes and lay perfectly still atop her mattress. She'd set an alarm for 0600 station time, but she knew she wouldn't need it. Slowly she lolled her head to the right and gazed out of her quarters' circular viewport. She'd muted the photostatic shade before taking to her bed a few hours earlier, but she could still see Jupiter's blazing radiance. The centuries old red storm churned and roiled silently beyond the flimsy bulkheads of *K3*. Maureen allowed her mind to get lost deep within its radioactive clouds and powerful lightning. She lay in silence for nearly a full hour before finally getting up to dress for the day.

It was 0357 hours. The admiral used the old-fashioned dimmer control by the viewport to decrease the shade and let the natural light of the angry gas giant illuminate her bed chamber. She'd slept atop the deep blue quilt she'd had since leaving her parents' home nearly forty years earlier. In the warm ochre light of Jupiter, she opened her narrow closet and removed the dress Starfleet uniform she'd prepared the day before. The golden starburst affixed to the white shoulder strap glittered in the warm light.

After a sonic shower, Maureen dressed methodically and then took an extra ten minutes to attend to her hair. She was still getting used to her new short 'bob-cut'.

It was 0423 hours when she stepped out of her bed chamber into the small living area that comprised the remainder of her on-station quarters. The PADD containing the files on John Harriman lay on the coffee table where she'd left it only a few hours ago. The similarities between the guilt-stricken captain and her Romulan asset, Nompel, didn't escape her. Harriman blamed himself for the death of James Kirk, a sentiment no small number of the Fleet's Admiralty quietly shared. Nompel was seen as complicit in Ambassador Nanclus' failure to see the Romulan end of the Gorkon plot through to a satisfactory conclusion. Both men were easily manipulated.

By 0426 Admiral Bautlin was standing on *K3's* Operations Deck. The night shift was still manning the terminals. There was no sign of Svetlana. They weren't due to depart until 1100 hours.

"Operative, report." Maureen stood in front of the status panel reviewing the latest Starfleet asset deployments. A growing number of ships were gathering along the Andorian Sector's border.

"Ma'am, Captain Xillion reports his courier was successful. The package was delivered to the President's Office on Earth within the last hour." The young man supervising the night shift stood at rigid attention as he made his report.

"Xillion's position?" Maureen turned away from the panel and looked the young twenty-seven-year-old man in the eyes. They were grey in colour, clear and unflinching.

He'd been enlisted by Deployment Resources from a pool of unsuccessful Academy applicants which fit Section 31's recruitment standards. His name was Tollard Moll. He was originally from Nebraska but had drifted around most of North America before settling at a small manufacturing plant in Manitoba operated by Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics as a low-level security guard. He was a short, unremarkable man...but his eyes betrayed the sociopathic nature which had piqued Deployment Resources' interest.

"Captain Xillion is presently in low orbit on the far-side of the Deltan moon. The *N12* will remain concealed until the courier returns from Earth aboard the long-range transport. Once the courier is retrieved, *N12* will proceed to our listening post at Nibia within the Andor Sector, ma'am."

Maureen nodded. "Very well. Status of 93?"

"Captain Demby is expected aboard at 0700 hours, admiral. 93 has cleared all pre-deployment diagnostics and is expected to make the 1100 hours departure." Tollard had earned the rank of first lieutenant during his few years with Section 31. He desperately wanted to make commander before he turned thirty.

Maureen knew Moll's psychological profile; in fact, it matched closely with that of Thayer Moddax. There was no point in trying to engage in small talk with the operative. He could be useful though. In

fact, Bautlin had already put Moll on a shortlist of operatives to address the Nompel situation once things were finalized.

She drew a short breath and remained focused on Moll's grey eyes. "I'll be in the mess. Have Commander Todorokov report to me once she's on deck. Carry on."

"Yes, ma'am." Moll nodded his understanding to the admiral, then returned to his own control panel as Bautlin made her way to the lifts.

## Comrades / *Daehlens*

Tikot disembarked from the *Talon*-class ship well past zero hour. He'd taken far too much ale in far too short a time and had to focus to keep from weaving as he walked. The silver draped young uhlans and the armed centurion overseeing their deployment along AK-hyi's primary landing platform said nothing as the colonel slowly plodded past their checkpoint to find the facility's lift. Ketor hoped the extent of his inebriation wasn't too apparent to his *sister's* armed soldiers.

After the solid black metal doors of the lift clanged closed and the rudimentary pulley system engaged, Tikot groped at the collar of his uniform and eagerly unclasped the stiff gorget. He allowed a rasping breath to escape in the dark solitude of the rattling lift and felt better now that his throat was free. The lift descended more than a *k'vahru* into the bowels of AK-hyi before its arresting system engaged and the car came to a jerky stop. Tikot flipped the restraining pin over on the car's limited control panel and the black doors screeched open to reveal Ketor's private suite of rooms.

With his shoulder drape hanging loose and his uniform pulling away from his chest now that he'd unclasped his collar, Tikot made his way into the familiar gloom of his domicile. Though he hadn't spotted Mivik waiting in the darkness from the confines of the lift car, he wasn't shocked to discover the Reman's presence.

"The hour is late, Mivik...I trust you're here to tell me you've put extra men to smelting a new panel..." Tikot walked past the tall creature and made a show of pulling the cumbersome over-tunic and drape away from his body.

"*S'nhdh ikjrhes u'lli temfaerre innaehv ehdhiss inner u'lmr, Nendixa 'hh res'pll,*" growled Mivik from his place in the darkness.

"What? When was this?" Tikot threw his tunic over a simple chair and wheeled around to peer at the hulking form lurking in the shadows.

"*Nihhs keep. Seijea Lhai nta'fviyav, valhthealh innaehv emaehe.*" Mivik moved into the dim circle of ambient light cast by the room's single computer panel.

Tikot drew a deep breath in an effort to sober himself. An inner marker had been triggered by something only twenty *siurens* ago, while he was drinking with Dar. Commander Nendixa was taking the *Valmaika* to investigate.

“Could it be another Federation ship?” Ketor caught sight of Mivik’s white translucent eyes and held them. The warrior responded that the contact had been small...a probe, or possibly a shuttle.

## Brain / Vahl'kev

(Three days earlier.)

P'nom let her left hand slip across the smooth control surface facing her. Windows opened and status updates appeared before her in an orderly fashion. As she double-tapped a virtual actuator on her primary telemetry monitor, she turned to face Shorh, seated pensively in his command chair.

"They've powered down the tractors on all three tugs, sir. The *Sheaffe* is floating free."

Shorh nodded his acknowledgement to the young half-Vulcan communications officer, then ordered Tagir to keep a floating target lock on the primitive little freighter. He called out to Moira to slowly move *Virgo* into the optimal position to conduct a full suite of scans on the ruined and dark *Saladin*-class refit.

>Captain Shorh, enhanced spectro analytic, particle sensor array and standard sensor packages are charged and ready to be employed.

"*Brain?*"

>Yes, Captain. Standing by to commence full sensor sweep of the target vessel.

Shorh looked back towards P'nom, who could only shrug. He was about to instruct the A.I. to stand down; that his crew would handle the operation of the ship, when Moira Dirlo released the control yolk and reported that *Virgo* needn't move a single meter. *Brain* was reporting they were already at optimal range.

"*Brain*...confirm, control of this vessel rests with the crew, correct?"

>Of course, Captain. Tactically it would be more efficient to permit me to run an enhanced sensor sweep of the target vessel. I will take no further action until you have issued a clear commit order.

Shorh had studied in detail the events surrounding the tragedy of the M5 a generation ago. The thought of a new multitronic computer seizing control of a starship under his command was...disquieting. The

collection of salvage vehicles hung pensively in the sable blackness of space. P'nom now faced Shorh head on from her place on the right side of the long, busy terminal. Her elongated, bobbed ears stood out like pseudo-antennae and Shorh had to stifle an inappropriate grin. She nodded grimly at him, indicating that the program's logic was sound.

"*Brain...commence scans and report.*" Shorh didn't like any of this.

Along the entire black terminal Tagir, Moira and P'nom sat facing, a blur of data and technical readouts began streaming across every square inch of useful space. All four biological members of *Virgo's* crew sat in stunned wonder while *Brain* employed a host of sensor beams, deep scan arrays, modular frequency emitters and negative resonance pulse generators to sweep and dissect the drifting *Sheaffe*. The moments ticked by. P'nom gave up trying to follow the myriad of data returns streaming across her monitors. Tagir passed the silent minutes by focusing on his phaser control—ignoring the other dozen screens streaming digital returns which made no sense to the chief specialist whatsoever. Moira's own set of limited monitors strobed with sensor returns. She tried to focus on the two circular control grips resting in front of her, prepared to engage the drive systems if needed.

A double buzz chimed from the unseen speakers and the long black terminal settled back into a more sublime state.

"*Brain...report?*" Shorh looked up towards the upper bulkheads hesitantly.

>The target vessel has been exposed to high levels of graviton radiation. There is evidence of severe structural damage along the dorsal section of the vessel's saucer section—likely the result of an extremely powerful tractor beam. Of note is the saturation of the entire vessel's heat-resistant panelling with exceptionally high concentrations of gamma radiation...

"What's so exceptional about that, *Brain?*"

>Only solar probes have displayed such intense gamma scoring and saturation. The damage is so complete that the vessel's panelling has no protective value whatsoever. There are also particles of stellar material in the vessel's shuttle bay.

"Life signs?"

>One hundred and sixty to one hundred and eighty corpses are aboard the vessel. 82% of the remains are human. There are no life signs. There is no atmosphere.

Shorh wasn't surprised. "Cause of death?"

>Most of the corpses display physical injuries consistent with a mass decompression event. Several bodies in the engineering section appear to have suffered decompression post-mortem and have evidence of trauma events.

"What...*ahem*...what caused the decompression event?"

>The vessel's panelling and dorsal tractor damage notwithstanding, the warp core has been ejected. Extrapolating... The majority of the corpses are crushed against the access doors to the central turbo lift shaft. It is likely that upon ejection, the magnetic containment system failed to seal the open warp chamber—along which the vessel's primary turbo lift shaft runs. As the core was ejected, the emergency bulkheads failed to seal, and the crew were blown towards the turbolift shaft.

"*Brain*...the scoring and buckled panelling aside, what's the damage to the *Sheaffe*?" Shorh tried to recall the compliment of a *Saladin*-class vessel...somewhere around two hundred?

"Sir, shouldn't we retrieve the..." Moira craned her neck to look up at her Andorian captain. Shorh quickly cut her off.

"Where would we put a hundred and eighty corpses, ensign?" He watched as his helmsman quietly returned her attention forward. "*Brain?!*"

>Impulse plants, auxiliary batteries and emergency reserves are all drained. The vessel's computer core appears to have been completely wiped. The vessel's forward torpedo bay has been ripped open to space. Blast patterns and particle trace analysis indicate the use of a heavy disruptor emitter.

"Romulans," growled Shorh.

>A possibility. Klingons and Breen both employ similar offensive technology.

"Captain, we know Commander Harris was investigating a graviton event somewhere beyond the Typhon Expanse—does any of this help us narrow down where we need to go next?" asked Moira, not

wanting to look back at her captain and risk him seeing how upset she'd become at the thought of leaving the crew of the *Sheaffe* to rot within the hulk.

"What about it, *Brain*? Anything about the burnt shielding or twisted deck plates give us a destination for where Bria...for where the *Sheaffe* may have met her end?"

>The gamma levels are extraordinary. The level of damage suggests the vessel passed through the corona of a brown dwarf, or possibly transited the event horizon of a class 3 pulsar, or possibly between binary stars. There is a brown dwarf known to exist in the Dewan System far beyond the Typhon Expanse. There are two known pulsars within the far reaches of the Expanse itself. At this range it is not possible to gauge graviton concentrations.

"Particles of stellar matter, is that right?"

>Correct. The particles have been logged and scanned. They are also unique.

"Alright, hold please, *Brain*."

>Holding.

"P'nom, is there anything more we can get from the *Sheaffe*?" Shorh watched the young half-Vulcan woman quickly tab through three screens of digital returns.

"Not really, sir. Whatever this thing has for sensors...well, they're incredible. It would have taken a full team working for at least eight hours aboard the *Isadore* to get these kinds of detailed returns working with standard sensors."

Shorh sat back in his seat and gazed out the main viewport. Neither the *Gunnlaugur* nor the three tugs had moved in the nearly twenty minutes that had passed. The idea that Brian was lying aboard the dark, ruined starship was difficult to process. Shorh imagined his friend was likely somewhere on the bridge... *Somewhere?* Shorh thought, *he's crushed in a heap by the turbolift shaft with the rest of those poor devils.*

He gently touched the swollen base of his ruined left antennae and let the shock of pain jolt him into action. "P'nom, open a channel to the freighter please."

"Channel open, Captain."

“*Virgo to Gunnlaugur*, thank you for your cooperation. Did you find the vessel in the vicinity of a binary star system, or possibly a brown dwarf? Were there any indications of survivors?”

Aboard *Gunnlaugur*, Preed prompted Gixr to respond as he'd been the one to originally discover the wreck.

“Uh, yes...four parsecs from the circumbinary stars at Beta-TS 4645-002. There, there were no lifeforms...some remains, but the hull was decompressed. It was very close to Romy territory.”

Shorh called for the channel to be muted. P'nom gave a nod to indicate they weren't transmitting.

“*Brain...what do we know about Beta-TS 4645-002?*” asked Shorh, surprising himself at how quickly he'd come to be at ease with Teague's program.

>Beta-TS 4645-002, the circumbinary stars at the center of the Kea System. The Kea System consists of four planetoids all orbiting the two stars. Kea IV is thought to be populated and orbits closest to the far end of the Typhon Expanse. The system is in unclaimed space; however, it has been speculated that the Romulans are engaged in resource extraction within the system they refer to as AK-Vah. There have been no probes or reports concerning Romulan activity in the Kea System for seventy years. At that time a class-2 long-range probe launched from the deep space explorer *USS Venture* recorded mining operations on Kea I...

“Enough, *Brain...Thank you.*”

A rumbling buzz from the hidden speakers indicated *Brain* had received and understood the captain's order to cease the playback.

“Ensign Dirlo, make your course for the Kea System, warp six.”

“Don't we want to check out the pulsars in the Typhon Expanse?” asked Tagir tentatively.

Shorh looked over at his hulking chief specialist and shook his head. “They found the *Sheaffe* drifting out towards Kea. The burns and the stellar matter suggest they could have come from these circumbinary stars, and we have historical evidence that the Romulans like that system. We'll make way for Kea. If we come up empty, we can push on to the Dewan System.”

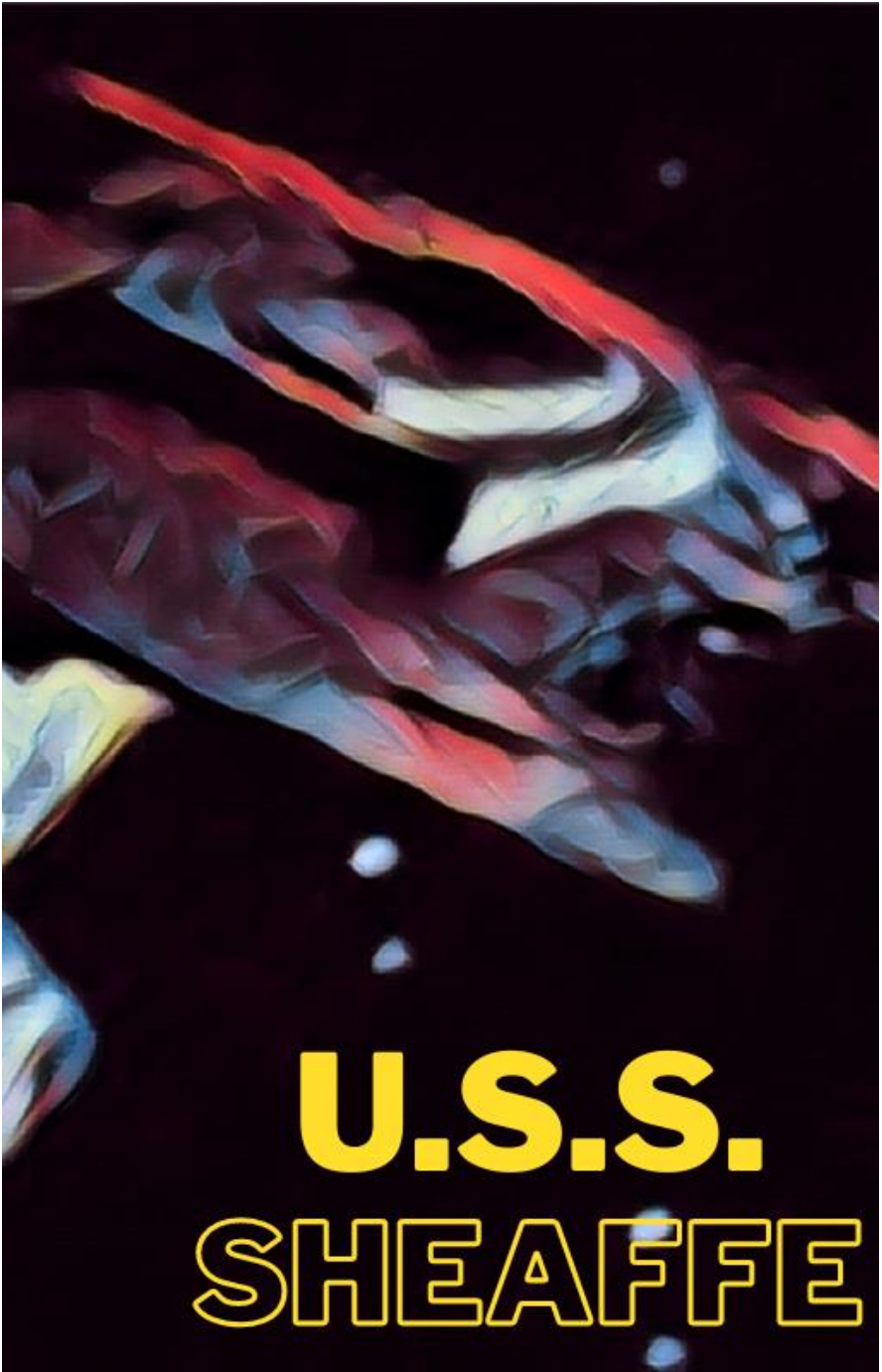
>Captain Shorh?

Shorh blinked hard and slowly looked up towards the speakers.  
“Yes...*Brain?*”

>*Gunnlaugur* and her crew are incapacitated now that I no longer operate the freighter. They will be helpless unless they conduct a complete systems reboot. By doing this they will reset their original control parameters and be free to operate. They are simple people, Captain Shorh. They pose no threat to you, or your crew.

Shorh looked over at P'nom and instructed her to open the channel with the ancient freighter below them.

“If you conduct a complete reboot, you will regain normal operation over your vessel. I'm afraid your A.I. is offline for good.” Shorh didn't wait for a response. He ordered Dirlo to engage the engines and get underway. *Virgo* moved above the old freighter and adjusted her heading before jumping to warp.



**U.S.S.**  
**SHEAFFE**

## ***Valmaika / Valmaika***

“Sub-Commander, we are within range of marker A-27.” Uhlan Hulmat kept his eyes focused on his navigational array readout.

“Contacts?” Sub-Commander Sitair stepped forward from his place at Commander Nendixa’s side.

“Negative, sir.”

Nendixa leaned forward in his elevated command seat and narrowed his eyes. The main display screen built into the forward bulkhead of the *Valmaika*’s bridge flickered and scintillated with angry flashes of static and fragments of digitally reproduced images of the space just beyond the massive *Horo*-class Warbird’s nose. The graviton interference throughout the system was a constant handicap. For a second, the commander could see the outline of the dark cylinder that was the marker sounding the alarm. Then a flash of white/yellow static obliterated the view, and the field erupted into chaos.

“Tactical, what are the graviton levels presently?” asked Nendixa in a low tone.

From his station alongside Uhlan Hulmat, Centurion Tomilo checked his own readouts and smartly responded: “Level four, Commander.”

Nendixa called for the display to be terminated. It would provide no useful telemetry in level four gravitons. The *Horos* were equipped with protective field generators and the most cutting-edge sensor packages the best engineers of the Imperial Design Bureau could imagine; however, even these incalculably intricate systems were useless past level two gravitons. Operating in the thicket surrounding the Esin Lattice required ingenuity. Nendixa and Veeta had pioneered the use of basic targeting beams to provide what amounted to negative returns of the surrounding space—a sort of space sonar, to help the otherwise blind helmsmen aboard the *Horos* to suss out the best ways through the soup obscuring their field of operations.

Sub-Commander Sitair confirmed the centurion’s readings. There was no sign of other vessels in the immediate area. Sitair knew even with the negative return method of sweeping the space around

*Valmaika*, the best they could hope for was a reliable range of perhaps five hundred *k'vahrus*. He moved from behind the centurion's post to the science station built into the left-hand bulkhead of the bridge where two more uhlans were posted.

Nendixa sat silently in his seat, waiting for Sitair to properly direct the crew. Of all the commanders assigned to the Task Force, Nendixa was the oldest and most experienced. A century earlier he was a twenty-cycle-old green-in-the-ears fourth-class uhlan, experiencing his first taste of combat as the warbird he was assigned to engaged and obliterated a Klingon destroyer. Had it not been for a break in service some thirty cycles later owing to a personal matter, Nendixa would easily have made enriov or even daise'khre'riov by this point in his career. As things were, he was a revered mentor and storied commander. That pleased him. No one would have expected an orphan boy from Cimaib Province to rise so high in the service of the Empire.

"Vavem, scanners?" Sitair now stood behind the two uhlans at the science station.

Uhlan Vavem was one of only five women serving aboard the *Valmaika*. In the entire taskforce there were only thirteen females. Being a woman and a northerner to boot, Vavem took great pains to always be professional and as close to perfect in all things as possible. Sitair had made no effort to hide his less than pure desire for her during her service aboard *Valmaika*. She could feel his eyes boring into the back of her head, but she refused to let the bloated *veruul* undermine her professionalism.

Commander Nendixa turned to watch as his second worked the uhlans at science. Each and every Romulan in the taskforce was loyal to the point of fanaticism; while Nendixa didn't doubt Sitair's devotion to their cause, he'd noticed the way the man obsessed over Vavem, and he didn't like it. Vavem was in line for promotion to quinturion. In her, Nendixa saw great promise and he felt duty bound to safeguard her career.

Vavem correlated her returns and pulled telemetry from her partner's cache of sensor inputs to triangulate a faint signal. After

quickly plotting a likely progression, she responded in a strong, even voice:

“Sub-Commander, there is evidence of an ionized plasma trail passing within eighty *k’vahrus* of the marker. Decay rates indicate the trail is recent and is plotted as heading inbound, towards AK-hyi.”

Before Sitair could speak, Commander Nendixa boomed: “Starfleet signatures, uhlan?”

Vavem finally turned away from her instruments, her light-coloured, regulation-cut hair whipping around her ears in a uniquely feminine way. Sitair felt his libido stir and hoped he hadn’t flushed. Vavem looked past the Sub-Commander and addressed the old man she’d come to regard as something close to a father...

“The readings are consistent with plasma produced by Starfleet impulse engines, Commander. The gravitons make it difficult to precisely measure the rate of decay; however, indications are that something passed by our marker less than an hour ago.”

Nendixa nodded his understanding and bid Vavem to return to her work. “Sub-Commander Sitair, contact Major Nokero and tell him to prep his war dogs.”

Sitair clicked his heels and nodded his understanding before pacing to the rear of the bridge to the communications station. Major Nokero was tasked with handling the thirty armed Reman shock troops the *Valmaika* carried.

“Tactical, charge forward disruptors. Helm, coordinate with science and follow that trail of plasma. Keep a close watch on your returns. Our intelligence tells us whatever we’re after is smaller than a scout. Correct, Uhlan Vavem?”

Without turning away from her instruments Vavem responded to Commander Nendixa: “Yes, Commander. Readings indicate the plasma trail was produced by a small vessel, a small transport or possibly a large shuttle of some kind.” She sent telemetry to Hulmat so that he could guide the warbird at best possible speed along the path she’d discovered amidst the thick gravitons.

## Progress / Eahe

The lighting level was at its lowest setting. Power rationing had been implemented days earlier to preserve the batteries. With the warp and impulse plants powered down, Chief Kelly had expressed serious concerns regarding the main energizer's rate of deuterium consumption while *Fury* hung impotently above Andoria. The dim light didn't bother him though. Neither did the field ration packs the crew were being issued to divert power from the food synthesizers. He found the reconstituted packs of potatoes and parsnip to be something of a delicacy.

As second officer, Syrk's quarters were more generous than those of the other command officers aboard—but his two rooms were practically empty. A standard bunk and chest of drawers were all the sleeping chambers had to offer. The main chamber simply hosted two ridged chairs and a small circular table. A meditation lamp sat alight in the center of the small table. Syrk sat stiffly on one of the chairs. He wore a simple black robe that hung comfortably off his slender shoulders. The low, vacillating flame held his focus. He had to keep the flame low to avoid triggering the automated fire suppression systems. The Vulcan was deep in thought.

Their present situation was growing untenable. The *Meni T'Pra* was all but abandoned. The Andorians had shown no interest in allowing either ship, or the hostages they held below, to return to friendly harbours. Captain Baker and his old friends had explored a handful of juvenile tactics thought to perhaps give them an advantage and secure a safe retreat, but Syrk had assessed each of their half-baked strategies as pathetic ploys pulled from the heady days of 'cowboy diplomacy'. Syrk, who would soon become master of the *Fury* upon Captain Baker's retirement, sought a logical course of action to successfully liberate both vessels and all Starfleet personnel from the present situation without bloodshed or undue rancor.

The low flame reflected off the copper and gold tapestry adorning the cabin's main bulkhead. A depiction of an IDIC in muted silvers and golds was the only decoration to be found in the first officer's quarters.

The glinting, brilliant reflections were in themselves nearly hypnotic. While Syrk sat facing the metallic tapestry, his eyes never left the flickering flame of his simple clay lamp.

He broke the situation down logically. He reasoned and planned. When he'd reached a conclusion, he rose and went to find his captain.

## **Intrepid / Kushana**

Three type 2 phasers, one spare power pack. Two vintage tricorders, one of which had been drained to 30%. A heavy phaser rifle, fully charged with no replacement pack. One flip-style mid-century communicator, partially functional. Tagir had laid out the assortment of tools in the aft compartment of the *Trudy* for Shorh to review.

“That’s it?” Shorh ran a blue finger along the red power cylinder fitted to the ancient phaser rifle.

“That’s it, Captain. The hand phasers are vintage but check out. The rifle is nearly 100% original, somebody swapped out the focussing crystal with a modern unit. We know the tricorders are properly calibrated.” Tagir adjusted the thick black belt around the midsection of his red overalls while his Andorian captain slowly inspected the small collection they’d found aboard Teague’s runabout.

Shorh wasn’t impressed with the antiques. He cursed himself for not thinking to at least bring along the medical tricorder from Space Dock 17 when they’d made their unorthodox escape to find Teague’s flying museum. P’nom and Dirlo were in the command compartment picking their way through the graviton heavy space which would otherwise blind *Trudy*’s sensors were it not for Teague’s unique field generator. *Virgo* had been left loitering in the dense asteroid field skirting the fringes of the graviton saturated Kea System. *Brain* had been instructed to keep a sensor lock on *Trudy* and maintain a dedicated communications link with Moira at *Trudy*’s conn.

Shorh was uneasy about everything. *Brain* had deduced where to seek the answers the survivors of the *USS Isadore* sought by scanning the battered corpse of the *Sheaffe*. Radiation signatures, hull damage, star fixes, cosmic eddies...Teague’s multitronic operating system took everything into consideration and plotted a direct line to the Kea System. In just three days *Virgo* tore across Federation space and into the unclaimed space beyond at an unheard-of speed of warp 9.97. The power and speed of both the vessel and the computer was both awesome and terrifying. When *Virgo* dropped out of warp just five AUs beyond the gravitational pull of Kea IV, *Brain* began intense sensor

sweeps splashing telemetry up on every screen around the four intrepid fugitives from Section 31 manning *Virgo's* bridge.

