

Beyond what's known, lies the beginning of everything.

CONVERGENCE

A WORK OF STAR TREK FAN FICTION

An Original Novel by:

Glenn G G Maitland

Convergence

by Glenn G G Maitland

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BOOK 1: *Sheaffe*

The collar was irritating his neck just below his left ear. He hated wearing the full uniform. For the last year he had enjoyed the more relaxed work overalls the Martian Research Institute allowed all personnel to wear while on duty. Without thinking he had slipped the