Little was recorded regarding specifics of the Kea System outside of its peculiar twin suns. What was a known fact was that the system consisted of four planetoids—all thought to be rich in various ores. *Brain* could only detect three planetary bodies in the system now. As P'nom tried to catch up to the computer's data sweeps, Moira gasped at the sudden schematic *Brain* cast to the main view panel inlaid in the forward-facing viewport...

"Kea, it looks like it's been smashed to pieces! What could do that?!" Moira had reached forward to take hold of the two control grips in order to free the yolk and prepare for impulse maneuvers, but the sudden appearance of the graphic froze her in place.

"Hells?!...*Brain*?" Shorh leaned forward and studied the translucent blue graphic which had shaken Dirlo and left both P'nom and Tagir speechless.

The two suns were where they were supposed to be, as were three of the expected planets...but a snaking spray of asteroids spiralling out and away from a point close to the suns was a sight none of them had ever before seen. The debris field was tight and dense near the center of the system but fanned out and spread itself in a twisting trajectory the further away from the suns it got. *Virgo* hung in space just beyond Kea IV. On one of Chief Rhupp's secondary deflector relays a steady spray of minor object strikes were registering. Even at this distance the debris field was stretching its way towards the intruding starship.

>Yes Captain Shorh?

"What are we looking at?"

>Sensors indicate the planetary body designated: Kea I, has been shattered by some as yet undetermined force.

"What could do that to a planet?"

>Unknown.

*Brain* had detected unbelievable graviton levels emanating from the center of the system as well. Even with *Virgo's* impressive sensors it was difficult to get any reliable returns; however, a settlement of significant size was detected on Kea II.

A few hours later, Shorh and his crew were flying blind aboard *Trudy* towards that settlement determined to find the answers they sought. Rhupp had wired the portable transport unit into *Trudy* and Shorh was operating without a firm plan, without a failsafe—in a state of unease he'd not felt since his days as a cadet.

“Chief, you'll take the rifle. P'nom and I will carry the tricorders...she should carry the communicator too. It checks out?”

Tagir drew a long breath... “I've got it wired to the *Trudy's* comms panel, but that's it. From *Trudy* we can call for *Brain* to come get us if all else fails.”

## Uninvited / *U'mehremrei*

Mivik remained in the main chamber of Ketor's warren of personal caves while the slightly inebriated Romulan changed out of his old Tal Shiar uniform into a practical black jump suit. The news that one of the inner markers had been tripped had greatly disturbed Tikot, but he reminded himself to keep his temper in check. The *Valmaika* had been dispatched. What more could be done now?

"Has there been word from the *Valmaika*, yet?!" called Ketor as he fastened a silver duty belt around his waist.

"*Ahht l'prets, hwia dei iekil'eirh dvaer duhaen duhaen hrrau ehdhihss!*" snapped Mivik in response to Ketor's shouted question.

Ketor shook his head. Nendixa was his most experienced commander. If there was something out there, Nendixa would hunt it down and deal with it. Out of habit he looked towards his bed chamber's mirror to inspect himself, but he'd gotten dressed in the dark and he was worried that if he called for the lights, his head might split open. He could hear Mivik pacing in the outer chamber. The Reman would be getting anxious. Tikot turned away from the dark chest where he kept his modest wardrobe and groped through the small metallic safe mounted to the wall beside his useless mirror.

The solid metal door was never locked—but it closed perfectly flush with the double strong frame of the safe and Ketor had to fumble in the darkness to gain purchase along the narrow seam of the door to coax it open. It had been mounted at head height and Tikot took great care to always close the heavy door, lest he brain himself while getting dressed. He reached blindly into the safe and quickly felt the cool metal grip of his disruptor. He had to get to control. Tikot holstered his weapon as he stepped back into the larger chamber to collect Mivik and board the lift for the facility's primary control level.

"*T'hea infle fraeta ieiugh rinam ulleinvs'hhwiemn kjumnaihsou?*" asked Mivik in a low sarcastic murmur as the two rode the lift down to control.

"There's no need to trouble the admiral with this yet," snapped Tikot.

The lift rattled down the black shaft at nearly a full plummet. Ketor refused to allow the automatic level selector to control this sortie. He kept his strong right hand firmly wrapped around the arresting lever and concentrated on the number of dim lights which flew by as they fell through the darkness. Three levels above the corridor leading to the control room, Tikot hauled back on the lever with all his strength and slowly brought the car to a sliding stop.

Mivik kept his grim face placid but was grateful to feel the cramped metal car beneath his feet slow and stop. He waited for the Romulan to disembark before following and happy to feel the firm rock of level six beneath his heavy combat boots.

Tikot strode into the control center of Remans busily manipulating a mishmash of Romulan, Reman, salvaged Federation and even Altairian tech and monitors. The communications and dispatch station was manned by one of Mivik's nephews, who was paired with an elderly quinturion from the *Vejul*. As AK-hyi was a Reman facility, the control center was largely concerned with mining operations and was mainly staffed by Reman specialists. A senior Romulan tech was always present as well though as the control center also coordinated the small fleet of warbirds and the modest planetary defences in orbit.

"Semis, what word from *Valmaika*?" Ketor ignored the Reman seated beside the Romulan dispatcher and the young creature growled low in the back of its throat.

"Rekkhai, the *Valmaika* reports evidence of a small vessel having transgressed our territory near marker A-27. No contacts, but they are stalking an ionized plasma trail believed to be from an impulse engine inbound to AK-hyi." Quinturion Semis kept his voice flat but conveyed the serious nature of the situation to Tikot with a simple, stern look.

Ketor looked into the old quinturion's slate grey eyes and knew the old veteran was concerned. Tikot clenched his teeth. The *Vejul* and *V'Dara* were in orbit alongside the unarmed *Keras*-class *Workbirds*. There was no way around it. He'd have to inform Dar...he heard the growling coming from the young Reman seated beside Semis and shot the hideous monster a cold look. The beast was cowed.

“*Alhe Mivik...*” called Ketor in a near whisper.

The nearly two and half meter tall Reman commander stepped forward and grunted. He was displeased at the disrespect his nephew had shown Ketor and made a deliberate effort to avoid making eye contact with the boy. He would deal with him later.

“Mivik, send word to the *Vollo...* alert level two. Do it quietly.”

AK-hyi was focussed on smelting a new panel for the Lattice. There wasn't an able-bodied Reman not at work on the far end of the complex. All that remained were the females and the children of the miners who were already on edge owing to the presence of Dar and her armed guards. Word of a possible invader could spark panic. There would be no transmissions which might be monitored by the general Remans.

## **Stirring / Embaele**

Grant sat silently in *Fury's* nearly empty mess hall considering all that Syrk had said. His cup of coffee sat untouched on the beige metal table separating Baker from the tall, slim Vulcan dressed in comfortable-looking black robes. Kelly was on the bridge to give Captain Baker a chance to have a quiet meal and enjoy a cup of coffee somewhere other than his quarters or the command chair. Syrk had come directly from his own quarters to the mess to speak with Grant—having used *Fury's* computer to glean his captain's location aboard the new *Constellation*-class ship.

“With respect, Commander...it can't be that simple,” Grant finally said after rolling Syrk's words over repeatedly in his own mind.

“It's hardly simple, Captain. The logistics of presenting such a compromise to the appropriate parties alone present a significant challenge.” Syrk remained cool and composed as he waited for his human captain to see the logic in the proposal he'd just been presented with.

Grant leaned back in his seat and ran his right hand down his chin and considered what he'd just heard once again. He'd hung his big maroon mission jacket over the back of his chair. They'd all started to let things slide as they hung helplessly above Andoria, surrounded by Raiders and stalked by Frigates. Grant knew they had to maintain discipline aboard, but the stress of the siege combined with the lack of meaningful things for his crew to occupy themselves with had forced the old captain to relax protocols and look for outlets to combat anxiety. He himself had decided to stop wearing his stiff uniform tunic. The mission jacket sufficed, and he was more comfortable in just an oversized white undershirt.

“Has there been any activity over at the *Meni T'Pra*?”

“No, Captain. I believe the Andorians will avoid boarding either of our vessels, so as not to appear openly aggressive.” Syrk was not pleased with Captain Baker's recent transition to informal attire; however, as he himself was sitting in the mess hall dressed only in his

meditation robe, the thin Vulcan reasoned that this was not the time to address that issue.

“I don’t mean to be blunt, Commander Syrk, but as a Vulcan yourself...”

“Captain, my being a Vulcan is not relevant to the proposal at hand. I am a Starfleet officer and a Federation citizen. As both of these facts are irrefutable, the action proposed comes from a place of duty.”

“And logic?” Grant could see the value in the younger man’s proposal and shook his head slightly at the simplicity of Syrk’s stratagem.

“Indeed, sir. As it stands, the High Command has taken the position that the Imperial Guard shall not construct any more heavy cruisers, Raptors, or offensive vessels whatsoever. Understandably, the Andorians are not pleased with this development. As a result, we find ourselves in our present predicament.”

“Right...and your solution is to offer the Andorians Starfleet assets to replace their soon to be *vanished* fleet.” Grant lifted the coffee to his lips and took a sip. It was a weak brew reconstituted from a ration pack.

“So far, short of Mr. Kelly blowing up our own ship, none of the attempts to rectify our present situation have shown any signs of success. Waiting for a diplomatic resolution is proving difficult. I’m proposing a formal arrangement whereby the Imperial Guard could be invited to qualify as Starfleet personnel to operate select Starships exclusively crewed by Andorians. In this way our present situation could be relieved, and the greater political crisis diffused.”

“Precedent?” Grant was aware of what Syrk was getting at, but he needed to hear his Vulcan Science Academy qualified First Officer say it firsthand.

“Since the inception of the Federation there have been allowances written into the Charter itself to allow VSA graduates to hold Starfleet commissions. I myself am an example of this. I would also point out that there are a number of Starfleet vessels exclusively crewed by Vulcans, such as the *USS Intrepid*, the *Oberth*-class *USS Banting*, the...”

“Alright, fine. Two things though... One, how would the High Command react to such a proposal to the Andorians? Two, who makes such a proposal in the first place? It can't be us; it would reek of desperation and frankly neither one of us would get any official backing on this.” Grant raised his coffee to his lips for a second time, but decided the hot brown liquid was best left in the white mug and deliberately set his cup down again without drinking.

“The High Command will not be able to find fault in the logic of this proposal as it will satisfy their stated concerns as regards the independence of the Imperial Guard. As for who should make this proposal, sadly, I am at a loss. With our communications compromised we can not simply report to Starfleet Command without the Andorians intercepting and possibly even blocking our transmission. We can not proffer up this proposal ourselves for the reasons you've already noted.”

Grant sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. An irritating memory suddenly surfaced from the fog in his mind. Syrk noticed a ripple of emotion suddenly cross his captain's face and raised his right eyebrow in curiosity.

“Commander Syrk...the Andorians are monitoring all official channels. They're even occupying themselves with creating false transmissions for us to pass the time, but what about personal transmissions, across *private* frequencies?”

“My apologies, Captain. I don't follow.”

“The Andorians are tapped into our official subspace frequencies, obviously. Do you think it's possible though that they're not bothering with our low-priority band frequencies though?” Grant pushed himself away from the table and slowly stood up, but never took his eyes of his First Officer.

“I can only speculate given the equipment we've observed in the field—the obsolete Raiders with the specialized eavesdropping equipment and what have you; I'd contend that they are primarily focused on our secure comms, yes.”

Grant smiled and shook his head. He could see puzzlement on Syrk's face. “Well, we might be able to make one long-distance phone call then without them picking up on anything.” He smiled broadly.

Syrk watched as the old human hefted his jacket on and began to turn to leave the mess hall. He didn't understand why Baker was suddenly so happy and he found the captain's abrupt move to leave...irritating.

"*Phone call*, Captain? The Andorians will undoubtedly detect any transmission regardless of what frequency we use." Syrk rose from his own seat and flitted out from behind the table to catch up to his captain at the mess hall's door.

"That's true, Commander, but they're not dialed in on those low-priority channels. Let's gamble they miss the content, and we get lucky." Grant winked at the Vulcan.

"Where are we going, Captain?" asked Syrk with an embarrassing note of confusion.

"To call an irritating little man. Come on!"

Grant set off for the secondary turbolift to head back to his quarters. He'd use the comms unit in his cabin which was routed to the secondary subspace transmitter for personal calls, after he and Syrk worked out precisely what they needed to pass along. There was no guarantee any this would work. Considering who they'd have to depend upon, it likely would derail horribly...but they had to try.

# ZHAT VASH



## Refuse / Fyyhhan

The Pailus Mark VII was an exclusive weapon of the Tal Shiar. At half the size, a third of the weight, and twice the power of the standard issue disruptor pistol, the Pailus was a lightweight, uncomplicated, easily concealed weapon. Sub-Commander Sohon, attached to Vice Admiral Dar, wasn't Tal Shiar, but she wore two Pailus disruptors with an arrogant pride. Dar had quietly provided her with them. They were her second pair.

There was no great secret to the sleek, light disruptors' construction. They were designed for one-time use. There were no bulky power packs, no condenser coils or modulation assembly. Each of Sohon's pistols were precharged with a single-use supply of energy which could be unleashed at the lightest pull of a trigger. If she wished, she could depress her trigger and empty the power cell in a single long beam of lethal energy, or she could deftly tap her trigger to set short, lethal pulses of energy loose to surgically eliminate numerous targets as desired. There were no "settings" for the Pailus. The pistols were meant to do one thing, kill. Once the power cells were depleted a small charge of molecular acid was triggered and the disruptors were left to dissolve at an alarming rate.

Sohon had exhausted two previous disruptors during the *Vollo's* last sortie to the border with Flaxia. It'd taken nearly a full cycle, but Dar had procured two more pistols for the subcommander she trusted to guard her life. The weapons were meant for the Llaekh—the elite assassins of the Tal, but from Enriov Dar's own lips; Sohon was as elite as any Llaekh in service to the Empire and deserved the best tools to do her job.

Enriov Dar had dismissed her guest and had retired to her suite for the night. Only Sohon and two of *Vollo's* service techs remained alert onboard. The techs were stationed on the lower engineering deck to begin prepping the ship for departure first thing in the morning. Standard procedure required her to keep watch over the admiral while the *Vollo* was grounded. Sohon had taken a seat in the corridor just beside the sealed doors to Dar's quarters.

She knew the armed contingent of regular uhlans had secured the landing platform beyond, and yet...

Sohon rose silently from the ridged seat she'd been sitting in. A noise...? She cocked her head to the left and opened her mouth slightly. The techs were below. The rest of the crew asleep. Sohon drew a quiet breath. A scent...? She exhaled silently and closed her mouth. Something wasn't right. There was a musk in the air. There was a noise—she hadn't heard it exactly, but she'd sensed it none the less.

With a practiced hand she reached down blindly and freed one of her slim disruptors from its holster strapped to her right leg. The ship had been set to "night mode" and the corridor lighting was dim. She turned to look behind her. The corridor ended abruptly at an angled grey bulkhead. There was nothing behind her. Her quarry lay somewhere ahead in the darkness.

Silently she paced forward along the dark corridor. The ship slept. She lifted her pistol and again opened her mouth slightly and breathed in the faint, alien musk. The corridor seemed empty. At the cordon ahead there was a "T" junction. To port, the boarding ramp presently under armed guard. To starboard, access to the bridge and the rest of the *Vollo*.

The odour was vaguely familiar. Sohon closed her mouth and held up just back of the junction. Sweat. The stench was sweat...but not Romulan sweat.

She stood as still as a statue in the dim light. Her elbow cocked at a right angle to the floor, disruptor at the ready. Her silver uniform tunic was dulled in the dusky lighting and her black pants and polished black boots weren't visible at all. She seemed to hover in the darkness like a phantom.

A noise. A definite noise to port. She held her position, tensing her calves and thighs, preparing to wheel around the corner... Breathing! Rasping breaths and clumsy footfalls.

Sohon drew a breath. She felt her legs twitch and with a professional detachment watched the world spin around her as she willed her body to move. She was around the corner. Her elbow

straightened and her index finger moved fluidly from aside the disruptor's trigger guard to tense itself against the trigger itself.

*Hideous grey skin and milky dead eyes which glowed in the dim light. Tall, young—something in its clawed right hand...TARGET!*

She trusted her training. Her finger twitched against the trigger. A high pitched 'ping' and a bright green flash lasting less than a second filled the corridor.

A young Reman dressed in a black uniform lay lifeless on the floor. A grey data tablet was in its dead right hand.

Two uhlans thundered up the boarding ramps, disruptors drawn, only to find the subcommander standing over the body—scowling at them both.

## Flying Blind / *Kaeust Vastaram*

*Trudy* split the invisible fog of gravitons at two thirds impulse as Moira used the limited sensor returns, crude visual scanners and her own pilot's intuition to guide the small runabout towards Kea II. Behind her sat P'nom, silently monitoring her own sensor returns at the runabout's comms/ops station. Even with the protective shield generated by Teague's unusual coil the small vessel's sensor's ability to cut through the radiation was extremely limited. Tagir Rhupp sat motionless at the engineering console.

Shorh stood behind his command seat with one strong blue hand gripping the chair's back as they slid smoothly through the rocky, asteroid-strewn blackness that led towards the system's two suns and their target. By standing, the captain could easily peer out the central forward viewport. A distant white light marked the center of the Kea System. A large yellow sun, with a smaller, bluish sun paired to it. Occasionally Shorh saw a brief flash as a small asteroid or chunk of debris bounced off *Trudy's* shields.

They'd set out to investigate a settlement *Virgo's* sensors had detected on the surface of Kea II. The raw data *Brain* had gleaned from the scans taken from the wreck of the *Sheaffe* had pointed them towards this system. The next clue as to what happened to Brian Harris and his ill-fated ship and crew, logically, could be found on Kea II. Fifteen minutes after departing the relative safety of *Virgo*—opting to leave their unique starship sheltered behind a large asteroid on the outer rim of the system, P'nom picked up a Starfleet signal.

"Ensign, status?" Shorh kept his eyes fixed on the distant suns.

"We're twenty-five minutes out from Kea II, Captain." Dirlo had her face pressed against her viewer. Basic navigational returns were badly garbled by the intense gravitons. She didn't dare take her eyes off her monitor less they drift off course.

"P'nom?" Shorh drew a long breath and willed himself to resist touching the inflamed base of his ruined antenna. They'd exhausted their pathetic supply of analgesic hypos.

The young lieutenant quickly consulted her instruments before answering. “Confirmed sir. I’m now detecting at least three distinct Starfleet TPDRs. All with diminishing strength.”

Shorh gripped the back of his seat firmly and his blue knuckles turned white. His head felt like it was on fire. He gritted his teeth and turned away from the viewport to regard the young Vulcan with the elongated, rounded ears. “Automated distress calls?”

P’nom furrowed her brow, turned to quickly scrutinize her garbled returns once again, then confidently reported that the transmissions appeared to be standard transponder signals. While she couldn’t confidently report that they were weak tricorder links—she did speculate that *Trudy’s* receiver array had activated the basic link features of some discarded Starfleet tech.

Shorh grunted and turned away from the small woman swimming in her oversized red engineering coveralls. Dirlo was focused on piloting the ship. Tagir bristled in his seat but said nothing. The chief, who now sported a full black beard, wore the same sized coveralls as P’nom and his thick arms and broad shoulders strained visibly beneath the vibrant red uniform. Slowly, the beleaguered Andorian captain seated himself and reviewed the away-mission allotment of equipment he’d finalized with Tagir. There was no real safety net. Shorh lowered his eyes and pretended to be interested in the status indicators affixed to his command seat. He deeply wished his three loyal crewmen had simply allowed him to set out on this quest alone.

“Sir? Captain?!”

Shorh looked up quickly and stared at Dirlo. She was still buried in the old-fashioned globe viewer, but her voice had been sharp and alarmed. “What is it Dirlo? Report.”

“Visual returns, there appears to be several vessels in orbit around Kea II.”

“P’nom?” Shorh craned his neck to watch the Vulcan at work.

“Confirmed, sir...two...no, three vessels, maybe more.”

“Romulan?” Shorh was prepared to have Dirlo reverse course.

“We are close to their borders, sir; however, several of the vessels appear to be much larger than anything we know the Imperial Fleet to operate.”

“Several? How many contacts are you reading?”

“Sir, the graviton intensity at this moment is extremely high—far off this vessel’s scale. I believe there are four vessels, but there may be more,” said P’nom.

“Course change, Captain?” asked Dirlo.

“Sir, I should point out that given the intensity of the gravitons and the relative diminutive size of our craft, those vessels are unlikely to have picked us up on sensors,” interjected P’nom.

*Trudy* continued on her course towards Kea II hoping the swarm of gravitons would shield her approach.

## Hunting / *Temglohha*

“Report.”

“Commander, the ionized plasma is obscured by the gravitons. The signal is growing faint.”

Commander Nendixa narrowed his eyes and nodded his understanding without looking at his second-in-command, Sub-Commander Sitair. “Tactical display. Begin long-range sweeps with targeting sensors. Whatever it is, I don’t want to risk letting it double back on us.”

The main view panel on the bridge of the *Valmaika* switched over to a simplified tactical format. The *Valmaika* was represented by an icon depicting a green Imperial emblem in the center of a black field segmented by a blue grid. As the warbird’s targeting sensors swept the graviton heavy space ahead of the vessel several asteroids and chunks of debris appeared as simple red blobs ahead of the ship. Using the simple targeting beams to cut through the gravitons to navigate had been a useful technique the Romulans assigned to AK-hyi had developed decades earlier. It was crude, but effective.

Nendixa studied each return intently waiting for his prey to be revealed. Standing orders were to intercept, detain, and board any unauthorized vessel operating within the system. Two decks below, just beyond the primary cargo bay where the *Valmaika*’s industrial transporter was located, Major Nokero had marshalled a half-dozen Reman shock troops to form a boarding party. The *Horo*-class warbird proceeded methodically back towards AK-hyi at one-half standard sub-light, sweeping, hunting...

Commander Nendixa didn’t notice Sub-Commander Sitair attending the communications station—being focused on the tactical board. When Sitair was suddenly at his side, Nendixa nearly jumped out of his command chair.

“Sub-Commander!” Nendixa jolted and turned his intense hazel eyes on his subordinate and let a rueful scowl cross his face. “Report.”

“Commander, apologies. We received word from AK-hyi. The *Vollo* is mobilizing to join us.”

“The *Vollo*?”

“Enriov Dar herself has ordered it. Commander Ariekh has also reported the *Valaj* is ten *k'vahrus* off our port aft.”

No sooner had the words left Sub-Commander Sitair's lips, when a bright green contact suddenly appeared on the tactical screen—the Warbird *Valaj*.

## **A Meeting / *Il Tempaeti***

Maureen looked down to the busy floor of the Starfleet Command Center below the glassed-in office that hosted the Starfleet Chief of Operations. She'd not been in HQ since she scrubbed Deployment Resources and abandoned the planet. It felt good to be back. She and her commander had arrived at precisely the correct time for their meeting with Admiral T'Chou, the acting Chief of Ops, but the admiral had been delayed.

Svetlana stood stoically by the door to the reception area. She held a small black leather dossier in the crook of her right arm. She'd never been inside the Command Center before. The experience would normally have thrilled her, but she'd spent most of the previous night programming and perfecting the device she had smuggle into what arguably was the most secure facility in the entire Federation. Her psychological training helped her remain laser-focused on the task at hand. She reminded herself of that every time her anxiety flared.

Maureen watched the lieutenants, lieutenant commanders and select techs and specialists tend to the endless banks of monitors, viewers, comms equipment and cypher consoles. There'd been some changes since the last time she'd seen the Command Center. Much of the tech had been upgraded and as she stood quietly watching the dedicated service men and women do their methodical ballet from terminal to terminal, she noted that the actual workforce had been cut in half.

*Strange how efficiency breeds exodus,* thought Maureen to herself.

"Admiral Bautlin?"

Maureen turned away from the massive windows that looked down onto the floor of the Command Center and found herself looking at the short, stern, Commander Donaldson.

"Commander...Donaldson, isn't it?" Maureen offered the plain looking woman with the mouse brown hair a wan smile.

"Yes, ma'am. I apologize for having you wait. Admiral T'Chou was on..."

Maureen shook her head and waved Donaldson off. “No need for apologies, Commander. I’ve known Xao for years. The man’s like a squirrel; easily distracted by any nut or shiny object.”

The joke fell flat. Commander Donaldson ushered Admiral Bautlin through from the main office into the secure meeting room where Admiral T’Chou had established himself for the meeting. There was no actual call for the secure room, but Xao felt it would somehow impress the head of Contemporaneous Affairs.

Maureen stepped through the open door just as Xao was getting out of a blue and silver chair at the head of a long black conference table. There were only three chairs in the room. The one Xao had occupied, one to his right at the head of the table and a third at the opposite end of the table where a stenograph unit had been set up.

“Maureen, sorry to have you wait. Couldn’t be helped.” T’Chou pushed himself free of the table and waddled awkwardly towards Admiral Bautlin to shake her hand.

“Not at all, Xao. Are we expecting...?”

Commander Donaldson stepped into the room and triggered the thick duranium door to close and seal the bulkhead between the secure room and the general office. She offered Admiral Bautlin a professional nod and then proceeded directly to the seat at the far end of the table where she powered on the stenograph and prepared to take notes.

“Your aide, uhmm?”

“Commander Todorokov, admiral. Svetlana Todorokov.” Maureen smiled. This worked out better than she could have hoped.

“Of course, Commander Todorokov. I hope she’s not offended, but I think we should keep this tête-à-tête between us, no?” Xao smiled and offered Maureen the only free seat left in the empty room.

“I’m sure she’ll understand, Xao. She’s a professional.”

Svetlana waited for the solid duranium door to slide into place and magnetically secure itself before she moved. Smoothly, mechanically, she opened her dossier and removed the passive transference multiplexer she’d programmed. She’d been prepared to surreptitiously install her program remotely, but as things worked out, there was no need.

Todorokov walked to the primary computer terminal on Admiral T'Chou's desk, sat down and removed the flush access panel to expose the standard duotronic busport. A smile came to her face—it was just too easy. She plugged the multiplexer directly into the computer. This was far faster and more reliable than her plan to upload the program remotely. As the computer hummed, Svetlana dreamily watched a lieutenant below update the tactical board denoting the buildup of assets just outside the Andor Sector.

## Quell A Riot / *Hmnhe Karosha'elh*

“Rekkhai, a call from the *Vollo*.” Quinturion Semis kept his old slate grey eyes fixed on the refurbished Altarian receiving unit in front of him.

Tikot turned away from Mivik, who was quietly relaying the names of the Reman shock troop contingent aboard Commander Nendixa’s *Valmaika*. “Report, Semis.”

“The *Vollo* informs she is securing for launch and will join the *Valmaika* in hunting down the unknown craft.” Semis slowly turned from his equipment to face Tikot Ketor. He pulled the old black and silver headset from his scalp and handed it to Ketor.

“That’s ridiculous. Commander Nendixa can handle the situation and Commander Arieikh and the *Valaj* is already out on patrol!” Tikot watched as the old man he’d known for close to fifty cycles slowly removed his transceiver and held it out towards him.

“The Enriov herself advises *Vollo* will be departing presently. She wishes to speak with you, rekkhai, confidentially.” Semis’ voice was soft, but he knew the anxiety he was suddenly seized with was running wild behind his eyes.

Tikot took the headset and fixed it around the back of his skull so that the earpiece sat warm and flush against the right side of his head and the silver sprig that was the transmitter hovered just in front of his lips. He could see what could almost be called panic in Semis’ eyes.

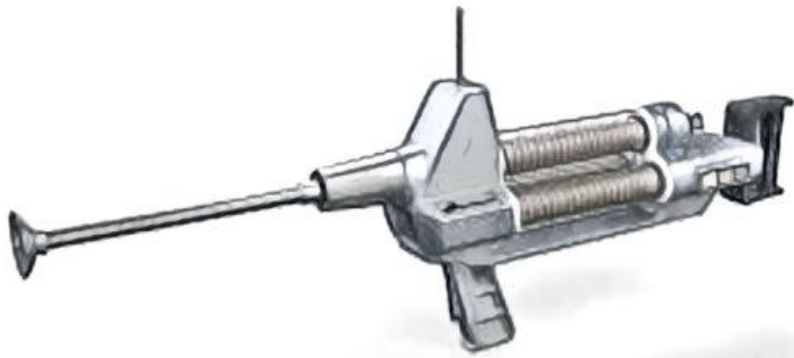
“This is Tikot Ketor, *Vollo*, do you copy?”

Ketor went cold when the sound of Caithlin Dar’s voice poured into his ear. He stood as still as a statue as he listened to his *sister*. Semis kept his eyes locked on Ketor’s. Tikot nodded as Dar spoke. She’d left the trash in the open to be found. Tikot looked at Semis—the old man knew what the enriov meant to provoke.

“Yes, Enriov Dar, at once...” Tikot pointed at Semis, who nodded quickly and moved to tell his Reman partner to clear the *Vollo* for takeoff.

Tikot nodded again and turned uneasily and looked back at Mivik. The big Reman warrior cocked his head inquisitively but knew enough not to speak. The Reman manning the dispatch terminal signalled the *Vollo* she was clear, and they could all hear the faint rumbling of the *Talon*-class scout ship's thrusters.

"I understand, Enriov.....Yes, *of course*.....They will, I'll see to it." Tikot pulled the headset free and handed it back to Semis. "Mivik...I would speak with you, alone."



**NAR 1331**

**PHASER  
RIFLE**

## On Approach / *Innaehv Mrei*

“Captain, I can now confirm four distinct Starfleet signals emanating from Kea II.” P’nom leaned back in her seat at *Trudy’s* central processor.

While the unique high-density field generated by the coil Teague had installed in the aft compartment helped the little runabout’s sensors in the swath of gravitons, the ship’s systems were still working far beyond their tolerances. Shorh gripped the arms of his command chair firmly and tried to suppress the pain in his head. He turned to face the young Vulcan.

“More tricorders?” His voice was strained, but he’d managed to keep a civil tone; though he doubted she’d notice, or even care.

“They are passive signals, captain. Possibly tricorders.”

Tagir groaned slightly.

“Ensign Dirlo, status on those contacts?” Shorh turned to look forward and watched as the young woman piloting the runabout squirmed slightly in her seat.

“There...there doesn’t seem to be a lot of movement, sir.”

Shorh leaned forward and his two white eyebrows bunched together as he scowled at his helmsman. “So, there’s been some movement then?”

“Yes, I believe so, Captain.”

Shorh pulled back and pressed his spine into the back of his chair. Leaving *Virgo* behind as a sort of last-resort emergency backup may not have been the wisest decision. He sighed and pushed himself out of his chair to look out the small viewport. The suns were so much closer now. The three rectangular viewports were fitted with solar filters decades earlier when the front half of *Trudy* had been a brand-new shuttle rolling out of the factory. For just a second, Shorh thought he saw some elaborate structure on the face of the smaller of Kea’s two stars, but then it was gone.

The likelihood of the unknown contacts being Romulan was high. In fact, to Shorh’s mind it was a foregone conclusion. He squinted out the viewport one more time hoping to catch a glimpse of...what?

Sunspots? Warbirds? The Tharay Witch herself? He looked down at the young human, still buried in the globe viewer, then over to P'nom and then back to Tagir—who looked pensive, ready for a fight. He had no right to ask these people to endanger themselves any further...

“Captain?”

Shorh turned around to see P'nom rise from her station and stretch out her back. Her terminal was now completely powered down. Without hesitation Shorh barked at Chief Rhupp to monitor the redundant overflow sensors from his engineering post. Once Tagir had telemetry from P'nom's overworked systems they'd execute a one-eighty and return to *Virgo*.

“Captain?”

“Yes, Lieutenant. What is it?!” Out of the corner of his eye he could see Dirlo pull back from her viewer in shock.

He hadn't meant to yell. The pain from his antenna was excruciating, and now the threat of possible Romulan engagement all mixed with the growing realization that all of it had been for naught.

“If we adjust our trajectory to match the trailing path of asteroids and flotsam, the graviton interference combined with the various minerals and debris of the asteroid field should provide us with a well shielded approach to Kea II.” P'nom smiled and then made her way aft to use the head.

Tagir dialed in the redundant data feeds and watched in silence as the small Vulcan ducked through the open hatch into the living compartment. He waited until she was out of sight.

“I have to admit, Captain, I think she's right.”

Shorh nodded at his Chief Specialist and turned back to Dirlo, who once again had her face buried in the small globe viewer. “Ensign, can...?”

“Already making the necessary course corrections, sir. We'll be dancing with rocks in two minutes.”

Shorh was speechless.

“We gotta find an approach that'll give us enough time to get off to rounds of transports and keep us covered from Rommies, Moira. We only have two transport pads and three of us to get down there to find

whatever's sending those signals and maybe not get vaporized," barked Tagir from his station.

"Just pick up the slack on the laterals."

Shorh sat dumbfounded in his seat. The chief and the helmsman had just assumed command. Shorh, who'd made it very clear none of them were Starfleet any longer, was oddly relieved to have someone else make the call.

## Conspiracy of Innocents / *Terraha Ihnerha*

Tikot stepped out of the control room and led Mivik in silence along the ancillary tunnel which connected the hub of the AK-hyi facility to the primary shaft running down to the Reman habitation levels. Ketor could hear the enormous Reman's heavy foot falls at his back. The light grew dimmer and dimmer as the two paced along in silence. Ahead, the cramped tunnel opened over a deep fissure, which was spanned by a simple metal walkway. Ketor slowed and stopped a few steps back from the opening where sounds and voices were amplified and echoed up and down the cracks and crevasses all the way down to the living levels.

"Mivik..." Tikot kept his voice low. This far back from the opening should prevent their voices from carrying, but Ketor wasn't going to risk anyone overhearing what he was about to share with the Installation's leading Reman.

"*Ra'nodaire Alhe Mivik, ve hwiyy htaodt'ia'rhoinnie!*" growled the warrior.

"Keep your voice low! Alhe Mivik, my apologies. I must know who you sent to deliver the alert to Enriov Dar." Tikot glanced around Mivik's mass to be sure no one had followed them along the tunnel. Damn her.

"Jijaik," growled Mivik in a low voice.

"Jijaik? The boy from the quarter shift?" Tikot shook his head at the thought of the gangly youth just recently elevated from working the extraction parties to uniformed service, being sent to deliver a confidential missive to Dar herself.

"*Ehwiyhwe'Imniuhfi'hwhueiurrr'at 'hh taeth faelirh-ravsem, aerrha,*" answered Mivik with a growing expression of concern starting to spread across his grey mottled face.

"Another *faelirh-ravsem*? How many damned nephews do you hav...!? No, never mind. Listen closely to what I'm about to share, Alhe Mivik. Know that I am your true ally here and value you and your people as the essential plank in all our sacred works here, yes?" His *sister* had intentionally meant to spark disaster.

Mivik drew a long breath and took a step back into the darkness. He nodded and waited.

“Jijaik boarded the *Vollo* without permission. He was...executed, as a trespasser.” Ketor could see the anger building behind Mivik’s milky eyes and quickly added... “The uhlan who failed in his duty to safeguard the ship has been severely punished, but Jijaik is dead. There’s nothing we can do about that.”

In a terrifying, low, guttural growl Mivik responded. “*Hveolhaonn htaodt’ia’rhoinnie taortuu ehdhiss fvai yearhoaium taeth faelirh-ravsem!*”

“Shh, shh, shh...that would be ill advised my friend. You know what that would lead to. Everything you’ve built here. All your people, all of it wiped away and there would be nothing I could do about it!” Ketor took half a step back as the hulking Reman seemed to surge forward for an instant, before falling back himself. Damn her.

Tikot watched as the monstrous creature paced hesitantly back and forth—seemingly at a loss as to what he should do next. An uprising would spell disaster for all of them; an uprising was exactly what Dar had hoped to provoke.

“Alhe Mivik...my friend, my friend please! The remains were left on the landing platform. The blast from the *Vollo*’s engines likely destroyed the corpse; however, I need you...YOU, Mivik, nobody else—to get up there and make sure there’s nothing to incite any of your people to rash action. Do you understand me?”

“*Ilm iebhe an feanna Rihanha khoiud!*” Mivik hissed violently.

Tikot curled his upper lip and stood up tall and straight. “We shall forget you just said that *my friend* and focus on the task at hand. Get up to the platform and be sure there’s nothing littered there that will set off any of your hotheaded brethren...for everyone’s sake.”

Mivik felt the swell of adrenaline and the urge to attack the *Rihanha*, the Romulan, in front of him. Had he been a younger man, Tikot Ketor would already be dead. As things were there were innocent lives at stake. Reman lives. Women, children, youths and simple miners. All of whom trusted Mivik with their governance and safety. Without uttering another word, the fierce warrior spun round and disappeared along the tunnel to head back to the surface. He had to

ensure the Romulan *fvai*'s ship had wiped away any evidence of young Jijaik—less a riot breakout and the AK-hyi colony itself was wiped away.

Tikot stood alone in the darkness long after the black/purple uniformed hulk of Mivik had disappeared. His *sister* had wreaked havoc on more than two decades of work in a single evening. His *sister* may have been right about the dangerous nature of the Remans all along. He was uneasy suddenly. It was the first time he could remember not knowing if Mivik could be trusted to do as he was bid...everything had been upended.

## ***Vollo Rising / Vollo Lhaerrh***

“We’ve cleared AK-hyi’s atmospheric shield, Enriov.” Commander Sateeka stood in front of *Vollo*’s command seat and waited for further instructions from Enriov Dar.

Caithlin turned away from the transmitter, having clearly laid out her instructions to her dear *brother* concerning the Reman filth which had violated her ship. She took a moment to regard the lean commander she’d personally selected to captain her *Vollo*. Sateeka was young for a commander, but she’d tested in the ninety-ninth percentile across the board at the Imperial War Academy and had risen through the ranks of the Imperial Fleet faster than any officer in the last fifty cycles. She needed to remind herself that it had been a rank-and-file uhlan who’d failed her—not her crew.

“Proceed to rendezvous with Ssiebh Landait’s *Keras* warbird and open a communications channel with Commander Veeta aboard *Vejul*.”

“Ie, Enriov Dar. Helm, steady ascent to one hundred *k’vahrus* and proceed to coordinates 11.7 by 33.6.” Sateeka placed her hands at the small of her back and watched as her crew smoothly operated the *Talon*-class ship’s sleek controls. She cut a lean figure in her mottled black and silver tunic, and she knew it. Nothing could surpass the pride she felt in her service to the Empire and her position as a Tal Shiar Commander.

Tal Shiar crews were rare. The Tal focussed primarily on individual agents and specialized teams working towards specific goals. As with Ketor’s operation at the Eism Lattice, the Tal Shiar often recruited the best of the Imperial Fleet to assist them in their work when necessary—but they rarely bothered to outfit their own vessels or installations. The *Vollo* was one of the rare exceptions. It had been purpose built for Enriov Dar’s needs and crewed entirely with Tal Shiar agents the enriov had selected.

With a crew of twenty-five officers and crew, *Vollo* was unique amongst other *Talon*-class ships in the fleet in another way as well. Dar had chosen only female Tal Shiar members to crew her ship. The security compliment of uhlans and their centurion commander were

regular Romulan Guard—Dar hadn't selected the armed squad herself, a situation she would rectify upon her return to Romulus. The small security force were the only men aboard.

Finally, there was Sub-Commander Sohon; regular fleet, but possessing attributes Caithlin found fascinating. Sohon would easily fit a role with the Tal, but Dar had bigger plans for her personal protector. Sohon would soon face the Admonition and if successful, Dar would indoctrinate her into the Zhat Vash.

“Enriov Dar, you have Commander Veeta on frequency three.”

Caithlin looked towards the communications officer sitting across from her. Sub-Lieutenant Surith, her black bobbed hair held down by a green communications headset. Dar nodded in acknowledgement then returned her attention to the *Vollo's* comms array and opened a private channel.

“Commander Veeta, this is Enriov Dar aboard the *Vollo*...The timeline for handover has been accelerated. You will prepare to receive my engineers within the hour and turn the *Vejul* over sharply, do you understand?...I am aware of the situation. Your orders stand: turn the *Vejul* over to my colonel aboard the primary *Keras*-class warbird and transfer yourself and your personnel to that craft promptly. Consider this not only a directive from the Tal Shiar, but a direct command from the Praetor himself...That would be acceptable, Commander, yes...Very well, yes *jolan tru*. *Vollo*, out.”

Commander Sateeka slowly lowered herself into the small, leather wrapped, marginally elevated command chair in the center of *Vollo's* long, narrow bridge. Major Sivetha, assigned to the helm, calmly manipulated her controls at the single station some three meters in front of and below Sateeka. All five officers staffing the bridge wore identical black and silver tunics. Only the subtle black decorations affixed to their banded collars denoted the differences in rank amongst them. Sivetha was twenty cycles older than her commander and her once jet-black hair had begun to fade to an iron grey.

“Setting course for 11.7 by 33.6, Commander,” reported the major in a raspy, low voice.

“Proceed, helm. Tactical, charge disrupters and ready shields. Enriov Dar, estimate rendezvous with Ssiebh Landait in three minutes,” reported Sateeka.

“Very well, Commander. Open a channel with the colonel.” Caithlin waited for the communications officer to activate the *Vollo*’s transmitter.

“Ssiebh Landait, standing by, Enriov.” The young woman seated across from Dar depressed two blue actuators on her console, which transferred the open comms channel to the transceiver the admiral was wearing.

“Colonel, this is Enriov Dar. The *Vollo* will rendezvous with you directly and escort you to within optimal transport range of the *Vejul*. You and your people are to board the *Vejul* as planned and ready her for imminent departure, understood?...That is correct, ssiebh. The plan has been altered for tactical reasons. Your people are prepared?....Fine, yes, jolan tru.”

## Commit / Irai

*Trudy* buffeted slightly as the runabout's modest shields impacted the rough, rocky surface of a jagged asteroid twice her size. In the control compartment Shorh braced himself against the right side of his seat to keep from spilling over to the deck.

"Ensign?!"

"Apologies, Captain...we need to stick close to the big ones to keep our cover." Dirlo had her face buried in *Trudy's* globe-shaped viewer.

Before Shorh could say anything further, Tagir Rhupp staggered through the hatch leading back to the runabout's midsection.

"What was that!? I nearly brained myself on the bulkhead!"

Moira groaned but kept her focus. She was literally piloting *Trudy*. They were so close to the stream of asteroids stemming from the point where Kea I had once orbited the system's two suns, that any deviation in course could mean a sudden, crushing death for them all.

P'nom was next through the hatch behind Tagir. Her hair was dishevelled, and she held her left hand over her left ear. The broad black belt cinching her red overalls was adorned with one of the type 1 phasers and one of the black, leather wrapped tricorders hung from its strap over the young Vulcan's left shoulder.

"Lieutenant, are you injured?" asked Shorh as he pulled himself out of his seat.

"I...I slammed the side of my head against my bunk, sir. I'll be fine." She took two steps into the command compartment and allowed Tagir to seat her at the engineering station.

Rhupp pulled the second tricorder free from around his own neck and handed it to his captain. Shorh examined the device to confirm Tagir had given him the unit with the drained battery. Satisfied that P'nom had the fully charged tricorder, Shorh looped the black strap over his head and let it hang at his side. Rhupp nodded as the Andorian shifted the strap to a more comfortable position, then he reached down to his own black belt and freed the first of the two remaining phaser pistols.

“Captain...” Tagir offered Shorh the pistol, butt first.

Without a word Shorh took the phaser, inspected its power cell, then fastened it to his own belt. P’nom was inspecting her fingers silently at the engineering console. Absently, Shorh wondered if his lieutenant bled human red, or Vulcan green? The young woman seemed satisfied that there was no harm done and slowly got to her feet and fixed her hair.

“Dirlo, I’m putting this here...beside your seat, ok?” Tagir slowly moved past Shorh and affixed the last of the phaser pistols to the side of Moira’s seat.

Moira could feel Tagir within her personal space and let a quiet grunt show that she understood what he was doing. The gravitons were apparently far more intense closer to the larger asteroids. Even with Teague’s field coil working at full strength, the returns were next to nil.

P’nom made her way to her accustomed station and as she passed behind Shorh, Tagir passed in front of the stoic Andorian. P’nom didn’t sit, but simply powered on her library monitor to consult the readings she’d taken a few moments before the gravitons had nearly completely blinded their sensors.

“Have you slowed to fifteen thousand kph, Ensign Dirlo?” the Vulcan asked in a voice completely void of expression.

“Aye.” Moira fired a half-second burst of *Trudy’s* aft dorsal maneuvering thruster to avoid a jagged outcropping the size of a mountain.

“Chief, the communicator?” Shorh tugged gently at the chest of his coveralls and again shifted the weight of the ancient tricorder hanging awkwardly against his left hip.

“I have it, Captain. Fully charged and functional.” P’nom twisted her rump towards Shorh, so he could see the small rectangular flip-communicator affixed to the back of her belt—where it wouldn’t interfere with either her tricorder, or phaser.

Shorh marvelled at how ridiculous the little Vulcan looked in the oversized coveralls, but quickly refocussed on their dubious plan of attack. “Fine. Ensign, you’re tied into the transmitter to summon *Brain*, if necessary?”

Moira grunted as she worked to trim Trudy's flight path to a parallel trajectory with an approaching asteroid the size of Earth's moon.

"Ensign?" prompted Shorh.

"Aye!" came the response.

"Good. P'nom, we're ready?" Shorh moved towards the engineering station and stood next to Tagir.

"At this speed we'll be able to get off two transport cycles. The facility *Virgo's* sensors first detected from outside the system appears to be 85-90% subterranean. It is possible we're looking at some sort of mining operation. Before we lost sensors, I was able to get a fix on the two strongest Starfleet signals coming from that facility. The first signal is emanating from half a kilometer below the surface in the southeast quadrant. The second is confirmed to be coming from a chamber six hundred meters north, northwest from the first, at the same depth. No life forms detected at the time of those scans." P'nom shut down her monitor.

"Good. P'nom, you and Rhupp will transport to the first contact, investigate and keep a low profile. I'll transport down right after you to the second location and collect readings of my own..."

"And I'll play chicken with asteroids for two hours and orbit those horrible stars before swinging by to scoop you all up again," said Moira from her seat in front of the orb-like viewer. The flying had already been challenging.

"You're sure you can manage, Ensign?" asked Shorh in a low voice.

"Aye." She didn't though. She hadn't shared with the others just how close they'd already come to being crushed.

"You're all sure about this?" Shorh looked from P'nom's big clear eyes to Tagir's dark bearded face and then over towards Dirlo, who still had her face buried in her viewer.

For a full eight seconds, nobody spoke. Then Dirlo announced: "Three minutes to transport, better move."

Three of the four ducked through the hatch into the midsection of the runabout where Tagir had wired the portable transport unit into the EPS feeds. P'nom programmed and double-checked the

coordinates, then without a word, stepped onto the octagonal pad on the left side of the unit they'd discovered aboard *Virgo*. Tagir stepped onto the pad to the right.

From her place at the helm, Moira triggered a simple switch as *Trudy* passed within transport range of the mysterious facility. A green diode illuminated along the upper bulkhead of the midsection and Shorh activated the transporter. P'nom and Tagir disappeared in a silver swirl of blue/white light.

The second the light faded, Shorh found himself alone among the bunks and the head he'd shared with his pathetic little crew. A red digital countdown from fifteen began on the unit's small screen. He checked his phaser and his tricorder again, then stepped onto one of the pads and watched as the red digits ticked down to zero....and he was awash in a silver/blue universe of light.

A stylized, high-contrast illustration of a man's face and upper torso. The man has dark hair and is wearing a white shirt with a black and grey pattern. The background consists of dark, angular shapes. The text 'SUBCOMMANDER SOHON' is overlaid on the left side of the image.

**SUBCOMMANDER**  
**SOHON**

## **Carrion Birds / Sseikea Nei'rrh**

“Commander, the plasma trail has dissipated. There is no sign of the intruder.”

Nendixa sighed and studied the tactical display on the *Valmaika's* primary viewscreen. Every two seconds a “sweep” of the *Horo*-class warbird's powerful targeting beams illuminated irregularly shaped red blobs to the starboard bow, which denoted benign asteroids. The gravitons had grown increasingly intense the closer Nendixa ordered his large, menacing warbird to the dense asteroid spray which fanned out from where *AK-gva* had once orbited the twin stars. Each of the *Horos* had been equipped with specialized sensors and amped up scanning beams to counter the graviton-heavy space. Regular *Keras*-class warbirds would be blind in the system, let alone attempting to navigate this close to the asteroid spray. A small shuttle, even a scout-class vessel would have no hope whatsoever.

“What news of the *Vollo*?” asked Nendixa, his hazel eyes fixed on the screen.

“*Vollo* reports she is underway now that the transfer of personnel to *Vejul* is underway. Commander Sateeka requests we broadcast our position over the secure all-frequencies system, so they might more readily rendezvous with us and root out the intruder.” Sub-Commander Sitair stood beside the communications operative and wore a headset with its transmitter/microphone flipped up to its inactive position.

“Commander Ariekh's disposition?” Nendixa watched the tactical board sweep again. More asteroids. No offensive contacts. No sign of the *Valaj*.

“*Valaj* has broken off from the spray, Commander. They're doubling back to the last confirmed coordinates of the plasma trail to try and intercept the intruder should it double back on its original course.” Sitair couldn't see his commander's face, but he knew the man well enough to be sure of his response.

“Clever boy Ariekh, clever boy... Contact the *Vollo*, advise this Commander Sateeka that even with the enriov's undoubtedly amplified sensors, a *Talon*-class ship will be blind out here. Provide them with a complete tactical report.” Nendixa had certified Ariekh for promotion to

commander nine cycles earlier. He'd trained the young man in the ways of war. As the lead command instructor at the Imperial War Academy, he'd trained most of the current generation of warbird commanders presently active.

Sitair flipped the slim transmitter arm down from his headset and waited until he heard the subtle electronic "beep" through his transceiver before signalling the communications operator to open a channel to the *Vollo*. His confidence in the abilities of Commander Nendixa was unshakable. It may take some time, but the *Valmaika* and her sistership, *Valaj*, would soon flush out their quarry.

## Signals / Rhssiiy

The first thing P'nom noticed upon materializing at the coordinates she'd programmed aboard *Trudy* was the heavy humidity and the warmth. It was easily ten to fifteen degrees warmer here than it had been aboard the runabout. The second thing she noticed was the dingy light and harsh rock walls, ceiling and floor she and Chief Rhupp had appeared amongst.

"Equipment check, Lieutenant," croaked Tagir in the humid darkness.

P'nom twisted her back and brushed her left hand over the bulky flip-style communicator affixed to the back of her black utility belt. She unfastened her phase pistol with her right hand simultaneously. The old-style phasers were rudimentary in their function in P'nom's opinion, but she knew how *special* Tagir found all this old gear to be and kept quiet as she verified her weapon was operational. Had they transported down from *Isadore*, P'nom and Tagir would have had their gear in-hand before dematerializing, but the mobile pads were too small to allow such freedom.

"Phaser ready," whispered P'nom as she moved her left hand from the communicator to the tricorder hanging off her shoulder. She flipped open the black instrument's main flap...and suddenly heard Tagir's rifle powering up.

"Big gun's hot. Communications?"

"Tricorder's good." P'nom let the tricorder stand open and set it to a low-frequency sweep as she removed the communicator with her left hand, flipped it open quickly and verified that its one available channel was operational. She closed the little box and replaced it to the back of her belt. "Communicator, functional."

Tagir closed his eyes and willed himself to keep them closed for a full three seconds to adjust to the dim lighting as quickly as possible. It was warm and sticky in whatever cave or tunnel their sensors had led them down to. He could feel P'nom on his left flank. Though he'd never thought of asking, he hoped now that the young woman had inherited some superior Vulcan vision given their present situation.

“What are you getting?” growled Tagir, his eyes still closed.

“No life-signs...we appear to be in a chamber, linked by several elaborate tunnels to at least two vertical shafts which seem to cut deeper into the planetoid.”

“So, a mine of some kind?” Tagir slowly opened his eyes and blinked. At first there was blackness, but slowly, thankfully, his eyes detected the dimmest levels of light and the shape of the world around him began to materialize.

P’nom held her phaser aloft as she focused on her ancient tricorder’s small screen and manipulated the small actuators lining the inner flap. “The signal is coming from an antechamber...fifteen meters ahead...no lifeforms registering within a hundred meters.”

“Alright, on my six.” Tagir fluttered his eyes one more time. The light from the rifle’s status diode polluted the dim glow of their surroundings and he didn’t want to lose his vision.

P’nom kept her phaser at the ready as she slowly followed Rhupp through the darkness. Before the older man could say anything, P’nom noticed the lighting begin to improve marginally as they closed in on the mysterious Starfleet signal they were following through the darkness.

Tagir walked up a rough-hewn step and ascended into a slightly smaller chamber. He blinked rapidly and allowed himself a few seconds to confirm what he suspected—the light was improving. He and P’nom were now standing in a room that was roughly three meters wide by five, or six meters deep. Two dark tunnels stood at the far end of what looked like a storage room of some kind. Rhupp swept the muzzle of his phaser rifle along the perimeter of the room, never taking his eyes off the two dark portals at the far end—imagining what might spring forth at any second.

“Here, Chief; the signal’s coming from in here.” P’nom looked around the room, then down at her tricorder.

Tagir glanced over his shoulder at the lieutenant and shuffled further into the room. He could make out odd cubbies—long dug out cavities in the rocky walls lined with odd purple veins of crystal, or minerals...but his naked eyes couldn’t make out anything stowed in these holes.

P'nom moved past Tagir, following her tricorder and forcing the chief to raise the barrel of his rifle to keep her out of his line of fire. She looked up from her hip where the tricorder glowed and reached out into the darkness to retrieve...

"What is it?" asked Tagir. They were too close to the two dark passageways.

P'nom held up a light-coloured object and made a show of pressing her thumb against it. A familiar tone sounded, and the room was illuminated by the active display panel of a modern medical tricorder. Tagir sighed, happy to see the world around him for the first time since arriving. There were items and scraps stowed in every hole. P'nom closed the flap on her antique tricorder and held up her find to log into the unit.

>ACCESS GRANTED....PWR: 09%....UNIT: MB-00S21 USS SHEAFFE NCC-0564<

## Completed / *Hveiyaeihdh*

Maureen sat quietly overlooking the arrivals platform at Starfleet Headquarters. The meeting with T'Chou had been pointless. Most of her interactions with Xao were. It had been useful to have an idiot in Security and it was perhaps more advantageous to have an idiot in charge of Ops, given her present needs. Now though, the *heavy lifting* on her end was done and Xao could fade into obscurity just as soon as Henry Wallace got around to pulling the trigger and selecting a proper replacement for Thomas Knot.

A transport shuttle hummed along one of the approach pads directly beneath Maureen's place on the concourse level. She watched the long white craft glide gracefully to a stop like some great white sea bird. They were awaiting a 1500 hrs. transit pod over some Bolian brew; a rare chance to relax. An opportunity young Commander Todorokov was sadly squandering.

"Admiral, may I refill your cup?"

Maureen turned to face the kind Bolian barista and smiled. Svetlana hadn't touched her coffee, and a tremendous looking blueberry scone sat unmolested on the brilliant white plate resting in front of her.

"Thank you, yes." She watched as the blue man poured a long steaming stream of jet-black coffee from the chrome carafe he carried.

"Commander, you really should try the coffee. Genuine Bolian brew is a delicacy," said Maureen over the pleasing sound of coffee filling her nearly empty ceramic mug.

The barista smiled broadly at the admiral upon hearing her praise his coffee and graciously withdrew to leave his only patrons in peace.

Svetlana waited until the Bolian had returned to his stand before leaning across the table and speaking to the admiral in a hushed voice. "Admiral, I don't understand why we're sitting here. Wouldn't it be easier to transport to Spacedock and await Captain Demby?"

Maureen smiled and lifted her mug to her lips. Jose hadn't done well with downtime either. "The good captain is sending a pod for us,

Commander. It's been cleared and scheduled with planetary control for 1500. Try the scone, they're almost as good as the coffee."

Through contacts Maureen had made with the C-shift Maintenance Dock Master while commanding the *Victory*, Captain Bautlin had secured a simple transit pod which was due for refit more than three years earlier. Admiral U'Chtuklli had asked her to deliver the pod no questions asked to one of his operatives, a dark eyed, intense man by the name of Moddax.

Years later that same pod had been completely rebuilt and outfitted with a new adaptive transponder. The final programming of that transponder, which would allow the pod to generate valid credentials for itself at any Starfleet facility across the Alpha or Beta Quadrants—had to wait until work on the *N12* was completed. Now though, the pod was fully operational and there was no longer any need for clandestine and often high-risk transports from Starfleet installations. The admiral, or any of her operatives could sit in the open, enjoy a coffee and wait for an official pod to collect them from any port they may need to infiltrate.

Maureen set her mug down and turned back to observe the transport. She'd missed watching whoever was onboard departing. "You're sure you delivered the package without issue, Svetlana?" she asked nonchalantly.

Todorokov bristled slightly. "Yes, of course. As soon as...*ahem*, the moment he needs to log in he'll be well taken care of."

Maureen smiled and let her gaze linger on the busy platform below. Jose had been better at this part of things than Svetlana appeared to be. Still, the program was installed and the second Xao logged into his terminal, everything he did would be copied to *K3*.

The arrivals/departures board updated itself. Maureen let the blinking digital screen draw her eye away from an executive shuttle resting on a far pad. In her own mind she reviewed what they'd put in place and what was scheduled to play out in the coming days and weeks.

*Enterprise* would soon be entering the Foxtrot Sector; Xao had been useful there and as far as the temporary Chief of Ops was

concerned, the plan had been all Captain Harriman's and his own doing. At best Maureen had been a cheerleader after the fact.

The *Tomed* would be on station just on the Romulan side of the Neutral Zone, stripped down and awaiting orders.

Cor Coroli had confirmed the Treaty was writ and ready to be presented once the calamity to come had triggered the sabre rattling and hand wringing the Federation Council so excelled at. She'd selected her man to deal with Nompel after all was said and done.

"Drink your coffee, Commander. That's an order."

## **Service No. 685-0813D / *Aihrifv ahht.* 685-0813D**

The heat and humidity nearly bowled Shorh over in the darkness. Once the transport cycle had completed the unexpected environmental assault sent his head spinning and he staggered backwards, withering in the heat. He banged into a jagged, rocky wall and gasped loudly for a few seconds trying to compose himself. The dark cavern he found himself in, stank of mildew and raw minerals.

He leaned against the wall not trusting his legs to hold him upright. His nausea was dwarfed only by the humiliation at being brought down by a warm atmosphere. Andorians were resilient, but they preferred the cold temperatures of their frozen homeworld to the sickening tropics. Shorh groped for his tricorder and with a shaking hand, pried open the device's main flap to activate the scan cycle.

He found himself in a tunnel just outside a large chamber some eight square meters in size. The ancient tricorder reported no life signs in the immediate area, but Shorh was unclear what the scan range for the old tool might be. According to the indicator lamp the tricorder had less than a 25% charge.

He pushed himself off the wall and forced his eyes wide open to allow them to adjust to the poor light. On Fesoan, he'd spent most of his childhood in the subterranean levels of Laibok City where the geothermal warmth kept his people from freezing. Under the ice there were times when the lighting elements had to be powered down and darkness was simply another state of being for all Andorians.

The tunnel in which he'd been deposited was over three meters wide by four meters tall. The walls, floors and ceiling had all been carved through the hard dark rock of the planetoid itself. A curious web of sparkling purple ore ran in long ragged veins throughout the rock. The air didn't move. The humid, sticky atmosphere clung to everything.

Shorh drew a long uncomfortable breath and raised his phaser up from his utility belt to check its charge. The pistol at least was at full power. He stepped towards the middle of the tunnel and consulted his tricorder for a directional fix on the passive signal P'nom had detected

from *Trudy*. The signal was coming from the chamber just ahead in the darkness.

Shorh set the old phaser from its diagnostic *lock* mode to the *stun* setting. He could feel the old tricorder growing warm against the protective red fabric of his engineering overalls. The tiny screen was awash in ill defined signals. The clearest contact was just ahead of him in the darkness, but apparently there were several other, weaker signals P'nom had missed. The indicator lamp flickered. The tricorder had dropped to a 19% charge. The old tool was broken and dying fast.

He closed the flap as the lamp flickered a third time and the charge dropped to 17%. Shorh slowly made his way a few steps through the dim tunnel holding his phaser out ahead of him. The floor, though composed of the same rock as the walls and ceiling, had been levelled and was mostly obstacle free.

His lungs worked twice as hard in the oppressive dead atmosphere of the cavern. In the tunnel, Shorh's eyes were able to pick out the form of things. He could make out the edges of the walls and see perhaps a quarter meter ahead of himself. Once he came to the entrance to the chamber where the strongest of the passive signals was coming from, all he could see was a solid inky blackness.

He flipped open the tricorder's flap and quickly tuned the old dials to sweep his surroundings one last time before the unit failed. As a warning tone sounded feebly, and the lamp flickered and died—a quick smile crossed Shorh's face. The tricorder was dead; its compromised power pack likely damaged in transport. Before the small screen faded though, it had confirmed that there were no life signs in the dark room and had indicated a simple actuator was mounted to the rock wall just inside the black chamber.

Shorh reached into the darkness and felt up and down the warm rock wall until he found a single pole, single throw, switch. Phaser in hand, the lone Andorian flipped the basic switch and was pleased when the darkness was expelled by a flickering lighting element mounted high in the craggy recesses of the mysterious chamber.

Stepping up into the dimly lit room, Shorh quickly assessed all that he could. The walls were bare rock. The piping and wiring for the overhead lighting element were crudely bolted into the rock, but the

walls were bare. At the far end of the room stood a tool dolly, a half meter tall metal cabinet on heavy duty wheels. It was the sort of thing Shorh had seen in hangar bays throughout the fleet. He slowly approached the dolly, wary of booby traps and unsure as to what he might find.

A simple etching on the dolly's door read: *USS Sheaffe* NCC-0564. There was no sign of any hidden danger. Within the dented cabinet he found a ragged, torn and filthy standard radiation suit. 'Bradley, A. Service No. 685-0813D / NCC-0564' was embroidered along the inner collar. The suit's distress/rescue beacon was still functioning—the passive signal. Shorh laid the once pristine white radiation suit atop the dolly. He counted a half dozen clean tears penetrating from front to back surrounded by a large, dark brown stain.

## Thirst / Pa'rshed

“Commander Sateeka, *Valmaika* signals they are unable to broadcast their location at this time. They recommend we remain in orbit and await updates; a tactical brief has been provided. Commander Nendixa sends his regards to Enriov Dar.”

Sateeka turned in her chair to regard her communications operator, but before she could open her mouth the admiral was out of her seat at the station on the opposite bulkhead and bearing down on the young Tal Shiar officer relaying the message.

“That tactical report, now.” Caithlin wasn’t angry at her agent; she was furious at the impudence of a common commander daring to refuse her order.

The younger woman manning the communications station entered an encryption algorithm into her computer and silently listened to the brief the *Valmaika* had transmitted. Sateeka rose from her command seat and took up her place to the right and just slightly behind Enriov Dar. Both Caithlin and the commander of the *Vollo* waited for the younger woman to report.

The report was brief, but concise.

“Commander, the *Valmaika* reports that the ionized plasma trail they’d been following dissipated and appears to have run into a thick field of asteroids. Graviton concentrations are so intense that even *Valmaika*’s specialized sensors are limited. Commander Ariekh and the *Valaj* are back tracking to ensure the intruder does not elude detection, while *Valmaika* continues her search along the projected path the intruder most likely committed to.”

Dar clenched her jaw, then turned to Commander Sateeka. Caithlin had been many things over her nearly eighty cycles, operative, politician, ambassador, hostage, *sister*...but she’d never actually commanded a ship and had never been to the War Academy. She’d selected her ship’s crew from the best of the best. Before reacting to what she still saw as patronizing defiance, she wanted to hear from her trusted experts the truth of the situation as laid out by this Nendixa.

“Enriov Dar, we’re not equipped to navigate in these gravitons. We have preprogrammed approach and departure routes to safely take us out of the system and back to Romulus with the *Vejul*, but to set off without an escort...in my opinion, would be folly.” Sateeka knew the admiral valued direct talk from her people and she delivered her opinion as simply and as bluntly as possible.

Caithlin’s eyes narrowed. Her fury had been stoked by the Reman filth infiltrating her ship. The news of an unknown intruder approaching from points unknown further infuriated her and now this Nendixa...she took a long second to order her mind.

“Relay the following to *Valmaika* and the *Valaj*: the intruders are to be detained and delivered to me alive for interrogation. Failure on any Romulan’s part to comply with this instruction will be met with severe consequences.”

The communications operative began encoding the orders for the two great warbirds hunting the unknown intruder somewhere in the rocky, radioactive darkness of the haunted little system they’d all come to be stranded in. The enriov hadn’t broken eye contact with Commander Sateeka, but the officer at comms understood clearly that the instruction had been meant for her.

“Commander, position us in a superior orbit astern *Vejul* and bring the disruptors and shields to full power. I want every beam, laser, sensor, and hand torch turned to maximum and sweeping a three hundred-and-sixty-five-degree bubble around this ship. If so much as a chunk of ice breaks our perimeter, I want to know immediately. Clear?” Caithlin tried to moderate her voice, but the rage had taken hold.

“Yes, Enriov Dar.” Sateeka brought her heels together and bowed slightly towards the menacing woman, not daring to break eye contact less the admiral take it as a sign of disrespect, or worse, weakness.

Dar watched in silence as Sateeka spun around and relayed her orders to the helm and tactical stations.

*Vollo* pulled away from her low orbit around AK-hyi abeam of Ssiebh Landait’s *Keras*-class *Workbird* and climbed gracefully to assume a looming position some two hundred *k’vahrus* above and

astern the *Vejul* and the smaller vessels which were in the process of exchanging crews and off-loading supplies. The other ships now fell within the *Talon*-class *Vollo*'s weapons envelope. All three now fell under the admiral's protection.

Dar left the bridge to await word of Nendixa's successful hunt in her quarters. Sub-Commander Sohon waited for her in the narrow corridor leading back to the admiral's modest suite.

"Orders, enriov?" Sohon showed no signs of fatigue following her long evening and had taken the time to ensure her silver uniform and two sleek pistols were perfectly presented.

"We wait. Walk with me, Sohon." Dar strode slowly, but confidently along the corridor to the ramp leading down to the larger deck where most of the living quarters were located.

## Recovery / *Etreimnai*

AK-hyi's natural atmosphere was only barely in the tolerance range of the Reman respiratory system. Its high temperatures and grit-laced winds blasted everything on its surface with a sharp mixture of nitrogen, hydrazine and oxygen. After the devastating destruction of AK-gva, it had fallen to a hundred Remans to establish an infrastructure of terraforming equipment on AK-hyi. It was Remans who prepared the planet for excavation and inhabitation; a necessary step in establishing a new mine and smelting operation for the critical Eisen Lattice Project.

Mivik stood at the center of his facility's primary landing platform and looked out over the brown/red horizon. It was still several hours before the eastern hemisphere of AK-hyi would spin 'round to bask in the brilliant light of the system's suns. A heavy pair of silver rimmed flash goggles hung loosely around Mivik's neck. Soon it would be too bright for his delicate eyes.

At nearly two and half meters tall, Mivik was considered large even among other full-grown Reman males. He was to AK-hyi what the Praetor was to the Star Empire...he liked to tell himself that. The truth was, he was just a survivor. He was strong when others had been weak and most importantly, lucky when it mattered most. All but one of his three uncles and his own father had died grooming AK-hyi for the Romulans after alien machine monsters had obliterated the Reman world of AK-gva.

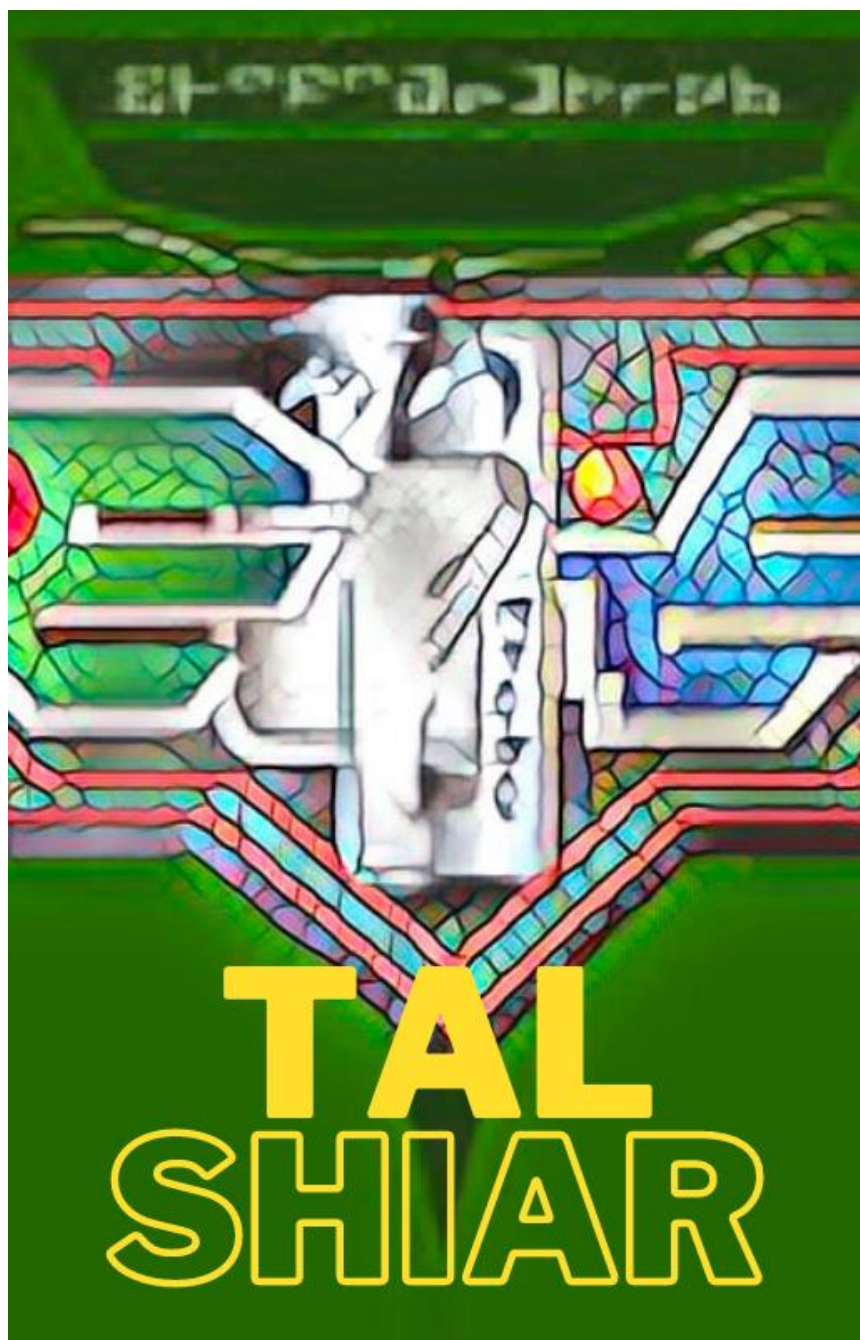
Mivik had been assigned to troop duty aboard a Romulan patrol craft along with a dozen other adult males when the unthinkable had occurred. He'd been lucky. His mate, their five children and ten thousand other Remans were obliterated in a matter of seconds while he ate gruel and drilled under the watchful eye of a Romulan centurion. His father and uncles were sent along aboard a support vessel from their colony in the Nelvana System some seven weeks following the apocalypse.

Mivik, a few of his peers and two brothers were pulled into service at the new facility of modular rigs and construction gantries. He was the oldest, healthiest Reman working at the time of Ketor's arrival.

Ketor deemed him worthy to be the Reman representative of the workers and he eventually became the leader of the small Reman facility which sprouted more than twenty cycles later. Lucky.

There'd been no real need to worry on Ketor's part, Mivik reflected. What remained of the boy was a tattered swath of black/purple material and some charred bones. Mivik had unceremoniously dropped the femur and the jawbone off the side of the platform. Most of his nephew was reduced to ash and scattered by the wash of the admiral's ship.

Gazing out at nothing, he wondered if being just lucky was enough...



## Detection / *Mhafv 'iuke*

P'nom quickly pulled up the medical tricorder's root menu to see if there was anything in memory that might illuminate how the device had come to rest on a shelf in a cave in the middle of an alien world. She noted that the tricorder's suite of programs was intact. Aside from being filthy, the unit appeared to be in perfect condition. The light generated by the small diodes and access screen was enough to cast flickering shadows onto the rocky, purple veined walls.

Tagir moved slowly towards the first of the two gaping passageways situated at the far end of the chamber they'd discovered the tricorder in. The lights and occasional alert tones and haptics chiming out from small device in P'nom's hand seemed to be amplified a hundredfold. Absently, Tagir wished the meagre light from the control surface of the small tool could somehow illuminate the near total darkness they were working in. He inched towards the first passageway and tentatively sniffed the air. He could see nothing, smell seemed like the only reliable sense he had left as both hands were firmly gripping his large phaser rifle.

"What are you trying to do?" P'nom asked in a flat, level voice. There was nothing on file in the tricorder's memory. Its chip appeared to be new.

Tagir jumped at the sudden sound of the young woman's voice and turned to hiss at the Vulcan. P'nom's face was still buried in the tricorder. She didn't seem to notice his reaction.

He readjusted the rifle's loose strap by shrugging his large shoulders and tried to compose himself. He wasn't sure just what he'd hoped to glean from sniffing the stale, warm air, but it had seemed primal and somehow appropriate...not that a Vulcan would understand.

P'nom lowered the tricorder and deactivated it. For just a second everything was black again. It wasn't until the lieutenant reinitiated the larger, older tricorder they'd brought along from *Trudy* that Tagir could make out the faintest details of the chamber by the pathetic light thrown up from the black box.

“There are seventeen distinct signals emanating from this room, all Starfleet. All fading gradually.” P’nom looked up from the antiquated screen and moved towards a warren of shallow holes carved in the closest wall.

Tagir moved away from the black void he’d been investigating and tried to force his eyes to open wider to drink in every lumen the dank reality surrounding him could provide. He could hear more than see P’nom digging around in what sounded like a bin of loose stem bolts.

P’nom had to stand on her tip toes to reach up and into the nearest hole that registered a Starfleet signal. Everything felt damp and warm down here, she wondered how the tricorder and whatever else was still functioning in this strange world hadn’t shorted out and corroded in the unpleasant atmosphere. Her fingertips brushed over sharp ends of wire, some flat pieces of metal and...she flicked at a thick, heavy object at the bottom of the hole. With a grunt and what might otherwise have been a less than dignified hop, she retrieved the palm-sized object her probing fingers had happened across.

Tagir saw movement...he closed the distance between himself and the small Vulcan and took care to raise the muzzle of his rifle. “P’nom, what is it?”

The flap on the tricorder had closed on itself. The unit was still on and pulling power, but the display was hidden. P’nom exhaled and gently lifted the old access panel into position but found it would not lock into place. With one hand she held her tricorder open and with the other she held her newfound treasure against the black clad primary scanner of the device.

“It’s a passive transmitter. Self-contained power cell.”

“Like what the radiation suits in engineering are outfitted with?” asked Tagir, quietly grateful to have the tricorder’s small screen spewing forth blessed light.

“Exactly. This one is nearly drained, but if I can...” She moved her left thumb against the old tricorder’s flap to hold it open as she manipulated the small diodes within using her free fingers. She kept the transmitter plastered to the side the black box, less its weak signal

fade and the old tricorder failed to get a proper reading. “There, this is registering as: ERS/7.”

“Engineering Rad Suit seven? There, there should be a prefix. A tag to identify what ship the suit was registered to.” Tagir lowered his rifle and moved closer to P’nom.

As the young Vulcan fiddled with the awkward dials and actuators clustered within the tight control compartment of the old tricorder, Rhupp was nearly overcome with relief to be so close to the light and to the comfort of another person’s presence. He doubted that even with Vulcan eyes, P’nom could see the embarrassing flush of red that coloured his cheeks, but he was embarrassed none the less.

As P’nom boosted the gains on her tricorder she looked quickly up at Chief Rhupp. He had an odd look on his face. If not for his thick black beard, P’nom would have been certain the man was blushing. An odd ‘bong’ sounded, and the tricorder displayed a single line of new information... “NCC-0564. That’s all. The unit is dying.”

## Call of the Dogs / *Mehre hvaedroalh Ehdhihss*

“Commander, the *Vollo* acknowledges your transmission. She remains in orbit of AK-hvi. Enriov Dar demands immediate status updates.”

“Huh? Imagine that Sitair: a Tal Shiar admiral listening to common sense. This must be a first.” Nendixa sat back in his command chair and breathed a long sigh. He shouldn’t have said that...and here came Sitair to...

“Apologies, Commander, but you mustn’t speak of the Tal Shiar like that.” Sitair kept his voice at a low whisper. If he’d been any closer to Commander Nendixa, he’d be licking the man’s earlobe.

Nendixa grunted, pulled back from his well-meaning, if overly intense Sub-Commander and swept his eyes over everyone present on the bridge. They were all completely loyal, he’d trained them all up from raw recruits. Of course, loyalty to a true Romulan was a commodity of degrees. Every crewman, uhlán, and centurion aboard were loyal to their commander; but if they were loyal to him, were they not more loyal to the Guard? To the Praetor and the Empire?

*To the Tal Shiar?* came the little voice deep in Nendixa’s head. The same little voice every sensible Romulan learned to heed from a very young age.

None of the crew seemed to have noticed his indiscretion. All Nendixa could do was move on. He was tired. Picking through rocks looking for some phantom intruder in the middle of a radioactive hellscape was not what the old warrior had thought he’d be doing at a hundred and twenty-seven cycles old. He glanced back at the tactical display, nothing had changed. Sitair was still standing at the right of his command chair.

“Commander, recommend we reverse course and join our efforts with those of the *Valaj*.”

Nendixa shifted his weight and glared at the useless tactical display.

“Commander?” Sitair awaited the old man’s orders. The attention of the enriov and the increasing tensions running through the

ship since the arrival of the Tal Shiar vessel and the two odd *Keras*-class warbirds, which weren't warbirds at all, had all made the battle-hardened Sub-Commander uneasy himself.

"You say we're looking for a small vessel, a shuttle or a light scout-class craft at most, correct?" Nendixa deftly flipped one of the toggle switches on the arm of his command chair and the tactical display dropped away from the bridge's viewscreen.

"Yes, Commander. From the ionized plasma we've scrutinized some kind of large shuttle seems likely. May I ask why?"

Nendixa let a monstrous grin pull his lips thin and puff his fat cheeks out in a grotesque mask of glee. "How many crewmen do we have off duty at the moment, Sub-Commander?"

"Off duty? Uh...yes, well, all told there are fifty-seven off duty personnel awaiting the next shift rotation, Commander. Not including the dozen section heads and command officers."

"You will have the centurion in ship's stores issue a communicator to each of those fifty-seven men and dozen officers. The communicators are to be tied directly to the bridge, understood?" Nendixa rose from his seat and called for an external view.

An unenhanced view of the asteroid spray appeared on the bridge's viewscreen. Sitair stood motionless, he could find no words and had no idea what Commander Nendixa was proposing.

"The ion trail has gone cold. Ariekh is guarding the reverse approach. Our intruder is using the asteroids to elude us." Nendixa strode confidently towards the screen and stared at the massive chunks of stone and debris drifting by less than two *k'vahrus* off their starboard side.

"That's not possible, Commander. They'd be blind."

"Not if they have a window. Rouse those men and equip them as ordered. They're to be stationed at every viewport, window and porthole along our starboard side. They will visually scan the asteroid field for our quarry. Helm, prepare to close our distance to the asteroid spray to one quarter of a *k'vahrus*."

Sitair considered how mad any pilot would have to be to attempt to navigate a deadly asteroid field with nothing but their visual pickups; but there was logic in what the old man had deduced. The spray did

flow directly past AK-hyi from its origin point where AK-gva had once orbited close to the twin suns. Still... “There’s no way...”

“I’ve given you an order Sub-Commander. A skilled pilot, with reliable thrusters and a sound dampening field—a skilled pilot just might risk it. Whatever our intruder thinks is worth that risk; it’s our duty to discover why. Jolan tru.” The conversation was over. It was time to hunt.

“Jolan tru.” Sitair left the bridge to rouse the men.

## Barnstorming / Hvei'khenn

*Trudy's* starboard nacelle signalled an intake blockage. The shielded buzzard collector had clogged with thick ice and dust from the flotsam shed by the stream of asteroids the small runabout skirted. The primary alert panel lit up in a rainbow of colours. The main MASTER ALARM was dark, but the secondary diagnostic alarms flashed in bright yellows and reds. Across the cabin from *Trudy's* helm station, the engineering console screamed alerts at the empty chair where Chief Rhupp had been sitting just an hour before.

Moira kept her face buried in the grey orb that was her station's standalone viewer. Her right hand gripped the navigational control and her left rested lightly on the splay of independent toggle switches that fired and shunted each of the runabout's eighteen independent maneuvering thrusters. Ignoring the latest chorus of alarms, Moira triggered the portside lateral thrusters for a one second burst to avoid a wayward chunk of rock which had suddenly appeared in her narrow field of view.

*Trudy* shuffled sharply to the right, narrowly avoiding an icy chunk of rock roughly twice her size. She ran her starboard deflectors hard into the plasma trail of debris and ice being shed by the larger asteroids which were obscuring her from detection. Another quick correction and the runabout, now showing signs of friction burns and meteor strikes along her starboard paneling, pulled away from the rough shower of ice and rock.

Ensign Dirlo throttled back on the impulse engine to one eighth standard and drew a long, shaking breath. She didn't dare take her eyes off the small screen she relied upon to guide the small craft along on its dangerous course. None of the exterior sensors were functioning. The most intense gravitons were close to the asteroid spray and even Mr. Teague's field coil couldn't compensate for the radiation *Trudy* was pulling herself through. The forward visual interstellar cameras were the only external sensors *Trudy's* protective field provided some protection for. Even these could only offer Moira a 1:1 aspect ratio with no greater magnification available in the midst of the heavy gravitons.

To get the clearest view possible Moira had switched her viewer to a basic black and white display. A simple spatial grid overlaid the live feed of the path ahead of the runabout, which Moira used to calculate her small course corrections in real time. Along either side of the screen were displayed several colour coded warning icons, letting Dirlo know of the more critical issues her vessel was suffering. She ignored most of them. The nacelle warning meant nothing at that moment—the warp core was shuttered. Tagir would have to deal with the fowled nacelle later.

The flying had been intense. There'd been three separate occasions Moira had been sure *Trudy* was going to become one with the universe, yet somehow, she'd managed to clip mountains, dodge meteors and narrowly avoid the broadside of asteroids using the antique thrusters and dwindling deuterium supply held in the runabout's inadequate reserve tanks. Sweat had collected along the bottom of the rubber-lined viewer cowling she'd stuck her face against. The small screen housed within the protective orb was beginning to fog. Just under an hour remained until the plotted pickup time.

As Moira tried to breathe through her mouth to reduce the fogging she was now dealing with, she didn't notice the proximity alert flashing on the panel directly in front of her. In just under an hour, she expected to receive P'nom's signal. The transporter unit had been programmed to recognize the signal and automatically transport the away team back aboard while Moira remained on station, ready to make a quick, quiet escape.

*Trudy* pulled past a particularly fragmented asteroid and Moira increased thrust to pull alongside the next moon-sized rock in line. In the bottom right of her viewer a new alert began flashing. Of all things, *Trudy's* ventral magnetic phase sensor was suddenly working and registering refined metallic debris on the surface of this new asteroid. Moira glanced at it for a fraction of a second and dismissed it as more noise. Piloting was what mattered. Unfortunately, the stray metal reading registered the same instant as the intermittent proximity warning and took precedence on the limited screen Moira was relying upon.

The flashing yellow “jelly” diode mounted directly in front of Ensign Dirlo flashed seven times. The anterior proximity sensors had registered a faint return in the lee of the graviton shower flowing over the runabout like an invisible blizzard. For twelve seconds the indeterminant return registered strongly enough to signal the automated proximity alert. The warbird *Valmaika* approached and readied her tractor beam. Moira never saw it coming.

# AK-HYI (KEA II)



## Predation / *P'illhvae'ga*

The first three calls came from the forward sections of the sensor bay access corridor on deck 12. Two bleary-eyed uhlans and a sub-lieutenant all reported spotting a small grey shuttle amongst the spinning asteroids trailing their way out of the system into the far reaches of space beyond. On the bridge three different communications operators relayed the calls in real time to the commander and the extra tactical operative brought up specifically to tune the warbird's visual detectors the way he might target a disruptor bank.

"Two more sightings, starboard 0.23 by 112!" called out the young operator manning the main communications terminal.

"On screen," said Commander Nendixa, deeply pleased with himself.

Calls continued to pour into the three communications operators, who dutifully relayed coordinates and notable details to Sub-Commander Sitair while Nendixa studied the static-laced images flickering on the main viewer.

"Tactical, clear that up!" snapped the old commander without taking his eyes from the screen. He blocked out the chatter behind him.

The screen flickered and erupted in a wild orgy of white static for a second as the tactical officer tuned the *Valmaika's* pickups to the ever-changing coordinates being relayed from the crewmen standing by the starboard windows and viewports. The tracking warbled slightly and then...clear and free of feedback, the image of the large shuttle.

"Hold that image!" roared Commander Nendixa as he pushed himself forward in his seat. "Lock disruptors!"

"Commander, the gravitons are too severe for us to accurately target a craft that small," croaked the uhlan at the primary tactical station.

"Sir, perhaps we should consider..." started Sub-Commander Sitair, but before he could finish, Nendixa raised his fist in anger.

“Enough! Can we disable that craft?” Nendixa intentionally ignored Sitair and glared intensely at the young man manning the disruptor controls.

“Commander, it is very likely we will destroy so small a target without full sensor targeting.” Even as he spoke, the young man called up the manual targeting menu at his terminal in preparation of following whatever order might follow.

“Sitair, transporters?” Nendixa rose from his seat and turned away from the tactical station.

“Uh, the...the transport beam should operate, but at speed, targeting such a small area without enhanced sensors the probability of a successful transport is low, Commander.”

Nendixa moved past his second-in-command and stormed towards the sub-lieutenant manning the warbird’s auxiliary operations centre. “Sub-Commander Sitair, contact Major Nokero, he’s to arm a half dozen shock troops and ready them for imminent transport. Prisoners are to be taken alive. You, bring the enhanced tractor emitter online and grab that ship.” Nendixa looked the young sub-lieutenant in the eyes and pointed back towards the image of the *Trudy* flickering on the main view screen.

“Yes, Commander,” was all sub-lieutenant Telai could manage as he quickly brought the tractor beam to power and cast a broad divergence beam in the general direction of the alien intruder. He prayed that his target could withstand the power of the beam meant to lift the massive cladding panels the Eisen Lattice Project required.

Sitair moved to the tactical station and calmly reported that they had the alien captured in their tractor. Nendixa ordered both vessels to come to a complete stop after the *Valmaika* had pulled the alien clear of the bulk of the asteroid spray.

Six black-clad, helmeted Reman shock troops stomped onto a modified cargo transport pad in quiet unison. Their Romulan overseer, Major Nokero, stood at the simple transport controls and watched them all with a dispassionate eye. They broke into two groups of three. The intention was to transport half of them into the aft of the intruders’ shuttle and have the other half materialize somewhere amidship to outflank potential defenders.

All six Remans were armed with standard disruptor pistols and long, razor-sharp *U'rels*. The lead Reman snapped and barked like a rabid dog. The others closed ranks on the pad. Nokero looked down at the simple status board and initiated transport.

## Time / Seijea

P'nom moved methodically to the last of the shelves carved into the dark, rock walls. Tagir followed with his phaser rifle slung low over his shoulder. The soft whirring purr of the old tricorder was the only sound to be heard for nearly three quarters of an hour as the small Vulcan rooted through each hole and shelf investigating everything she found.

Sweat ran down and collected at the small of Tagir's back. The humidity and heat were oppressive. He'd managed to keep his nerves in check as he shuffle-stepped behind the lieutenant, doing his best not to crowd her too much for want of the meagre light cast up from her tricorder. They were nearly at the rear of the chamber where he'd initially gone to investigate the two dark passageways that haunted the claustrophobic room.

Tagir wiped his forehead with the back of his right hand. "Time check?"

P'nom carefully put the component she'd been scanning back on the rocky shelf and quickly flipped the tricorder's display back to its home screen. Her right eyebrow cocked up when she saw that the unit's power cell had been drained to 21%. She kept any comments about the surprising drop in power to herself and consulted the unit's chronometer.

"We've been at work for more than hour. Ensign Dirlo will be expecting us to make contact in exactly thirty-nine minutes and twenty-six seconds."

"...and twenty-six seconds, huh?" Tagir exhaled and pulled at his black beard in the darkness. "We need to think about meeting up with the captain."

"Yes, I agree. I've catalogued everything of interest here now. We should consider triangulating Captain Ch'onithron's position proactively, so we don't miss our exit window." P'nom flipped off the home screen, past the telemetric analysis screen, to the general returns screen.

“Do we wait for him to signal?” Tagir asked, watching her concentrate in the flickering light.

“We know he’s only a few hundred meters away and supposedly on the same level; however, given how fast this tricorder has drained its energy cell, it is possible the captain’s own tricorder is incapable of signalling us given it’s depleted reserves prior to this away mission.”

Tagir ran his hand across his brow again. “Drained?! So, the captain might not be able to...?”

“Correct. There may be something in these caverns which drains our batteries.” P’nom paused and turned just as Tagir lifted his rifle to his eyes to presumably doublecheck the weapon’s own power cell.

“I’m good. Still fully charged.” Tagir lowered the rifle slowly and let it hang off his shoulder as he noticed P’nom watching him in the dark.

“Then it would seem the age of our instruments, while charming to you, have rendered them somewhat less-than-mission-ready. In either case, I can use our unit to hone in on the trace trillium insulation buffeting the captain’s own tricorder’s battery. I just have to exclude the trillium readings coming from this unit and your rifle’s cell.”

Tagir cleared his throat and shifted on his feet uneasily. Whatever screen P’nom was on now didn’t throw much light at all. “What about all this junk? Aren’t you going to get trillium signs from all this stuff?”

P’nom attenuated her basic scan cycle. “Most of these items are components of various tools apparently taken from the *USS Sheaffe*. Tricorders, maintenance scanners, PADDs, tags, transceivers...the tricorder we tracked is essentially intact, but the rest of this debris has been stripped of their base components. Batteries, wiring, insulation, anything that could be reused, or melted down has been effectively, if crudely, ripped away from this *junk*, as you call it. Besides, this equipment is too modern to have any trillium insulation.”

Tagir couldn’t be sure, but in the near total darkness he thought he saw P’nom smile. He was just about to make a comment when a sudden gust of cool, fresh air hit him squarely in the face.

“Did you feel that?”

P'nom's tricorder gave a chirp, and she consulted the screen. "I have a reading, four hundred meters through that passage on the left."

"Great...just, just give me a second. That cool air came from the other door. Could be a way out." Tagir shivered slightly as his skin reacted to the sudden cool air.

"Both passageways run away from this chamber in different directions. We need to follow the passage to the left." P'nom flipped back to the home screen. She was now down to 18% power.

"Fine, just let me get a look at where that fresh air came from. Stay here."

Tagir moved thorough the right-hand postern. P'nom watched and waited. Then suddenly, without warning, a dark metal door crashed down sealing Tagir away in the dark.

## A Call / E' Mehre

Lieutenant Commander Kelly leaned back in the command chair on the bridge of the *USS Fury* and stretched both arms high over his head. He'd drawn night watch in the new rotation Captain Baker had approved during their weeks long internment by the Andorians. Ensign Heenan at the Ops terminal stifled a yawn while Lieutenant Jones manning the engineering post jerked himself upright having drifted to sleep momentarily. Kelly sighed and looked over at Jones but said nothing. There really wasn't a lot for any of them to do. Lieutenant Franceschi's station at the helm was unoccupied; Kelly had given her leave to fetch a round of coffee for the sparse night shift bridge crew.

The forward viewscreen was fixed on the dark and distant *USS Meni T'Pra*, the *Miranda*-class starship which had ferried the now deceased Starfleet Chief of Operations to meet with the Andorian Chancellor. There had been no communications with the *Meni T'Pra* since the last of her command crew and senior officers were fooled into voluntarily transporting down to the planet. Several Andorian Raiders had taken up position around the *Meni T'Pra*, but so far, they'd shown no interest in trying to board her. Kelly's orders were to monitor the situation. Actual Andorian infiltration would signal a serious escalation of the already tense situation.

The ship's chronometer mounted above the viewscreen indicated that it was 0532 hours. An hour and twenty-eight minutes remained in Lt. Cmdr. Kelly's watch.

The sound of the turbolift doors hushing open caused Jones to turn in his seat in hopes of seeing Franceschi arriving with coffee, instead Captain Baker and Commander Syrk stepped onto the bridge. Jones pushed himself up awkwardly and croaked...

"Captain on the bridge!"

Heenan, Lieutenant Mos L'llith at the communications station and Ensign Opre at sciences all rose and turned to face their captain as he plodded towards Lt. Cmdr. Kelly. For his part, Kelly was slow to rise from the command chair...his left foot had fallen asleep.

“Captain?” Kelly managed as he rose and hobbled aside to open a clear path to the command chair for his friend and captain.

“Morning, Mr. Kelly. As you were, all of you.” Grant smiled and tossed a small chip at his longtime friend.

“What’s this?!” Kelly asked as he instinctively caught the code chip.

“Mr. Syrk and I made a call.”

Kelly studied the small chip and vaguely remembered being handed one exactly like it during the decommissioning ceremony for the *USS Drekler* a year and a half earlier. He looked up and watched his friend take a seat in the command chair. Grant was wearing one of the new-style white uniform undershirts under his open mission jacket.

“Wasn’t it, what’s his name? The admiral running security...gave these out to anyone who’d take one?”

“That’s the one. Where’s Neevg?” Grant glanced down at the status board mounted to the arm of his chair. *Fury’s* reactor was cool, but otherwise she was green across the board.

Kelly turned the code chip over in his hand and could see that it had been cancelled out. The chips were a one-time free access connection to the general Federation communications network. They had largely fallen out of favour with the Industrial Representatives and Trade Brokers on the interplanetary exchange, but smaller operators and hustlers still liked to bait potential customers and marks with them. Before the chief engineer could answer his captain, the turbolift doors again hushed open.

Lt. Franceschi stepped onto the bridge with a large tray of coffees and sticky buns...she froze in her boots when she saw Captain Baker looking at her from his seat and Commander Syrk, dressed in an immaculate uniform, glaring at her with a cocked left eyebrow.

“Captain!?...I...I...”

“Stand down, Lieutenant...and bring me one of those sticky buns, I’m starving. To be clear though, Mr. Kelly’s lax command style aside, there is to be no food or drink on the bridge from here on out, clear?” The night shift silently nodded their understanding and Grant waited for the young woman to bring him his breakfast.

“Apologies, captain. It won’t happen again. Commander Neevg is off duty until fourteen hundred, sir.” Kelly took a coffee from the tray and sheepishly glanced around the bridge. He was an engineer, not a school master; he thought ruefully.

“Well, Darren, I guess we better wake the old pig up, we’ll need a tactical brief with senior staff for seven hundred hours, good?” Grant kept his voice low and let Kelly see that he wasn’t really bothered by the coffee break.

“Very good, sir.” Darren took a pull of his coffee and winced. It was freeze-dried MRE fare. Terrible.

## Alarm / *Bhaie*

“*Bhaie ueiik’h’unhr ehdhihss ryakna!*” growled Ticix to Cirox, seated beside him at the receiving unit.

“*Aeek’h’i? Payr hwiiy co’n?*” came the guttural response.

“What are you two barking about?” snapped Quinturion Semis, who’d left his place at Cirox’s side to await Tikot Ketor’s return.

Semis had been working on AK-hyi since before the Eism Lattice appeared and destroyed AK-gva. As a graduate of the Imperial Engineering Institute, Semis had been conscripted into the Romulan Engineering Corps and attached to a Mining Survey ship to investigate mineral deposits on the second planet in the system. Following the cataclysm, motivated by a sense of duty and horror, Semis had applied to join the Romulan Guard—volunteering to assist with the establishment of the AK-hyi facility. At the time he was thought to be the oldest uhlan in the service.

The old quinturion had worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the Remans his whole career and it only stood to reason that he should be the primary Romulan liaison to the Reman facility. Over the cycles he’d come to understand the hideous monsters. He’d even come to a place of restrained admiration for the Remans’ work ethic and sense of duty, but he had failed to develop any affection for the grey demons he regarded as little better than Klingons.

“*Bhaie ehdhihss, ryakna,*” repeated Ticix casting his slightly yellow translucent eyes to the ground, an autonomic show of submission.

Semis pushed his way past Cirox, the last of Mivik’s nephews not toiling in the mines and studied the mishmash amalgam of monitors and components which comprised the master status board for the facility. He could see that most of the facility’s adult population were registering in the open shafts at far end of the mine. The living levels were all but deserted; less than two hundred Reman life signs registered. Semis knew these would be the women and children. He consulted the pictograph status diodes for the secure points throughout

the facility. A single black icon flashed beside a Reman storage vault in the abandoned section of the mine.

“What have you got in that vault?” Semis kept his voice even and low. Handling Remans, especially young Remans, took delicacy.

“*Tech oaeueaeaith ehdhss,*” came the response.

Semis noticed a phase variance spike recorded by the shield sensors. Evidence of a transport beam. “Contact Rekkhai Ketor, immediately.”

## Isolated / *Eial*

18% dropped to 17%. Without a diagnostic kit, circumstantial evidence was all P'nom could draw upon to conclude that her tricorder was defective and fading fast. She'd managed to get a fix on a trillium signature she had to presume belonged to the captain's own tricorder further along the tunnels and caverns they'd come to explore. Locking in on the signal was difficult. Given the confined nature of their present environment, it was reasonable to assume that heading in the general direction would yield a satisfactory result.

It had not gone unnoticed that Chief Rhupp was acting peculiar. Before the unexpected engagement with the Cardassian attack group and the loss of *Isadore*, P'nom had only ever had passing contact with much older specialist. Since their forced association however, she'd come to know the gruff non-com as a confident, nearly fearless man. From the moment they'd materialized in these caverns though, Chief Specialist Rhupp had seemed...off. Having had a human father herself, P'nom could only assess Mr. Rhupp's emotional state as...anxious.

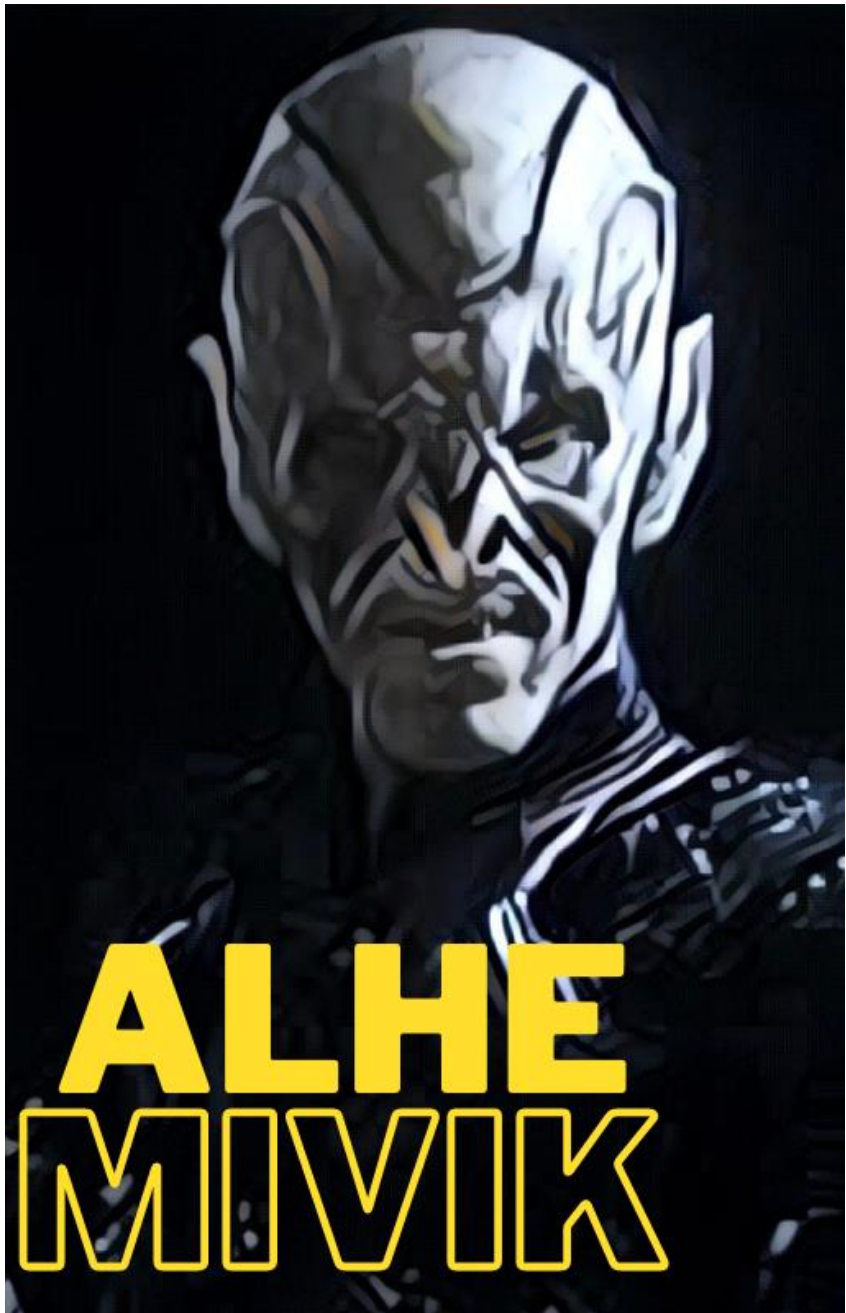
They were running out of time. P'nom tuned her fading tricorder once again to the narrow band detecting the trillium. They didn't have time for the chief to go investigating strange tunnels which ran in the wrong direction from their objective. Satisfied that she'd memorized the scant information her tricorder could provide, P'nom looked to call the chief back. As awkward as it may be, she was the superior officer.

She saw him dissolve into the blackness. She opened her mouth to call out, but then...

WHUMP!

A dark metal seal descended from the rocky ceiling and the chief was gone.

"Chief?...Chief?!" She ran to the seal and began scanning. Her tricorder offered no returns. "Tagir!?"



**ALHE**  
**MIVIK**

## **Funeral / Aethhon**

Shorh pulled the dead tricorder over his head and placed it atop the dolly he'd found, beside the radiation suit. The long, black leather strap fell and dangled just above the rocky floor of the dark chamber. He didn't know who "Bradley, A" was, but he could see how "Bradley, A" had died. He stood silently in the dank, humid, static atmosphere and let his eyes sweep over the soiled radiation suit draped over the dolly. There was no need for a tricorder to confirm what he already knew was blood staining the once white engineering uniform.

The average body temperature of an Andorian was 42°C. For those Andorians serving with the Imperial Guard aboard Raiders and other Andorian ships, environmental settings were such that the noble Guardsmen had no need to suffer discomfort. For those serving aboard Starfleet, Federation, or mixed-crew commercial vessels, or off world facilities, it was necessary to undergo extensive acclimatization training. Shorh had spent most of his adult life in Starfleet. His average body temperature ran at a consistent 72°C—which put him in good stead for service aboard the starships he'd dedicated himself to since leaving his home world.

In the cavern though, without a proper environmental suit, Shorh laboured under the oppressive heat. His red engineering coveralls were insulated and had a rudimentary environmental unit set to its lowest level; however, on top of being decades old, the coveralls were meant for human crewmen and did little to regulate the weakened Andorian's core temperature.

He knew he was fading. Each step took more and more effort, but he'd remained focused on his task. The signal had come from the rad suit. The rad suit had belonged to somebody named: "Bradley, A" ...and whoever that was, had been eviscerated by something.

Shorh drew a long breath and felt the air burn his lungs. Without the tricorder there was little he could glean beyond what his own strained senses could tell him. He shook himself into action and slowly began pacing around the perimeter of the chamber for a third time to be sure he'd not missed anything of import. As he moved slowly along

the dark rocky walls with their curious veins of purple minerals, he figured he'd been at it for an hour or an hour and half now. P'nom and Rhupp would be signalling him shortly and without a tricorder, he'd be unable to answer.

He finished his circuit and stopped where he felt the dim light was brightest to try and catch his breath. There was only one way in or out of the chamber. He knew his team were a few hundred meters behind him on the same level, it was time to start back to rendezvous for their beam out. Sweat was pouring down his cheeks and dripping off his chin. He felt lightheaded and bent forward to breathe. The idea of getting to the others to transport back to *Trudy* was a welcomed one.

Shorh slowly straightened himself and went to retrieve his dead tricorder...then stopped short when a faint sound came to him in the darkness. His right antennae twitched and curled. The mutilated stalk of his left antennae had turned black. Then there was...nothing. He stood motionless once again. He strained to listen for whatever it was that had crashed somewhere beyond the chamber in the darkness. There was nothing. He waited for what seemed like ten minutes for another sound, some indication of approaching danger, but there was only silence.

Depleted, drenched in sweat and now paranoid, Shorh moved sluggishly towards the dolly and slowly snagged his tricorder's strap. Leaving anything behind which might alert some hostile force to his team's presence wasn't an option. He painfully pulled the strap over his head and brushed his dead antenna by accident. The pain was exquisite but gave him just the jolt he needed to shake himself out of exhaustion for a few seconds. He couldn't take the rad suit for the same reason he couldn't leave the tricorder.

Shorh turned and slowly made his way out of the chamber and back into the tunnel he'd first materialized in. He hoped P'nom's tricorder had recorded something useful. Staggering along the rocky wall away from the dimly lit chamber, it occurred to him that he'd left the suit on the dolly...he huffed and pushed on. There was nothing for it. He had to get out of the heat.

## Raid / *Faumnelai*

Ensot, Tuit and Burrul materialized in the aft section of the intruding shuttle. All three warriors were dressed in their slick black and purple environmental battle suits and wore black glossy helmets. Tuit and Burrul raised their snub-nosed disruptor rifles and affixed their *U'rels* to the black stocks supporting the weapons' short emitter barrels. Ensot, as the alpha, sported a pair of standard disruptor pistols. His polished *U'rel* hung against his outer right thigh. He snarled and swept his eyes around the claustrophobic cabin.

*"Mos'jamnae! Yhfev ru io. Innaehv ahefvi."*

As the trio in the aft compartment began to move forward, Jalor, Eku and Cejoth materialized in the midsection of the intruding vessel. Jalor affixed his *U'rel* and began sweeping the compartment. Eku materialized inside the bulkhead which separated the forward command deck from *Trudy's* living quarters. He was dead the instant his pattern formed. Cejoth stepped forward to examine his comrade. Seeing the man was dead and that his weapons had materialized within the bulkhead, Cejoth set his own *U'rel* and began sweeping the sleeping berths and sonic shower for signs of aliens.

On the panel in front of her, the Master Alarm began to sound frantically. Moira blinked and quickly moved her eyes around the narrow menu bar surrounding her narrow view of the course she was trying to navigate—but there was no telemetry presented to explain the alarm. She fired a retro thruster with no effect. Something was wrong. An asteroid loomed in her viewer...

Ensot marshalled his four surviving troopers and satisfied the two aft compartments were clear of hostiles, ordered Cejoth to stand by to blow the hatch to the final compartment.

Cejoth plucked a disk from his belt and held it out towards the hatch. The round, black disc was barely three centimeters in diameter and only a centimeter and half thick, but it contained enough explosive to blow a hole in most standard blast doors. A green diode sparked to life and the magnets engaged. The black-clad Reman simply let the

disc fly from between the tips of his long, claw-like hand to find purchase against the hatch with a flat “click”.

“*Mos’jamnae!*” Cejoth barked at the others and the squad fell back to take cover.

Moira startled at the sound of something knocking against the hatch to the crew compartment. *The hatch isn’t even locked.* Thought Ensign Dirlo to herself, resisting the urge to pull her face out of the runabout’s orbed viewer; the returns weren’t right.

Then another sound exploded in Moira’s ears. “Thwummp!!” Followed almost instantly by a compression wave which burst both her eardrums.

Jalor and Tuit burst through the bulkhead, weapons at the ready. The other Remans staged themselves to follow the first team through the smoldering hatch. From his place in the living quarters, Ensot could see an empty chair at a dark control panel beyond the bulkhead. The shrapnel from the breached hatch had shredded both the terminal and embedded jagged sherds of metal in the plush, empty seat.

Moira pulled back from the viewer for the first time in hours and soundlessly opened and closed her mouth like a suffocating trout. Blood trickled out of both ears and the world was eerily silent. She could see the Master Alarm flashing through heavy smoke. She could smell burning wiring and upholstery. Her brain reeled and tried to put things together, but before she could reason out what had happened...

Two black and purple wrapped monsters pushed their way onto the command deck. Massive creatures. Too tall to stand fully erect. Brandishing dark weapons with long silver blades and wearing nondescript, polished black helmets...

Moira fell out of her seat and grabbed the phaser Tagir had affixed to the side of her chair. She still didn’t know what was happening. She was driven by terror and her own survival instinct. She lifted the phaser and pulled down on the trigger.

A beam of blue energy streamed out of the old phaser and struck the first monster squarely in the chest. It threw its long black arms up wildly as the heavy-stun ray threw it back against Tagir’s engineering terminal.

The monster beside the first beast moved like a cat and dropped low into a combat roll just as the first hostile slumped awkwardly to the cabin's floor against a ruined and smouldering terminal. Moira pushed hard against the base of her own chair with her left foot to try and roll to cover, but another two black helmeted monsters were suddenly standing at the shattered hatch.

Moira felt herself grunt; she still couldn't hear. Without thinking she blasted the comms unit linking *Trudy* with *Brain* then thrust herself backwards under P'nom's seat. She struggled to free her right arm to get a bead on these new monsters.

Cejoth moved past Jalor's lifeless form and spotted the injured alien cowering in the far corner. He raised his disruptor, instinctively braced himself for the recoil and opened fire. Four short, bright green bolts flew into the small alien, striking its chest three times and throwing its head back with the final bolt.

## Enemy Down / *Ih'htirrn Uwheawhoiik'heqhr*

Commander Nendixa sat silently on the bridge of the *Valmaika* and watched the alien vessel hanging in his mighty warbird's powerful tractor beam. The hostile was so small and the *Valmaika's* tractor so powerful that it was doubtful the intruders aboard the large shuttle, which looked oddly *Federation*, even realized they'd been snared. Sub-Commander Sitair had resumed his post at Nendixa's right hand.

"Status?" Nendixa purred.

Sitair looked towards the communications officer. The young uhlan took a moment to listen to the status report from Major Nokero two decks below. As the Reman's handler aboard the warbird, it was Nokero who liaised directly with the shock troops.

"Commander, Major Nokero reports his infiltration squad have secured the hostile vessel...one casualty...a transport accident, one injury. One alien aboard...human, deceased..."

"Pissst!" hissed Nendixa as he pushed himself up and out of his command chair. "The orders were to take any crew alive for interrogation!"

The uhlan on comms with Major Nokero, shrank in his seat.

Sitair moved towards the communications post, intentionally putting himself between the commander and the young man simply relaying information. "Press the major for an explanation."

Nendixa turned back to regard the grey shuttle. If they were meant to simply dispose of the hostiles, they could have vaporized the entire craft without the loss of assets (even if those assets were just Remans).

"Commander, respectfully...the major reports the alien opened fire on the boarding party, they were merely defending themselves." The uhlan felt the blood drain from his face and braced himself for whatever rage might befall him.

Nendixa considered letting the insignificant ship tumble into the asteroid spray, but quickly resolved himself to a more reasonable course of action. "Have Nokero's dogs secure the vessel. We'll take it in tow. Inform *Vollo* of our status."

## **Mobilize / Do ta'hwswai**

Mivik fixed his U'rel to the end of his tactical disruptor rifle and quietly looked over the dozen Reman shock troops that had assembled on the minecart loading platform. Most of the men had been on security duty at the smelting facility. Keeping a watchful eye over the miners processing the tons of raw ore on double shifts to recast the lost cladding for the Eisen Lattice. Though the miners were all Reman themselves, the concern was labourers with ready access to heavy laser cutters and industrial disruptor tools might be tempted to revolt. Mivik felt it was insulting that his troops should be expected to oversee their own people...his people.

Like all Remans, Mivik was dissatisfied with the Reman place in the Empire. They'd toiled and died for their Romulan betters to help build the great Star Empire over a millennium and yet, they remained invisible. At best, the Remans were as their home world was; cast in shadow, barely an afterthought. Mivik had done well for himself though. He'd been lucky, of course, but he'd also worked hard and fought with every fibre on his being to survive.

Looking out at his assembled troops he felt a surge of fierce warrior pride...and an aching depression. He was taller and older than the men who stood silently before him for inspection. They were a fierce unit. Uniformed in the oily black and purple battle suits only a few select Remans ever got the opportunity to don, each clutching a black disruptor rifle to his chest—affixed with the long silver *U'rels* which were the Remans' true weapon of choice. Mivik knew each boy's name. He knew their parents and, in a few cases, he'd even known their grandparents.

*"T'hea nviomn ehdhihss aellei temhavra iudaiht ehdhihss. Ehdhihss iudaiht uaefvalhuneitrde'h'n thiich, ve luhtos. Mos'jamnae?!"*

The troops barked their understanding as one and raised their weapons high to salute Mivik.

*"Araemna!"* shouted Mivik and the first three troops marched stiff legged to a waiting ore car and piled in.

Ketor had ordered the squad to the Reman vaults at the opposite end of the facility. Intruders had transported down and triggered an alarm. Mivik's orders were to arrest the intruders and bring them back for questioning.

The second group of troopers were climbing into the next ore car and preparing to release the handbrake to follow their comrades. Short of transporting across the warren of shafts and tunnels to the vaults, the mine carts were the fastest way to move the troopers to their objective. The remaining three troopers split into a pair and they clambered into yet another empty ore car. The remaining trooper, Pitux, waited for Mivik to join him in the final cart. Pitux was the last of Mivik's brother's children.

Mivik moved like a sabre-backed *jadashhas* and stalked past the boy who had no idea that his brother was dead. As the nearly two-and-half-meter tall Reman lowered himself from the platform into the hollow of the waiting minecart, he took his rifle in his left hand to brace himself with his right and caught a glimpse of the light grey dust marring his black glove. He'd tossed Jijaik's bones from the landing platform less than an hour earlier. His hands were still dirty from the boy's ashes. Pitux bounded into the cart with the ease and vigour of a young warrior and released the break.

As they rocketed along the winding rails through the darkness Mivik considered telling Pitux of Jijaik's fate but couldn't find the words. Instead, he calmly rubbed the ash and dust from his gloved hands and seethed with hatred for the Romulans responsible...responsible not only for the boy's death, but those responsible for the enslavement of his people. In a cold moment of clarity, he realized he hated all Romulans. Luck be damned.



**TIKOT**  
**KETOR**

## Administration / *Daesn*

Tikot sat pensively overlooking the status board, waiting for Mivik to transmit that he and his men had found and captured the intruders who'd tripped the alarm in the storage vaults. The long evening was stretching into morning. In another hour the unrelenting light and heat cast from the system's two suns would bake the exterior bulkheads of the complex and even the hardest of Remans would instinctively seek shelter and rest.

"Rekkhai, an incoming transmission for your ears alone," whispered Quinturion Semis, as he rose and offered Tikot his transceiver.

"Mivik can't have made it all the way across to the vaults so soon," said Ketor in a weary voice and with a puzzled look on his face.

"It's not Alhe Mivik, rekkhai," was all Semis dared to say.

The old Romulan overseer and Tikot Ketor were the only two Romulans in the AK-hyi control bunker. Mivik had apparently disposed of any evidence of the young Reman messenger's execution but the tension between the Remans and the few Romulans living among them was palpable and growing worse since Dar's arrival. He remained calm, but the sensation that both he and Ketor were standing in a nest of Reman Fire Ants just waiting to feed was very nearly unbearable. Before doffing the transceiver and handing it to Tikot, Semis had deftly isolated the channel from the main system to prevent any Reman ears from hearing the angry voice calling for Ketor.

Tikot took the headset and caught a glimpse of the barely contained panic in the old man's eyes. For just an instant a flicker of fear sparked in Ketor's mind. He pulled the transceiver on and cleared his throat.

"This is Tikot Ketor, report."

Semis stood perfectly still; eyes locked on the only other Romulan in the room. He was working hard to keep a stoic expression on his face and keep himself from trembling for all the nervous energy exploding within. It hadn't been Mivik who'd called in to demand to speak to Ketor. It was the admiral herself. She was in high orbit

overseeing the preparation of the *Vejul* for transport—and she was angry.

Tikot listened as his *sister* blasted him for his incompetence and raged about the Reman troops his people relied so completely upon. Tikot looked at Semis, standing in front of him, and focused on him. They were alone and stood as one and other's only source of support. As Dar raged, Tikot realized that beyond intruders and overzealous Reman troops, a new reality was quickly dawning.

"I see, Enriov...I will of course have Commander Nendixa....no....no Enriov, I do not promote a shoot-to-kill ethos among, the *special troops*...that is your opinion of course...no, no...yes, well Alhe Mivik...I'm sorry?...it is the proper title, Enriov...we have dispatched Alhe Mivik and his troops to collect suspected intude...pardon?...yes of course I have...he will, Enriov. I assure you...the, the secure vaults at the far end of the...no, not ours. They are the exclusive property of the, uh...yes. That is correct...Just myself, the quinturion and perhaps...yes...I'll have the coordinates relayed. Do you wish me to...I understand. Yes, Enriov. Jolan Tru."

Tikot drew a long breath and slowly returned the headset to Semis. He noticed now that the Remans manning the communications terminal and the others within the control complex, were making no attempt to hide their interest in listening to Ketor's side of the brief conversation. Tikot tugged at the front of his black tunic and stood straight and proud.

"Status report from the double shift in the pit and at the smelting facility?!"

"*Thi ehdhiss av'g 'hh. 35 khoi, faehe claddi'ss. Ueiik'h'unhr khi aaith, rekkhai,*" came the subdued, if strained response from the Reman manning the status board.

Tikot let his dark eyes fall on every Reman face in turn. He let every man glaring back at him from behind white translucent eyes see the steely resolve in his face. Remans knew their betters. They respected strength. Tikot was well practiced at projecting strength and menace...still, something had shifted. They'd not found their comrade on the platform; left to be found by Dar like so much trash. Left to spark

revolt, Tikot sadly realized. The balance between master and servant was off.

The mine had produced nearly three times the average haul of ore during the double shift and the smelting facility was already set to casting the replacement panel the Eisen Lattice project required to get back on track. If the abnormal level of productivity continued, the Remans estimated a complete panel could be ready within the week. Tikot grunted his understanding, then ordered the quinturion to accompany him to the antechamber.

Semis was grateful to leave the company of the young Remans he was responsible for supervising, though he feigned slight annoyance at having to leave the control room. Behind closed doors Ketor shared that the *Valmaika* had found and neutralized the intruding vessel, but her Reman shock troops had killed the pilot. Enriov Dar was furious and demanded prisoners be taken. The intruders Mivik had just set out to intercept were to be taken alive, at all costs.

Neither Semis, nor Tikot spoke for a long while. Reman shock troops were not in the habit of taking prisoners...and it had been Mivik's kin Dar had slaughtered.

## **Fire / Hna'h**

The rifle pushed back from the powerful beam spewing from its emitter. Tagir snugged the blunt end of the weapon's handle against his hip in order to brace himself against the phaser's kick. The intense heat was sapping his strength. Sweat rolled down his cheeks and dripped from his beard as the brilliant red/orange bolt of phased energy gushed from his rifle to impact the black metal door which had separated him from P'nom.

He was in a narrow tunnel. Every black rock and twisting purple vein of ore coursing through the walls and ceiling of this long, narrow tunnel was brilliantly illuminated by the light of the rifle's fire. It was his third attempt at breaching the black metal door. He'd dialed the rifle to its maximum setting, which should by rights vaporize nearly anything it impacted, but as before, nothing happened. The strange black metal simply absorbed the rifle's energy.

Glancing down at the rifle's power indicator, Tagir noted that he'd drained his only power pack by nearly 10%. Defeated, Chief Rhupp released the triggering actuator built into the rifle's broad black handle and the bright ray of searing hot energy ceased. Tagir lowered the weapon and huffed out a puff of hot air. The rifle had raised the temperature in the tight tunnel by another 20°C. He paced towards the door and gingerly brushed the very tip of a finger against its surface where he'd concentrated the phaser fire. As with the previous two attempts, the metal was smooth and cool to the touch. Exhausted, Tagir slammed his fist against the metal and instantly regretted it. The door was as solid as the rock walls surrounding him. Drawing his fist back, wincing in pain, he marvelled at how strong the barrier was.

Wherever the blast of cool air which had originally tempted him into this new passage had come from, it was noticeably absent now. He blinked his eyes open and closed to adjust them to the all-consuming darkness. The phaser rifle's beam had been wonderfully bright, but in its absence all Tagir could perceive was blackness.

There was no way P'nom was going to hear him through the door. There seemed to be no way to open or breach the door. Tagir

began to prepare himself to move along the tunnel to try and find a way back when, from the darkness...the sound was faint at first. Tagir realized he was hearing not the sounds themselves, but rather their echoes. The heat in the tight tunnel began to bleed away. It was still humid, but a chill ran up Rhupp's back. The echoes were alien...but familiar somehow. It was like a pack of large dogs snapping and barking somewhere off in the blackness. Tagir realized the sounds were getting closer.

Blindly, Chief Rhupp began moving along the narrow tunnel away from the strange metal door and the chamber where he'd left P'nom on her own. He'd not had time to take note of how far along the tunnel ran while the fire from his rifle had illuminated everything, but he hoped it would open somewhere up ahead and give him some options to avoid being penned in by whatever beasts were rapidly approaching. He didn't dare run. In the darkness his eyes were of little use, and he didn't want to bash his own head off a rock in an attempt to avoid whatever it was that was bearing down on him.

The snarling, barking, growling sounds grew louder and louder. Tagir could make out the sound of booted feet marching along the rocky floor somewhere ahead. He tried to remain silent as he moved towards the terrifying sounds—still hopeful that the tunnel might open into a chamber, or branch off in a different direction before he came face-to-face with whatev...

Copper filled his mouth, and his head rang with a numbness only a sudden and violent impact might make. Sprawled on the rough, rocky floor of a dimly lit chamber, Tagir tried to recover his senses and reason-out what had happened. He'd fallen three meters from the black tunnel into a larger chamber sloping down towards a brighter level below.

He pushed himself up slowly and gingerly checked himself over for any signs of injury or broken bones. The left side of his face was red hot and ached, but he could detect no blood. Coming to his knees, he took three long, slow breaths and realized he could see again. He'd come to land face down just half a meter from a pair of metal rail lines...if he'd had landed on them, he'd assuredly have be killed.

The barking started up louder and clearer than before.

Tagir exhaled and coughed up a bloody mass, which he spat out onto the floor. His rifle lay just ahead of him. With more effort than he expected, Rhupp got to one knee and looked towards the direction of the barks and what sounded like the cackling of a hyena or some giant targ...

There, barely ten meters away from where he'd landed, stood four towering creatures from a child's nightmare. They wore black/purple uniforms which captured and reflected the chamber's dim light like oil. It was difficult to make out their exact proportions as their black clad bodies blended with the black rocky surroundings, but they were tall and grotesquely lean. Their skin was a mottled grey and looked almost slimy in the way the light glinted off their elongated skulls. Their ears came to fierce points; nightmare versions of Vulcans, was what came first to mind. Tagir groaned in terror and wasn't sure if he'd wet himself as the four monsters cackled and approached him slowly.

Their eyes... From somewhere deep down, Tagir willed himself to move, and he awkwardly thrust himself forward to take hold of his rifle. They were still meters away, but he could see their dead white, translucent eyes glow in the dim light. His right hand clasped the rifle's black handle and his left groped along the weapon's cylindrical body to bring the emitter to bear.

As Tagir pushed himself over into a clumsy combat role the sound of a disruptor echoed off the high rock walls. A green bolt of superheated plasma whizzed by Rhupp's head, and a new chorus of excited barks exploded. Tagir slammed his left foot into the floor as he came 'round from his roll. He was just able to keep himself from tumbling down the long slope to what now looked like the entrance to a series of mineshafts below.

He raised his rifle and depressed the actuator. A red/orange ray exploded from the end of his antique weapon and two of the four monsters dove for cover. One of the monsters dropped to a combat stance and got off an unaimed disruptor bolt which went wide. The fourth creature caught the phaser blast squarely in the chest and was lifted off its feet and thrown backwards.

Tagir watched as the beast shrieked and emulsified from its chest outwards while hurling backwards through the air. Somewhat

shocked, Tagir glanced down at his rifle and realized it was still at its maximum setting.

Another two bolts of green plasma sizzled past Tagir's head. He lost his footing and rolled down the slope towards the mineshafts. As he tumbled all he could hear was the braying shriek of the creatures as they rallied and chased after him.

*“Taortuu ehdhiss hevam!!”*

Another green bolt of death slammed into the rock beside him—so close the red arm of his overalls had discoloured and stank of burnt hair. Tagir made no attempt to slow his crash. He kicked out with his right leg and redirected himself down a dark, steep mineshaft. Two more green bolts streaked by. One smashed into the low ceiling, the other disappeared somewhere down the shaft.

In the darkness Tagir got to his feet and raised his rifle. The snarling, barking screams continued. They were coming and there was no cover. His head pounded. His body ached. The scent of urine and sweat was pungent. Rhupp had no choice but to go deeper into the unknown and pray for cover of some kind—another tunnel, or an exit, someway out of the nightmare he was now living.

The creatures screamed: *“Taortuu ehdhiss hevam!!”* over, and over again as they gave chase.

## Approach / Mrei

“Yard Control, this is 93 on approach from Earth standard. Transmitting on encrypted channel 1 alpha black, Captain Demby. How do you receive?”

93, Demby’s sleek black *Hou Yi*-class starship approached Jupiter yard’s outermost marker at less than one half impulse speed. As all three of Section 31’s small *Hou Yi*’s and Captain Xillion’s *Nimrod*-class heavy cruiser the *N12*, were invisible to the new sensor net Starfleet had deployed across the Sol system, there was no need to rush.

Admiral Bautlin, still dressed in her Starfleet maroon tunic, stood patiently behind the younger woman she’d promoted to captain less than a year ago. Svetlana was stationed at an auxiliary science station to the admiral’s left. Commander Todorokov had taken the time to change into her black Section tunic.

“93, this is *K3* control. We confirm your encrypted transponder codes. We will reset the interplexing oscillation shield to allow safe passage into secure space. Docking ring three is prepared to receive you, copy?”

Demby smiled with satisfaction. She’d always dreamed of being a starship captain but failing to qualify for a command-stream appointment upon joining Starfleet, she’d had to put that ambition out of her mind. Excelling at computer sciences earned her a commission to Daystrom’s Fleet Systems Laboratory in California, where she’d earned the rank of lieutenant commander. It was from Daystrom that she was recruited into Section 31 and assigned to Deployment Resources in San Francisco, and it was there that the possibility of one day earning a captaincy and command of her own rekindled her life-long dream.

“This is Demby, understood *K3*. 93 ou...”

“Captain Demby?”

“Go ahead, *K3*.”

“Ma’am, we’ve received a code black transmission for Admiral Bautlin. Flagged urgent.”

Maureen stepped to Demby's side and spoke clearly towards the mic recessed above the command seat.

"This is Admiral Bautlin, message?"

"Admiral, the secure channel is still active and as directed, has been placed in hold on your private transceiver aboard the station." The voice was dry and purely professional. Operative Trotter.

"Did you advise of my current disposition, *K3*?"

"Affirmative, ma'am. Coded response was a direct command to place the call in secure hold until your return."

Maureen was silent for a moment. A code black transmission could mean only one thing: Cor Coroli. She wondered if it was Controller Talbot, or perhaps one of the others needing to speak with her directly. The admiral looked down at Demby and quietly asked what their ETA was for *K3*. She knew before asking of course but needed to hear her captain say it.

"*K3*, encode to sender: Admiral Bautlin to join in fifteen minutes. Copy?"

"Affirmative ma'am, fifteen minutes. Encoding now." Trotter kept his voice flat and coldly gave direction for the communications operative to encrypt the admiral's message over the code black channel.

93 passed the marker in silence. She passed through the magnetic field generated by the unique interplexing oscillator *K3* employed to harness the radiation of Jupiter itself to generate a nearly impregnable shield around the station and the vast scrap yard of mothballed wrecks and the ever-useful Space Dock 17. Bautlin ordered the channel closed and turned to Svetlana.

"Is your program up and running?"

"Of course, Admiral." Todorokov turned and pulled up the telemetry from Admiral T'Chou's computer at Starfleet Operations. "Nothing unusual ma'am...a prod to the yards at Rigel to step up construction on their *Miranda*-class space frames, but nothing significant."

"Hmmm...keep monitoring T'Chou. Once we get aboard coordinate with Data Collection to watch LSC's feeds in real time. If anything changes, I want to know immediately."

“Yes, ma’am.” Svetlana panned through the scant data T’Chou’s computer was broadcasting. Nothing seemed out of place.

## Warm Up / *Pokot Oiiuhw'udssyrh*

Grant stood at the head of the long beige conference table in *Fury's* senior lounge/briefing room and looked at his senior officers.

Commander Syrk sat to the captain's right with a placid look on his face, betraying no emotion. Kelly sat to Grant's left and looked tired and a little beleaguered.

Commander Neevg, the ship's Tellarite Chief of Security popped his jaw and grunted in annoyance at the other end of the table. In the entire universe there were but two individuals Grant Baker knew in his bones would never let him down. Darren Kelly and old Neevg. The three had gone through nearly three decades of service together. They'd laughed, cried, fought and nearly died over one and other more times than any of them could possibly remember. This mission, what was to be the *USS Fury's* shakedown, was supposed to have been their final mission together before they all faced retirement and the end of their Starfleet service.

"Something bothering you about this, Commander?" Grant refrained from simply calling Neevg "*Pig*", as was his want to do when the three friends were alone.

At nearly two meters tall and weighing less than a hundred and eighty kilos, Neevg was easily one of the most athletic looking Tellarites anyone could ever hope to see. "*Pig*" was a term of endearment Grant had given the Tellarite long ago when the two had been cornered by a hostile Klingon squad on a search-and-destroy mission on the Federation Colony at Archanis IV during the territorial disputes following the Klingon/Federation War. Grant had managed to kill two Klingons, Neevg had defended himself against a third, but they were marooned; Baker seriously wounded.

Neevg could have made a run to an emergency transport point some two hundred meters from where he and Baker had been attacked, but moving the human would mean Baker's death. Stubbornly, Neevg took up one of the fallen Klingons' bat'leths and stood guard over his fallen comrade. Baker, a junior lieutenant at the time, tried to order the Tellarite to safety, but Neevg refused to abandon the "useless human."

Bleeding and unable to move, all Baker could manage was to call the fierce young ensign a “thick-skulled pig”. As the remaining Klingons closed in, Lt. Kelly managed to beam the pair to a service shuttle.

Lt. James Parker was seated beside Chief Kelly and Lt. JG. Loban—communications—was accompanying Commander Syrk. Grant was cautious to remain professional and kept his address to his Security Chief and his Jr. Tactical officer, Ms. Crypt, purely professional.

“That’s our plan? That’s what we’re reduced to now?”

“Kelly will warm up the reactor and bring the warp core online. We should expect some sort of contact from the surface but given the fun our Andorian hosts have been having, it may be difficult to assess the initial sincerity of any such transmission. I need you and your people to be ready for all contingencies none the less, Commander.”

Neevg popped his jaw again and shifted in his seat. He wasn’t happy about being roused from a sound sleep.

“Of course, we’re ready for any contingencies! It’s the fact that you’re relying on that incompetent to make this happen that disturbs me!” Neevg hadn’t meant to snort following his outburst, but he was tired, and a very pig-like *oink* escaped him.

Grant bit his tongue and simply nodded his understanding. “Believe me, he wouldn’t have been my top choice either, but he’s what we had. So, if there are no more questions, let’s all be ready for anything, yeah?”

“Captain, if I may?” Commander Syrk pushed himself away from the table and smoothly rose to his feet.

“Of course, Commander Syrk.”

The lean Vulcan nodded his acknowledgement to the captain, then turned to face the others: “Given the Andorians’ own corruption of ship-to-shore communications, it seems likely that one of the Starfleet officers currently being held on the surface will be selected to make any serious communication with us. Logically, Captain Evengii would be the best choice. If Mr. Loban or any of his people should receive such a transmission, it would be wise to treat it as genuine.”

“Huh, makes sense. Still, I’m with Neevg as far as who this all hinges on...I mean, I’ll prime the engines, but I’m not counting no chickens before they’re hatched,” volunteered Chief Kelly.

“Indeed. Which brings me to my second point of concern. Commander Neevg, it may transpire that the Andorians board the *Meni T’Pra*, given what has been proposed. I should like to make it clear that if we witness such an act before receiving any transmissions from the Andorians—your orders are to hold fire. Am I clear?”

Neevg glared at the First Officer with flinty eyes. He popped his jaw, but instead of engaging the Vulcan, he simply nodded his understanding.

“Very good then. Let’s look sharp people—and remember, it’s the Andorians’ news to break. They must believe we know nothing about anything, clear?” To a man they all agreed, and Grant dismissed them to get on with their preparations.

## Displacement / *Etreimanai Hvaedroalh temohrie*

The long, narrow triphasic sensor unit looked like a twig in Pitux's black gloved hand. It was a Romulan tool. One of the few the Remans were given access too. The old Romulan quinturion who supervised stores for the Reman troopers had bragged that the triphasic sensor was infinitely more advanced than the clumsy tricorder units the Federation Starfleet relied upon, but Pitux was unimpressed. The only tools the Romulans supplied that were of interest were the snub-nosed disruptor rifles.

Pitux and Mivik had broken off from the others. There were three distinct alien signals detected in the vaults. Mivik had dispatched the other four to deal with the one who'd triggered the initial alarm. He and Pitux had hauled up and stopped their minecart some three hundred *vahrus* back of that first signal. The third signal would be dealt with by the others once the first was eliminated.

Pitux had voiced confusion regarding Alhe Mivik's orders for the squad. Tikot Ketor had wanted any intruders detained and returned alive for questioning; however, Mivik made clear his expectation that the squad hunt down and destroy all invaders, at all costs.

The younger warrior regretted speaking up. Alhe Mivik was in no mood to be questioned. He brandished his worn, but still deadly *U'rel* making clear that any man who did not do his duty would find his head at his feet.

The skinny sensor rod hummed in Pitux's muscular hand, and a bright green dot flashed indicating their quarry was somewhere in the tunnels ahead of them.

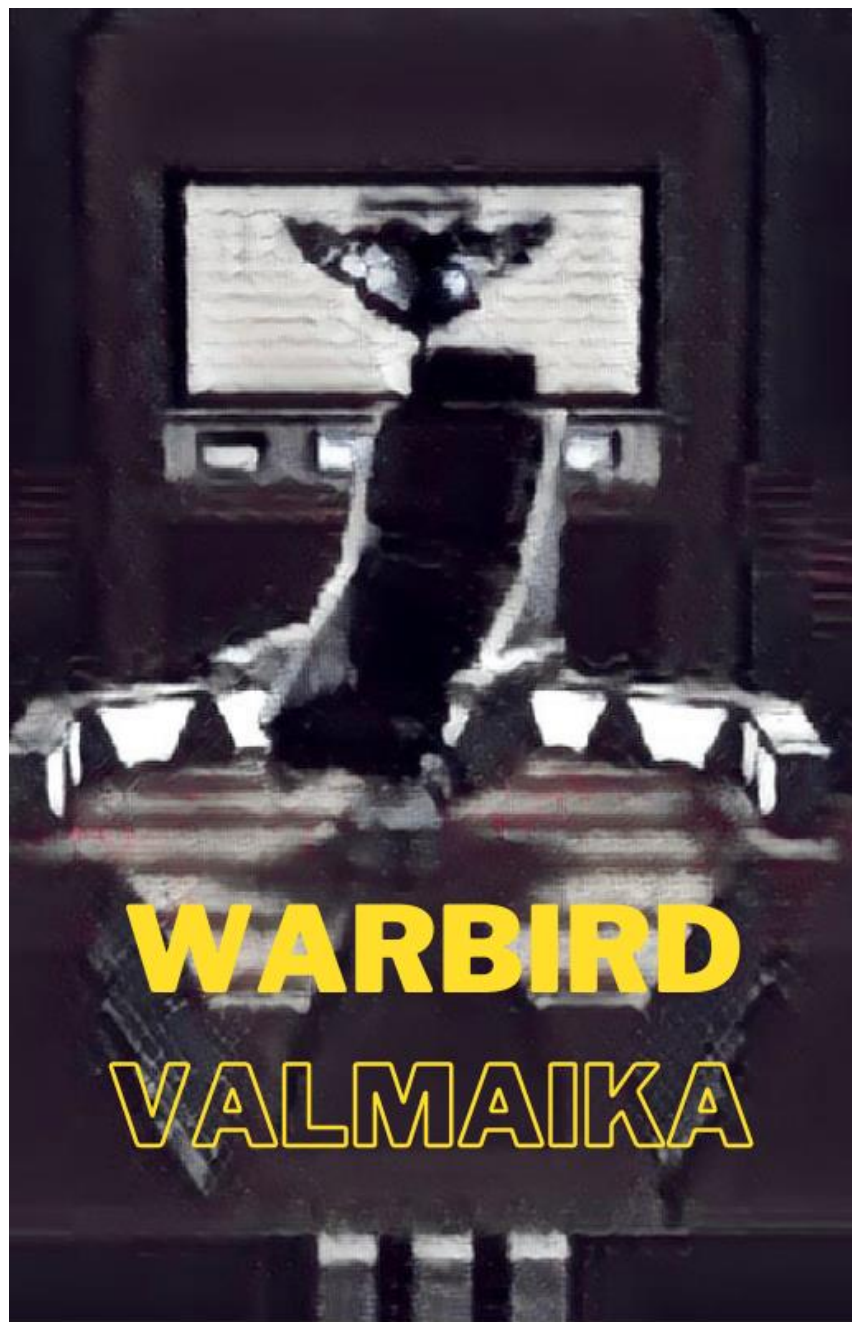
"*Duhaen duhaen, alhe,*" whispered Pitux over his shoulder to where Mivik followed. He turned the sensor off and attached it to his belt. His *U'rel* was already affixed to his disruptor.

Mivik heard the alien's laboured breathing in the darkness. Both he and Pitux spotted the slow moving Andorian further along the tunnel. The young warrior dropped to one knee and raised his disruptor. It occurred to Mivik that the Andorian couldn't yet see them. Remans

lived, toiled, fought and died in the darkness. Andorians, like humans, were blind.

“*Temelhaeu temaekhei*,” Mivik ordered.

Pitux looked up at his commander. He didn't know why Mivik wanted him to miss such an easy target, especially after making it clear that each of them was to execute all intruders on sight, but he wasn't about to risk angering the great warrior.



**WARBIRD**  
**VALMAIKA**

## **Stand / *Trunvuiteihjiwh***

Shorh's head was spinning. The heat was unbearable. In the darkness it was difficult to keep track of how far he'd progressed back towards the transport point where P'nom and Tagir must surely be waiting for him.

Suddenly a shrill sound caused his right antennae to stand erect and the swollen, mangled base of his left antennae twitched and sang out in pain. The humid, warm air suddenly caught fire and sizzled and stank. A green lightning bolt slammed into the rock wall just before his face and he instinctively jumped backwards from what he knew subconsciously was a disruptor blast.

The air smelt of molten plasma and the heat washed over him in a wave—nearly causing him to swoon. Shorh groped at his overalls looking for his phaser. For an instant everything had illuminated in the harsh green light and then just as quickly everything went black...but there was something.

The phaser wasn't on his right hip! Where was his phaser?!

Had there been figures up ahead? Did his eyes catch a quick glimpse of two lean, incredibly tall monsters lurking up ahead in the darkness?

The phaser was resting just over his right buttock. The one drawback to Chief Rhupp's vintage uniforms was their tendency to shift awkwardly with every movement. Shorh's blind fingers rattled against and then around the old phaser's grip to free it from his black utility belt...but...

A form in the darkness swept in. Oily black, green and purple skinned, it moved like a foul wind. Shorh fell reeling against the rock wall he'd been using to guide himself along in the darkness. His phaser flew from his belt and clattered uselessly to the ground somewhere. Whatever had hit him, struck like a boulder.

Instinctively the Andorian pushed himself off the wall and dipped to his left in the hopes of avoiding another blow.

An anvil caught him in his ribs on the left and he heard two sharp cracks. Shorh grunted and tasted blood in his mouth. It wasn't an anvil. It was a giant fist.

He countered with a wild right and made contact with something hard. His hand glanced off whatever it was and Shorh felt his shoulder strain as his arm continued in its awkward trajectory. His ruined antennae streamed blood now. He blinked the sweat and blood from his eyes.

In the darkness was the face of a demon. Horrid grey/yellow needle like teeth, slimy mottled grey skin and barbed ears and eyes... the dead white eyes of the Tharay Witch herself!

Somehow Shorh got his right leg up and with all his strength pushed himself off what he had to guess was this demon's chest. The creature threw its hideous face to the ceiling and barked like an animal.

Shorh slammed into a hard rocky wall. He was completely turned around and had no sense of where he'd come from or where he was heading. The form moved in. It was terribly hot and nearly dark to the point of blackness. Shorh sensed the creature more than anything, but he could clearly see those dead white eyes—full of rage and malice, getting closer.

He picked himself up from the half sitting heap he'd landed in. There was no time to run. There was nowhere to run to. Shorh drew a breath and almost vomited. He couldn't feel his right arm but clutched his dead right hand in his left to make a double fist. The eyes darted forward. Shorh grunted and swung from low-down with both fists together; it was a technique they taught at the Academy, though Shorh had never used it before now.

He managed to keep both fists together as he impacted the demon's chin to no effect.

Too hot.

Too weak.

Too...

Another hideous bark erupted in the dark and Shorh felt himself being raised to the ceiling on the end of a long, sharp, silver blade. The last thing he saw were the dead white eyes of the Tharay Witch.

Mivik howled in rage as he worked his *U'rel* and split the Andorian invader in half.

In the darkness Pitux watched his commander, his *Alhe*, eviscerate the strange blue alien with a vicious ferocity even a Reman found unsettling.

From somewhere in the warren of tunnels the sound of an explosion echoed in the darkness.

## Controller / *Esaahenen*

Maureen fastened the shoulder clasp on her black Section tunic. Moll had been waiting with it at the docking port. Todorokov accompanied her up the lift from the berth of 93 towards *K3*'s command level. Before stepping out of the lift one level below the operations center, Maureen took the time to be clear that Svetlana was to pour over every nano byte of data they were now monitoring from Earth.

As her office door secured itself behind her, Maureen wasted no time in making her way to the desk where her personal communications transceiver flashed with a waiting transmission. The admiral took her seat and drew a steadying breath before entering her personal identification code into the terminal to open the channel.

The face of Controller Talbot appeared on the screen. He was wearing what looked like a simple white cotton robe and was seated in what looked like an empty white room.

"Admiral Bautlin, I trust your endeavours on Earth were a success, yes?"

"Controller Talbot, I apologize for keeping you waiting. What can I do for you?"

"Yes, well straight to it then: What is T'Chou playing at and why have you allowed it, Admiral?" *Sinjin* tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice, but he knew he'd failed.

"I...we were just in a meeting with Xao, he's redirecting resources to the Andor Sector as we planned. There's a contingent of *Oberths* out by Alpha 441 monitoring the Cardassians, but that's not unexpected..."

"He's just proposed to the Andorians that Starfleet give the Imperial Guard three *Miranda*-class starships to continue their *tradition of service* to the Empire and the Federation. In exchange for letting *Fury*, *Meni T'Pra*, their crews and the body of Admiral Knox go."

Maureen's eyes went wide. The Yards at Rigel VII.

Talbot could see his charge had no idea of what the acting Chief of Starfleet Operations was up to. He sighed deeply. There'd been

revelations concerning Bautlin's time commanding the *Victory Talbot* had wished to share, but now was not the time.

"It's not that this moron has somehow managed to alleviate the rather useful impasse we worked so hard to arrange between the Andorians and the Federation; it's that even after all we talked about, you're somehow still a step behind."

Maureen tried to recover herself. "Does this affect our plans?"

"You tell me, Admiral. Is Harriman proceeding with the *Enterprise* as you planned? Is your Romulan friend still onboard? I know the President has already gotten her hands on the treaty, so it would be rather embarrassing if too many eyes fell away from our little blue friends and suddenly noticed that we're about to give away the store to the Romulans."

Maureen bristled. The development with Xao was unexpected, but she'd taken care to get everything else right. Nompel had committed the *Tomed*. The President was in hand. Harriman was witlessly warping into the whole thing ready to be a hero. No, Xao's sudden and rather uncharacteristic deep dive into subversive diplomacy wasn't going to affect the greater plan.

"Controller Talbot, I can't say that this...*move* on Xao's part was in anyway anticipated. I've known the man for years and this is completely out of character for him. That said, if the Andorian situation is resolved prematurely I'm sure Ambassador Sarek and the High Command will provide enough bluster and outrage to keep those eyes well entertained while the plan runs to course."

Talbot sat stoically, thinking. "Xao needs to be handled."

"He will be. *Vithi Bulb Tea*, did you say?" Maureen's mind fired.

"Yes, that's right...?"

"Let me have the recipe, would you? I'd like to see that it finds its way into Xao T'Chou's personal cookbook."

Talbot smiled. "Fine, if you think it will help. What about your friend Nompal, Nempau, or what have you?"

"I've selected an operative to pay Nompel a visit once the treaty is signed. There will be no loose ends. If you send along the particulars of that tea, I'll see to it that the examination of Admiral Knot's body leads

to Admiral T'Chou's kitchen, as it were." There was no way T'Chou could ever be left in charge of the regular fleet.

"Better...but still disappointing, Admiral. Bold strokes win the day, don't get caught not knowing again, Maureen. Cor Coroli, out."

Maureen sat watching the Red Spot from her desk. The Romulans would safeguard everyone from *assimilation* and sequester themselves. The Federation would rub up against the Klingons as 'cold allies' and Starfleet would remain armed. It would work.

## P'nom / P'nom

The sound of an explosion echoed down and along the unseen tunnel system they'd beamed into. P'nom jumped slightly at the sudden change in air pressure as the sound waves washed over her. She glanced down at her tricorder. The unit was operating on reserve battery power. All it registered was a nondescript, uncontrolled release of energy from one of the lower levels.

*In other words, the explosion appears to have been an explosion,* thought P'nom cynically to herself.

She looked up from the now useless tricorder to the black metal door she'd spent the last twenty minutes attempting to open. The tricorder had cycled through every one of its analytical programs and scans to no effect. She'd used every one of her type 2 phaser's sixteen settings hoping that she might somehow affect the door itself, or the mechanism which controlled it—all to no effect.

There'd been no indication as to Chief Rhupp's disposition on the other side of the door, but it was logical to assume that he too was working to liberate himself from whatever cave or tunnel the door had trapped him in. All P'nom's efforts had revealed though was the simple fact that the door appeared to be impervious to energy weapons and was remarkably solid.

The young half-Vulcan was trying to be as logical as possible given the two choices she now reasoned lay before her. Option one was to remain and continue to work at triggering the door to open and thereby rescuing Tagir...though having nearly exhausted her tricorder's power pack and running through the entire range of phaser settings she was at a loss as to what to try next. Option two was to use the last of the tricorder's power to lock onto the signal she was reasonably sure was Captain Ch'onithron and make their way back to *Trudy*, where perhaps they could use the mobile transport unit to lock on to Tagir from orbit.

It occurred to her that had the captain completed his survey, he'd sure have made his way back to find their away team as he presumably had no means by which to contact them. Their transport window was

quickly approaching. P'nom flipped open the tricorder one last time to hone in on the readings she'd previously picked up. Option two was the most logical choice.

Instead of registering the trillium insulation from Shorh's tricorder, P'nom's unit flashed a warning. An incoming transporter beam...

P'nom looked up from her ancient tricorder and suddenly the entire chamber brightened and shimmered in a yellow golden light. Two figures materialized. A tall, fit-looking Romulan woman wearing an Imperial silver battle tunic holding disruptor pistols in either hand. A second Romulan female, dressed in a formal black uniform, her hair piled high in an elaborate conical bun and sporting decorative ear caps. P'nom stepped back to find safety, but felt her right heel hit the immovable black door. She quickly dialed her phaser to the heavy stun setting and prepared to defend herself.

"Lower your weapon, child. Sub-Commander *Sohon* won't hesitate in killing you where you stand," Dar purred more than spoke the words. She was delighted to see that this last remaining intruder appeared to be at least part Vulcan.

P'nom looked from the woman in black to the silver clad warrior at her back. Even in the dim light she could see the cold expressionless face hovering in the darkness above the twin barrels of the remarkably slender pistols. She lowered her phaser slowly. There was no advantage for her, and she doubted she could get off a shot before her opponent did in fact kill her where she stood.

"Drop it, Starfleet."

P'nom looked past the dark woman, to the taller woman. In the dim light it wasn't possible to get a completely clear view of either of their faces, but she could make out this pistol bearing Romulan's eyes. She could see that this *Sohon*, was serious. She slowly opened her hand and gently tossed her phaser to the side. It hit the rock floor with an unsatisfying *click-click* sound.

"So, I am to be your prisoner then?" P'nom asked in a steady voice.

“I believe current treaties require you to identify yourself by name, rank, and service number,” said Caithlin as she approached the young woman in the amusingly oversized jumper.

“Those treaties apply when opposing members of either the Federation or Star Empire transgress into either’s territory without prior authorization. As we are currently in the Kea System in what is recognized as unclaimed space, such information is not mandated.”

“You don’t look quite Vulcan, but you certainly sound Vulcan.”

“I am half-Vulcan, half-human.” P’nom was uncomfortable as the older woman was now entering her personal space. The other Romulan never wavered. She kept both pistols fixed on P’nom.

“Hmm, well half of you is of interest anyway. So you know, you *are* in Romulan space. We annexed this system more than forty cycles ago.” Caithlin noted the young woman’s elongated, yet rounded ears. She found them adorable.

“The latest star charts do not reflect that claim,” was all P’nom could counter with. There was something oddly familiar about the black-clad woman.

“No? Well, the Praetor is a very busy man, perhaps it slipped his mind.”

“I have a comrade trapped behind this door. I would ask you to release him.”

“Your comrade is dead. Both your comrades are dead. You’ll be dead in a matter of moments if you don’t start cooperating, little half-Vulcan.”

P’nom swallowed hard and tried to focus.

“Have you ever encountered a Reman warrior, child?” cooed Caithlin.

P’nom felt herself go pale. She’d never seen a Reman before, but she’d heard reports of their cruelty and proficiency as warriors. The woman with the pistols was cold, emotionless. This older woman though, she was flush with a sort of passion P’nom had noticed in her human peers; the sort of passion she’d spent a lifetime trying to suppress. The woman with the remarkable hairdo was confident, strong and lithe...but a vulnerability had crept into her voice. Not quite

fear, but something close to it coloured her words as she spoke of Reman warriors.

“No, I have not,” was all P’nom could manage.

“They’re coming this way now. They’ve murdered your compatriot in the small space vessel. They’ve just slaughtered your missing comrade in one of the lower mineshafts and the fiercest, worst, strongest of them is just up ahead having dispatched your third and last confederate. He’ll be here in a matter of minutes. Do you want to be here to meet him, or do you wish to come with us?” Caitlin slowly walked back to where Sohon was covering the young Starfleet officer.

“I...how can you...?”

Just then the echoes of Mivik’s horrible barking screams boomed down the tunnels. Pitux had just informed him that the explosion had wiped out the other four Reman warriors sent to dispatch the first intruder.

P’nom was shaken by the raw rage she heard in the sounds. She looked to the Romulans and nodded her head. A single tear rolled down her right cheek. Another fell down her left and suddenly she was wholly human, wholly terrified.

Caithlin Dar, Sub-Commander Sohon and the young, terrified half-Vulcan woman transported up to the *Vollo* two minutes before Mivik crashed into the chamber, *U’re!* dripping Andorian blood in hand.

## Transmission / *Ishanakuedh*

Semis consulted the chronometer mounted above the status board. It would be suns up in three quarters of an hour. Most of the Reman miners and smelters would return to their caves to rest. The specialized troops, the Remans chosen by Alhe Mivik to receive training and be entrusted with security and executive duties would stay on duty though. The young, fierce men Semis had been working alongside all night would soon go off shift, but there would be three fresh troopers reporting to monitor the facility and keep things running while the majority of AK-hyi's Reman population slept.

Ketor had returned to his private chambers. His standing order was for Semis to contact him directly the moment Mivik reported in, or if Enriov Dar should require anything further.

Semis consulted the status board. There were five producing shafts on the near side of the facility. Shafts three and four were still reporting as active, as was the primary smelting compound, but they'd be in the process of locking down for the day. As the simple status indicator for shaft four began to flash yellow—indicating the foreman supervising the miners hard at work therein was preparing to end the double-long shift, a call came in across the open channels.

The young Reman at the communications terminal growled low into the refurbished Altarian mic wired to the transmitter. Semis couldn't quite make out what was being said, which struck the old Romulan as odd. In all the cycles he'd spent living and working alongside Remans he'd never known one to whisper...

Semis moved closer to the communications terminal, trying to be subtle. He recognized Mivik's voice, but couldn't make out what he was saying...

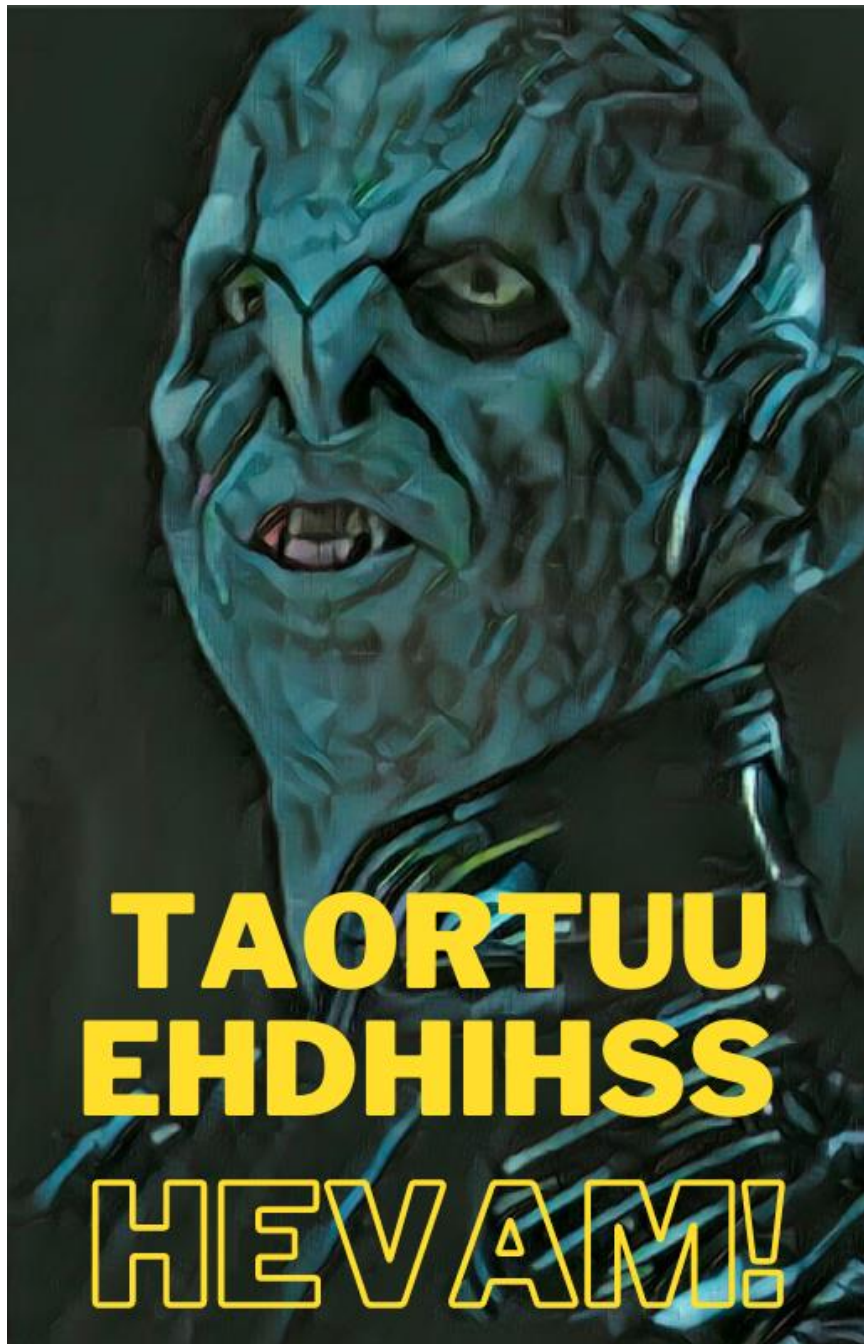
*".....ehdhihss rihannsu....'hh valhthealh..."*

Semis tried to make out what Mivik was saying, he'd heard the word slaughter...and...

The young Reman turned away from his comms panel and growled at Semis.

*Slaughter the Romulans.* Semis gasped and took a step back. The young man glaring at him had nothing but hate in his eyes. *Slaughter the Romulans!*

Semis moved as quickly as he could. His standard issue disruptor was stowed in the locker by the command bunker's door. Turning around to run for his weapon he was greeted by the other Reman trooper. As the fierce Reman thrust a rusty photo-spanner up into the old Romulan's chest, all Semis could think was: *How could I have forgotten about the other one?*



**TAORTUU  
EHDHIHSS  
HEVAM!**

## Revolt / *Iumnelai*

“Transmission confirmed, Enriov. The Reman *alhe* has just commanded his people to slaughter the Romulans.”

Caithlin stood silently on the bridge of the *Vollo*. Her people had been monitoring all the interfacility communications since arriving. Sub-Commander Sohon was securing the young Vulcan below.

“Orders, Enriov Dar?” Commander Sateeka had already signalled to the tactical station to begin cycling the disruptor banks.

“Status of the *Vejul*?” Caithlin asked in a flat voice.

Sateeka sat back in her command seat, surprised by the admiral’s request. “The, uh, the *Vejul* will be ready to break orbit within the hour, Enriov. Should we plot an incursion point to...”

“Get me Commanders Veeta and Nendixa, priority channel.”

The communications officer turned to look at Admiral Dar. The woman was perfectly calm. “Which one would you like to speak to first, ma’am?”

“Veeta.” Dar moved past Sateeka and stood in front of *Vollo*’s viewscreen. The red/brown surface of AK-hyi slowly rotated below.

“This is Commander Veeta aboard the... *Vutik*.”

“*Vutik*? Well, you’ve not wasted any time, Commander. Well done.”

“Named for an aunt, Enriov Dar. She was dainty and famously weak. I have complied with your directions and surrendered the *Vejul*, what more...”

“The Remans on the surface are in active revolt. If they haven’t already, they are in the process of slaughtering every Romulan in that facility.”

“What?! Contact Nendixa, scramble...”

“Commander, the mines and the Remans can wait. You will coordinate with the other warbirds; they’ll rendezvous with you at AK-onx. Your fleet will remain there until reinforcements arrive and the offending creatures can be properly disposed of.”

Veeta spun around the unfamiliar bridge and looked to the sub-lieutenant at the communications board. The man shook his head and tapped his right ear.

“Admiral, we don’t have the power to cut through the gravitons.”

“I’ll take care of the preliminaries, Commander Veeta. Once the *Vejul* and the *Vollo* are underway, just head for AK-onx. The others will be waiting for you. *Vollo*, out.”

Dar sighed, but kept her eyes fixed on the dirty ball of rock spinning slowly on her ship’s screen. Her *brother’s* pets were running wild and there was nothing to be done about it. She’d warned him so many times over the cycles. Still, it saddened her to have to have been the one to loose the monsters on poor Ketor.

“Enriov Dar, I have Commander Nendixa.”

“Open the channel.”

“Enriov Dar, this is Commander Nendixa, how may I serve?”

“Is your bridge secure, Commander?”

Nendixa sat up in his command chair, startled. He glanced around the bridge of the *Valmaika* and shrugged. “Of course, Enriov. This is an Imperial Warbird.”

“Where are your Reman shock troops, Commander?”

“There’s a boarding party aboard the alien shuttle, we were just about to transport them back. The others are on deck fourteen, held separate and secure from the rest of the ship. Why?”

“The Remans of AK-hyi are in open revolt. Destroy the shuttle and the creatures aboard and empty deck fourteen into space. Do it now.”

Nendixa turned to face his tactical officer and jabbed two fat fingers at the shocked looking young man. The tractor beam disengaged, and *Trudy* tumbled wildly away from the massive Warbird. The Remans aboard had no way of knowing what was happening. Before they could even think of contacting the Warbird, *Trudy* exploded in a hail of disruptor fire.

As Nendixa watched the small craft disintegrate on the viewscreen, Commander Sateeka initiated an emergency purge of deck fourteen. Seventeen Reman shock troops were blown out into space.

Nendixa turned to look at Sateeka at the operations terminal to see that his second in command had done what was asked.

“Our Remans have been dealt with, Enriov,” reported Nendixa dryly.

“Good. Quietly contact the other Warbirds and discreetly order them to do the same. You will all set course for AK-onx and await back-up. Understood?”

“Confirmed.”

## Sisters / Ravsam

P'nom moved along the muted grey corridor from the tight transporter room in silence. The Romulan officer manning the transport control station was a young woman. She had light brown hair, cut in the uninteresting style that was the standard of the Romulan military, but her uniform confused P'nom as she was ushered off the black pads and through an open door. The transport officer was dressed in a black/silver tunic P'nom was unfamiliar with. The tall, stern-faced woman holding one of the pair of sleek looking disruptors, stood in stark contrast to this other Romulan.

The trio moved through a narrow, nondescript corridor in silence. P'nom walked at a brisk pace in front of the tall woman dressed in the familiar Romulan silver military tunic, who was followed by the older woman who'd extended the invitation to flee the dark caverns of Kea II before the arrival of the howling Remans. P'nom kept her eyes down and watched as the slick green metallic decking slipped under a dull grey industrial carpet. They'd come to a "T" section and P'nom stopped abruptly, not knowing which way to turn.

"Sohon, escort her to my quarters. I'll be on the bridge."

P'nom stood aside as the older woman with the strange hairdo brushed past without so much as looking at her. She turned right and disappeared along the wider corridor they'd come to.

"Left, Starfleet."

*Sohon*, P'nom thought. *The woman's name is Sohon.*

They walked in silence. P'nom kept her eyes downcast as they passed three more women dressed in the odd black/silver uniforms. They were clearly aboard a ship of some kind.

"Right."

P'nom sighed and turned as she'd been instructed. Sohon, pistol in hand, hadn't touched her, but P'nom could *feel* the woman at her back and could sense how deadly serious she was. The industrial grey carpeting continued in an unbroken stream. A voice came across the vessel's address system. Another female, but P'nom couldn't make out

what was being said. Absently she wondered if her Universal Translator had malfunctioned.

“Left.” They turned down a dead-end corridor. A single door on the left side awaited close to the terminal bulkhead.

## Wallace / Wallace

Henry was standing in his kitchen when his home's integrated communications station sang out a unique three note alert that indicated a priority transmission from command was coming through. All active members of the Admiralty had standalone, secure communications systems integrated into their private homes, wherever they might be located. In times of emergency, every step was taken to ensure stable, secure communications up and down the chain of command.

Admiral Wallace sighed and moved as quickly and quietly as he could to the interface panel mounted to the wall above his wife's reclaimator unit. The comms panel was installed beside the room's environmental control screen. It was 0603 hours. Henry gently selected the acknowledge prompt to silence the alert before its chiming woke his wife, who was still sound asleep upstairs. The thought of having to speak with Xao so early in the morning was not appealing.

For years he and Thom Knot had relied upon their personal communicators, which operated on a secure dedicated frequency to get a hold of one another. In all the time Knot served as Chief of Ops, Henry couldn't recall him ever using the intrusive home channel. The secure communicators were still available of course; however, Henry had no desire to furnish T'Chou with such access as the acting Chief of Ops would surely abuse the privilege to no end.

Henry sighed again as he noted the call was still waiting for his attention. There was a full communications station through the sitting room and down the entry hall in the study, but as things were, Henry opened an audio channel in his kitchen. Dressed only in a pair boxer briefs and an open, purple-striped bathrobe, he had no intention to be ogled by Xao T'Chou.

"This is Wallace, what can I do for you Admiral T'Chou?" His voice felt weak, and his mouth was dry. He'd come downstairs to brew a pot of Bolian blend and review the overnights before getting showered and dressed for the day.

"Admiral Wallace, apologies for disturbing you at home."

Henry shook his head. "Yes, Admiral. Can we get to it, please?"

"Captain Evengii has contacted the *Fury*. Chancellor Ch'Sharo has accepted our proposal and even as we speak, steps are being taken to return all Starfleet personnel to the *Meni T'Pra* and I've been assured that uh, that Thom's remains will be released as well."

Henry stepped back from the wall mounted speaker and leaned against the heavy oak countertop opposite the reclimator. "What!? What proposal?"

"Oh! Yes, well..." T'Chou hadn't thought through how he'd take credit for managing to break the stalemate without revealing Grant Baker's involvement, but as with most of his career defining victories, Xao's instinct was to move fast and claim all that he could.

"Admiral T'Chou?!" Henry snapped his mouth closed. He hadn't quite yelled, but his curiosity had quickly turned to anger, and he now risked waking his wife.

"Things developed quickly, Henry. I, uh, well I'd managed a private call with Captain Baker to get a proper status report yesterday, shortly before lunch..."

"What proposal, Xao?!" Henry could feel his blood pressure rising.

"Yes, sorry...while speaking with Baker and his first officer it occurred to me; what if we offered the Andorians an alternative path to supplication? The issue at heart really was the Vulcan demands that the Imperial Guard cease building and operating Andorian warships, yes?" Xao was very pleased with how this was all coming together. There was no doubt that he would be the permanent Chief of Ops by the end of the day.

"Go on..." Henry closed his eyes and forced himself to keep his voice low and even. He'd not yet reviewed the overnight fleet deployment charts and minutes. T'Chou had caught him flat-footed.

"Simply put, Henry, I made a semi-formal proposal to Ch'Sharo's Office in the hopes of perhaps relieving this whole mess..." Xao waited for Wallace to engage and ask to hear more about his ingenuity, but only expectant silence came across the open channel. "Uh, so essentially, as Chief of, uh, acting Chief of Ops, I suggested that the Imperial Guard could train for and crew Andorian-exclusive starships."

“You what?”

“Yes, well, the Vulcans you see, their issues focus specifically on the warships the Andorians have built and intended to keep building...the uh, Andorian fleet, really. The uh, the Imperial Guard has issue with the Vulcan’s clipping their wings, as it were, so...” T’Chou struggled to remember how eloquently Commander Syrk had explained the logic of it all, but it was getting away from him.

“So, what? You volunteered Starfleet assets?”

It was T’Chou’s turn to sigh. Wallace had jumped to his own conclusion and offered something of an explanatory bridge in the conversation. “In effect, yes, Admiral. We have several ships crewed exclusively by Vulcans, why not have a few crewed by Andorians? I mean, the Science Academy supplies us with officers who’ve never really been through our Academy. Why not allow the Imperial Guard to train crews for a handful of ships and have everyone on a level playing field?”

Henry considered what Xao was saying. There was an undeniable logic to it all...which made Henry somewhat uneasy, considering who’d apparently come up with the idea. “You made this proposal yesterday morning?”

“Well, late morning, early afternoon really. I had another meeting I was running late for...”

“You made this proposal yesterday morning and Ch’Sharo has already accepted?” Henry pushed himself off the counter and slowly made his way to the cupboards where they kept the coffee mugs.

“This has been going on for weeks, Henry. I’m sure the Andorians were as eager to find a way out as we were. Afterall, we have a formidable task force massed just outside their sector.” Xao sensed a slightly more relaxed tone in Wallace’s voice.

“So, what? You offered them some random ships we’re going to de-crew and deliver at some point?” Since the ‘*Upgrade*’ there’d been a growing shortage of qualified crews for those starships pressed into service. The notion of shunting one or two vessels to the care of the Andorians wasn’t terrible; the manpower could be used elsewhere.

“Certainly not. The Imperial Guard would see that as an insult. Besides, I’ve worked hard to logistically see to our fleet-wide needs to

just give things away. No. I sent word to the shipyards out at Rigel VII to step up construction on the three *Miranda*-class ships we'd been holding back on. We won't be able to crew those ships fully for at least another two years; even then we'd be relying mostly on green Academy grads..."

"So, in the time it takes the yards to complete the ships, the Imperial Guard can orientate and train their people to assume control in less than half the time we'd need to get them online."

"Precisely, sir. It made sense to me. With that sorted, our two ships and...and poor Thomas, are coming home. Situation resolved. Normal Operations resumed!"

Henry rooted in the cupboard and found the bag of ground beans he'd purchased from the Bolian Coffee Shop at HQ. He shook his head in disbelief. "You've seriously over-stepped here, Xao. The Vulcans are going to be livid. Hang fire on anything further. I'll be in my office in two hours, I expect a full report on all of it."

"I...? Uh, yes, a full report. Of course, Admiral."

## **Mercy, of a Sort / *Ekhes hvaedroalh, A teilhkh***

Caithlin made her way down the wide ramp from the *Vollo's* command deck to the primary deck below. Nendixa was now the primary commander of the Eisl Lattice work fleet. Veeta wouldn't be happy with his demotion, but as far as Enriov Dar could see, the younger commander had been complicit in her dear *brother's* misguided management of the entire AK-hyi facility. Besides, Nendixa was the older, more experienced commander; he should oversee the small fleet.

The *Vejul* would be breaking orbit shortly. Commander Sateeka was ordered to follow the massive Warbird out of the graviton polluted system—while the *Vollo* was next to blind and relied on pre-programmed approach and departure flight plans, the *Vejul's* superior sensors could carve a more direct route away from AK-hyi.

The moment *Vollo* was clear of the gravitons, Sateeka was to contact Chairman Luvax, the head of the Tal Shiar. Using Enriov Dar's personal code clearance, Sateeka would request that the reserve strike force held in the yards of Nelvana III be dispatched immediately to the Kea System. Commander Nendixa would meet the heavy *Keras*-class warbirds just outside the graviton heavy asteroid field between AK-hyi and AK-onx and guide them to their target.

The strike force would deploy a battalion of Romulan troops to the facility on AK-hyi and every Reman, man, woman, child, miner and soldier would be executed on sight. Their bodies would then be taken to the facility's smelting urns and disposed of. Once the Reman scum was purged, a fresh load of simple Reman miners could be shipped in aboard a Mining Consortium vessel and put to work mining and refining the *ih'hedaes* panels necessary to seal the deadly Eisl Lattice. Commander Veeta would be tasked with installing proper Romulan overseers and running the facility going forward.

Caithlin stepped into her quarters to find Sohon standing watch over the half-Vulcan child they'd plucked from the mines. As the door to the corridor beyond hushed closed, Dar gazed down at the small girl perched in the same chair Ketor had occupied only hours earlier.

The girl was dressed in a ridiculously oversized pair of old engineering overalls and was speckled with *ih'hedaes* dust from the caverns. The tiny points of sharp purple sand reflected in the cabin's harsh lights, making the girl appear to shimmer as if she was standing in a transporter beam. Dar cast a quick eye down to her own black-clad arms and torso and realized that she too was covered in dust and sparkled just as brightly.

"You'll have to decontaminate. *Ih'hedaes* in its natural state isn't harmful short-term, but you don't want to live with it."

The girl blinked and kept her hands clasped firmly in her lap.

"Sub-Commander, go and decontaminate yourself. We'll be fine until you return."

Sohon looked from the timid girl to the admiral but said nothing. She knew better than to defy any instruction Dar cared to give. The slender disruptor was lowered and secured in its holster strapped to Sohon's right thigh. She, too, was covered in the glittering purple dust. Without a word she silently exited the room to decontaminate and change into a fresh uniform.

Caithlin waited for Sohon to leave before stepping into her bed chamber beyond the modest receiving area where P'nom had been sat. The primary door leading out to the corridor wasn't locked, but where would the little Vulcan go?

P'nom cautiously examined her sleeves and noticed the dust for the first time since leaving the caves. The door the older woman had just stepped through remained open. P'nom could hear her host going through a closet or footlocker of some kind. She remained rooted to the seat opposite a single sofa lounger. A low, black table rested between the two pieces of furniture. The sound of whatever the Romulans called a sonic shower then roared forth from the open doorway.

A short time later the older Romulan woman emerged dressed in a maroon blouse and a pair of airy white pants with wide flowing legs. She carried a bundle of grey fabric. Her hair was now hanging long and loose. The jewels and decorations were gone.

"Now we will have a proper conversation, child. I will ask you some questions and you will either answer them, or I will have you

returned to the caves where you can join your peers and the twenty-six Romulans recently slaughtered by the rioting Reman dogs my dear *brother* was responsible for spoiling. Yes?”

P’nom watched as the older woman gently put her grey bundle on the low black table, then reclined on the sofa opposite.

“That uniform, Starfleet engineering. That’s somewhat outdated.”

“...the...*ahem*...The uniform is from a...a sort of museum,” P’nom managed.

“So, you are Starfleet then. Name, service number? Come along now.”

P’nom took a moment to consider her circumstances, then in a shaky voice volunteered: “P’nom, serial number: 807-3659C. Lieutenant, Starfleet, Engineering Division. Assigned communications officer, *USS Isadore*.”

“*Isadore? Isadore...?* If memory serves, *Isadore* is a heavy cruiser. One of your *Excelsior*-class warships, is it not?”

P’nom cleared her throat. She was suddenly very thirsty. In a cracking voice she replied: “*Isadore* was a ship of exploration...”

Dar smirked at the refrain she’d heard hundreds of times from her own husband. “Yes, of course. All Starfleet vessels are purely interested in exploration. Why did you say *was*?”

“*Isadore* was lured to the Umoth Nebula where we were set upon by a flight of Cardassian warships...”

“The *Isadore*! Yes, yes...Captain Ch’onithron, no?”

P’nom snapped her head up and glared at the Romulan sitting across from her. The shock must have been plain on her face. How this Romulan knew about the captain and apparently about the events that had transpired nearly a quadrant away was immensely disquieting. She groped for words and the older woman smiled and purred on...

“So, you are one of the four to escape Section 31 custody? Impressive. Tell me though, why are you here?”

“...We...We came looking for answers,” was all P’nom could manage.

“Answers? Oh, do go on my dear. Answers to what?” Caithlin delighted in the thought of sharing with her husband that she’d found what his people had lost.

“The *Sheaffe*, Commander Harris...the, the *Isadore*...answers to why and who was responsible for it all. We reasoned it must be... You know about Section 31?”

“Oh, my little P’nom. Is that what you were all doing? Looking for an explanation for the sacrifice of an antique and a crew of insignificants? Trying to find reason in events far greater than yourselves? How *human* of you all.” The girl looked like she was on the verge of tears. Caithlin reminded herself she was seated across from only a half-Vulcan and quickly carried on: “Of course we know of Section 31, child. The Tal Shiar is, in many ways the far more refined and efficient counter pole to that organization.”

“Then you know what this has all been about? You know who was responsible for so much needless death and destruction?”

“My dear, your perspective is badly skewed, I fear. I think you consider yourselves far more important in all of this than you truly are.”

P’nom shook her head and fought back the urge to cry. She’d worked her entire life to keep her emotions in check and had been mostly successful. “So, this is how it ends then? No answers, no closure?”

Caithlin sat up straight and tried to offer the sloppy girl a reassuring smile. “End, P’nom? End? No, this isn’t an end. It’s certainly not a beginning either. It’s just one of a million steps along the way; necessary in the moment, but quickly relegated to insignificance.”

The older woman pushed the grey bundle across the table. P’nom could see that she was being offered clean clothes.

“We can talk more later. For now, take this service uniform. It will fit you far better than that horrid red thing. You can use the spray booth in the other room to decontaminate first. Be sure to place that contaminated uniform in the iso-bin. The booth’s settings are already appropriately programmed.”

The small half-Vulcan with the rounded ears timidly rose from her seat and scooped up the grey suit. A look of insecure hesitation was on her face. Dar wondered how useful a Starfleet lieutenant might

be to her. The girl turned towards the open door leading to Dar's private chambers and head, but before she could disappear...

"Tell me, Lt. P'nom, are you a Section 31 operative?"

P'nom slowly looked up from the neatly folded grey suit and locked eyes with the Romulan. "No. I am not." A new and searing hatred for the people who'd manipulated them all to death and despair suddenly flared in P'nom's mind.

"Very well then. Just know you will be vetted. The truth of things will be discovered whether you volunteer them or not. Jolan Tru." There was a mind-sifter aboard.

"Of course...thank, thank you." P'nom made her way to the head.

## Paris / Paris

Commander Dazgin took back his credentials from the Security Officers stationed at the main entrance to the Executive Building. Both he and Admiral Wallace had transported over as soon as the morning briefing was done, and the Commander-in-Chief had gathered all the necessary materials for the impromptu meeting he'd demanded with the Federation President. It was 1903 hours, Paris time. The light, dusky Spring evening was fading to full night in hues of orange and red. Summer was threatening.

Both the admiral and the commander were wearing their best dress uniforms, though only the contingent of Security Officers watching the approaches to the lifts leading to the Presidential suites were present to notice them. The grand avenue leading up from the Sein to the front of the Federation Capital Complex and Council Hall bustled with tourists and passers by. The people were in good spirits. The evening was warm, and the Spring rains had stopped. The City of Lights was slowly coming to life for another magical night.

Henry had spoken to the President personally just an hour and a half earlier as he prepared for an expediated morning brief with his admirals at Starfleet Headquarters in San Francisco. The developments in the Andor Sector needed to be fully discussed and moreover the looming diplomatic fallout with the Vulcan High Command needed addressing. T'Chou's name didn't come up specifically, but the President was very keen to learn just who had brokered the unconventional understanding with Chancellor Ch'Sharo.

"Thank you, Commander. You can wait for the Admiral just over there by the lifts." The tall major in the blue and white security uniform directed Commander Dazgin's attention towards an alcove where two leather seats and a firm-looking leather-wrapped bench were neatly arranged around an information screen.

Dazgin replaced his Starfleet Identification packet in his tunic's inner pocket and glanced over to where the Security major had indicated.

“It’s alright, Commander. I’m heading up to the most secure piece of real estate on the planet.” Henry offered his young commander a reassuring smile and held out his hand for the black attaché case they’d brought along.

Dazgin was still getting used to the logistics of the capital and hesitantly handed over the briefing materials. Major Thomlinson remained silent at a respectful distance. The other Security Officers remained at their posts and presented themselves as models of professionalism.

A moment later, Henry was examining his appearance in the mirror within the lift car. He’d met with the President a hundred times before, but his meetings of late had yielded more and more unsettling revelations. As the lift doors opened Henry comforted himself with the thought that very soon, he’d be retiring and leaving all this behind.

Stepping from the lift, Admiral Wallace noticed that the small security check point just outside the Executive Wing was vacant. An eerie silence was in the air. He glanced up along the bulkheads on either side of the wide, mahogany panelled hallway; the security monitors were all in place and lit up indicating they were live and functioning. He glanced quickly to his left and right but saw no indications of anyone else. Cautiously, he made his way towards the President’s Office.

The security desk and reception area just outside the passage through to the President’s Secretary’s office were also abandoned. Henry tightened his grip on the handle of his attaché case. He was just about to break protocol and risk setting off any number of security alarms by activating the wrist-worn communicator to summon Dazgin when he noticed the doors to the Salon D’Observation were standing open.

“Let’s not stretch this out Henry. Come in please,” came a woman’s voice.

Wallace’s apprehension turned quickly to rage. He knew exactly who was waiting for him. With a determined grimace he rounded the turn from the deserted security posts and strode into the Salon to come face-to-face with Maureen Bautlin.

“You again.”

Maureen was standing at the end of the long mahogany conference table. She was dressed in her black Section 31 uniform and unapologetically wore a phaser and communicator on her broad black belt. “Yes. For what it’s worth I am sorry to have to do this to you, again.”

“For what it’s worth?!” balked Henry as he dropped his case at the head of the table and quickly surveyed the rest of the room before taking note of the weapons the admiral in charge of *Contemporaneous Affairs* was sporting. “I don’t suppose the President is going to grace us with her presence?”

“No, she’s arranging to meet with Azetbur to discuss some new realities the Klingon Empire needs to come to terms with. I won’t ask you to sit. This won’t take long.”

“I called this meeting less than two hours ago...to discuss the Andorians.”

“Yes, Xao’s made a mess of things. Don’t worry though, I’ve filled the President in on everything. She’ll be in touch with Sarek to break the *happy* news.”

“What is it you’re after Maureen? I haven’t got time to...” Henry suddenly noticed the narrow black peg-stand resting at the far end of the table just in front of the black-uniformed admiral. It was turned round to display the face of the small silver bar with the three red hash marks.

“I’d considered coming to see you in your office, but the thought of that brave young Benzite getting worked up wasn’t appealing. I’m too old for active combat.” Maureen smiled glibly, knowing that Henry had just spotted the trinket from his desk back in San Francisco.

“How did you get that?!” was all Henry could manage.

“How could you not put it on? A better question. Don’t you think?”

“Damn it, Maureen. This isn’t a game!”

“No, its not. I know you’ve read the files concerning the El Aurian refugees. I know you pulled everything security had on the *Borg*.”

The word hung in the air between the two for what seemed like forever.

“That’s... *Information concerning the unconfirmed existence of the cybernetic entities referred to as “Borg” by a handful of traumatized aliens is strictly classified.* No one, aside from myself...”

“Yourself, the President and the Head of Starfleet Security. I’ve had two out of three for a long time, Henry.” She watched as the colour drained from the old man’s face. He’d quoted the proposed preamble to the official policy response to any *Borg* inquiry verbatim—it was somewhat impressive.

“The taskforce is breaking up. The *Fury* and *Meni T’Pra* passed out of the Andor Sector just under an hour ago. When they get back, run a heavy carbon scan as part of Admiral Knot’s post-mortem. I suspect you’ll find tetrodotoxin in his digestive track. Have reliable people conduct a search of Xao T’Chu’s private apartment. You’ll find the same tetrodotoxin residue somewhere in or around his kitchen. Thom had coffee with Xao the same night he shipped up to *Meni T’Pra* on the President’s orders. They were quite close, I understand.”

Henry shook his head. The last time he’d been in this room, at this table, he’d been with Thom. It was the night the President ordered Thom to Andoria to stabilize relations with Ch’Sharo and show Federation support for the Andorians.

“So, what? Xao poisoned Thom? You don’t expect me to believe that?”

“You’ve always known Thom was far more devoted to his relationship with T’Chou, than Xao ever was to Knot. The fact Xao managed to get to head Starfleet Security spoke to the man’s ability to manipulate.” Maureen gazed down at the Section 31 service bar she’d gifted Henry in this very room.

“I suppose you’re telling me that Xao planned to murder Thom to...what? Advance his career a little more?” Even as the words left his lips, the notion sparked waves of doubt in Henry’s mind.

“I’m telling you to be thorough in your post-mortem and consider all the evidence. Conclusions you can draw yourself.”

Henry brought his hands up from where they’d been hanging uselessly at his sides. He rested them atop his hard black attaché case. His left hand twitched for a moment, the quieted. The tremors had

started almost a year earlier. The doctors had run scans and found nothing outright “wrong” with him, he was just getting old.

“I know you’ll likely never trust me again, Admiral. I do. So, I brought this along. I asked you to consider putting it on. If you had, I’d have been able to share so much with you.” Maureen gently slid the pegged service bar towards Henry’s end of the table.

“Are we done?” was all Henry could think to ask.

“This is a subspace transmitter, Henry. A prototype of a long-range transceiver we’re working on. Eventually we’ll have integrated communicators. No need to carry clunky pieces of tech, no more worrying about power packs.” She saw Wallace wobble slightly. The man realized the moment she said the word *transmitter*, what it was that she’d done. “I’m telling you this because we need to reset our paradigm. I have no intention of bugging you any longer. I’m not going anywhere and I’m sorry, neither are you.”

“What?”

“In the safest way possible we’re fighting to prevent a *Borg* attack. You don’t get to know the specifics. This situation with Xao, though, destabilizes everything. I know the President told you that you’d be asked to step aside soon, but that’s changed for now.”

Fifteen minutes later Admiral Wallace and Commander Dazgin were transporting back to San Francisco. Henry needed to speak with the Judge Advocate General about a warrant for Starfleet Security to search a private residence.

# CAITHLIN DAR



## **Galactic Peace and Marriage / *Rim Daeman Saith Aellei d'annha***

(Four months later.)

The haunting sounds of Grand Tenor D'Mastu 'hvanne's immortal performance of "*Teelis Hvaedroalh Bataer'le*" echoed across the dusty plains of the Woebegone Plateau southwest of Paradise City. The population of Nimbus III had greatly withered over the decades. Now the "city" was mostly deserted and slowly crumbling back into the rocky dust from which it had been built. A few hundred diehard colonists remained, determined to somehow make a life in the desolation. For all the random settlements and failing mining interests scattered along the world's arid western hemisphere, Nimbus III had a population that was roughly half that of the far distant settlement of T'hak Lat on Pi. At least T'hak Lat had the *gax* ranchers to keep it going.

On the pitted and baked Woebegone, stood a squat, low structure. From a distance the building looked like a sort of squashed dome. Drawing closer it grew easier to discern a seamless curving curtain wall constructed from the same white/cream gravel that made up the surrounding desert. The wall stood at a uniform four meters in height and wrapped around an inner compound some 4,050 meters in diameter. Hidden behind the wall was a sleek, silver environmental terraforming unit which moisturized the dry desert air and brought the temperature within the compound to a pleasant 24°C.

Lush green grass grew in all directions around the silver unit and ran uninterrupted to the very base of the inner curtain wall. There was a grove of *Illeha'h* trees, a pond, a small meadow of wildflowers and a shaded pergola with an intricately carved patio table and chair set. A small two-person hot tub was set up close by and in the very center of the verdant paradise was a white/cream coloured house. It was in the shape of a perfectly circular dome and was comprised of an uninterrupted skin of transparent aluminum held in place by four great white/cream pillars which supported a solid cap of white/cream concrete which was all that was visible from beyond the curtain wall.

A silver tray sat atop the dining room table. Two fluted glasses stood next to a nondescript blue/green bottle. Caithlin lay reposed on her home's cream coloured sofa and watched as water condensation collected and rolled down the odd bottle's sides.

"What have you brought us, husband?" she called in a lazy voice.

"What's that my darling?" came *Sinjin's* response from the kitchen. He was preparing some fruit and cheese for the two to share.

They'd both arrived late the previous evening. Talbot's old executive shuttle pulling into a low orbit some ten *k'vahrus* abeam of the *Vollo*. It had been more than a year since they'd last been together and there was little interest in anything other than spending the night together before anything else. They'd slept late and woke to find themselves in each other's arms—perfectly ensconced in a world of their own making.

"*Sinjin*, the bottle? It's not that terrible whiskey dreck you love. It's certainly not Romulan Ale." Caithlin beamed. Nowhere in the universe was she ever more at ease and simply happy.

Talbot walked into the primary living room carrying a wooden tray of charcuterie. "Oh yes, that. Something special to toast the Treaty of Algeron." He set his tray down on the table in front of the sofa then proceeded to the table to uncork the odd bottle and pour two glasses of bubbling, sweet smelling liquid.

"Yes, the treaty. Truly something to celebrate, my love." Dar dropped a cube of baby Swiss into her mouth. The mix of Romulan and Terran cuisine was one of the small things she so loved about their marriage.

"Indeed, and huzzah to that! Peace between our worlds. Freedom from the Klingons for you and no worries about cloaked Federation threats. For us, a great relief of resources along your borders and a good look at your artificial singularity drive," hummed Talbot as he handed his wife a glass.

"Thank you, my *h'jol*. Don't forget the freedom to seal that damned portal and stave-off the, what are they called? *Borg*." She took the flute, raised a toast and took a sip of the light, sweet, bubbly alcohol. It tickled her nose. "Oh, but come now, husband. What is this lovely elixir?"

*Sinjin* gulped down his own glass and smiled his crooked grin. “Bajoran spring wine. Haven’t you had it before, darling?” *En garde.*

Caithlin put her glass down and sat up slowly. “I don’t think so, *Sinjin.*” Their fencing had resumed. *Allez.*

“Hmmm...you know, I had to lock away one of my operatives for exceeding his mandate recently.” Thrusting straight to the *balestra.*

“That’s unpleasant, husband. Such betrayal within the Tal Shiar usually results in an execution. So much more effective.” Caithlin picked up a grape and dropped it into her mouth. *Parry and counter-riposte.*

“Well yes, I can see how such a response might seem so. The thing of it is...this broken, angry, sad little man shared some rather interesting details about how he came to find himself getting involved with, well, with the Obsidian Order.” Talbot took a handful of grapes and sat at his wife’s feet. The attack did not let up. *Beat.*

“Cardassians, well. I see where the Bajoran wine comes from. You should tell your people to be cautious around Cardassians. They’re little more than thugs, but the Order is not an organization to be taken lightly.” She picked up her glass again and held it just under her nose to inhale the bouquet. *A feint.*

“Yes indeed. You’re sure you’ve never enjoyed spring wine before?”

Caitlin kept her glass to her nose and smiled. “Is there something you wish to ask, husband?” A direct and deliberate *beat.*

“You’ve brokered various transactions within Federation space using a Ferengi Daimon the Tal Shiar once arrested for smuggling Altair water through the Typhon Expanse, you remember? You told me about it, oh years ago.” *Parry.*

“As I recall you didn’t even know what a Ferengi was.” He was coy and *beat* from a slight advantage afforded by the early attack. She *counter-parried.*

“No... well this man I’ve incarcerated has shared that not only has this pet Ferengi *of yours* been responsible for several pirate raids of cargo transports and other, weaker vessels within Federation borders.” Talbot put his glass down, delivering another *beat* and prepared to press his attack. He knew what he knew and vice versa—

the trick was to glean just a little bit more from the other without giving anything else up.

“If its Daimon Prac you’re referring to, he died years ago.” She kept the glass just below her nose and peered over the rim at her husband. Another *counter-parry*.

“No, no, not Prac. He and his ship were destroyed by the *Victory* when they tried to bite off more than they could chew. Years ago, as you say. I’m talking about Daimon Kago, Prac’s partner.” *Thrust*.

Caithlin set her flute down with a thump and let some of the spring wine slop over the top. “I don’t believe I care for this. Its too sweet and not nearly as refreshing as one might hope.” *Touché*. He’d got a clean hit. She wanted to disengage, give him today’s point and reprise tomorrow.

“Kago was sent to plant the notion of using the Cardassians to eliminate Admiral U’Chtuklli, why?” Considerable resources had been wasted dealing with Moddax—who admitted in prison that his first meeting with the Obsidian Order had been brokered by a strange little alien called Kago.

“You needed a distraction to keep the bureaucracy from paying attention to the machinations of the treaty—so you used the Andorians and Vulcans. We needed distractions as well.”

“We’d arranged for a bureaucratic row. To have Sarek raise some fuss. Not provoke a standoff at the opposite end of the quadrant,” said Talbot dryly.

Caitlin smiled. “Perhaps some Romulan Ale to properly toast the Treaty?”

“Yes, well Bajoran spirits are perhaps a bit disappointing, though far more palatable than kanar. Saurian Brandy?” *Sinjin* had won the day. He knew better than to press his advantage too far.

Talbot had insisted that his side handle, Nompel, and his lady wife had arranged to allow a Section 31 operative access to see to the political officer’s end. Caithlin had been surprisingly willing to assist. Now he understood why. The Tal Shiar had assassinated U’Chtuklli and had used one his own operatives to do it. She’d scored a hit without him even seeing her *fleche* more than two years earlier.

“A compromise then.” Caithlin watched her husband collect the odd bottle of wine and the two used glasses.

They would remain on Nimbus III for another week, but she wouldn't wait that long before reengaging him in their never-ending bout. He seemed genuinely pleased that his side had captured *Tomed's* flawed artificial singularity drive. When she resumed her efforts on the *piste*, she'd *remise* his Ferengi revelation with a fleeting mention of the awe-inspiring power of the *Vejul*, which made *Tomed* look a century out of date.

“Here we are then.” Talbot reappeared with two tumblers of brandy. There were the reports concerning the Praetor's new flagship over Algeron which he needed to probe...but that could wait until tomorrow.

Dar graciously accepted a glass from her husband and sighed wistfully. He was so happy when he thought he was winning.

# Jolan Tru.

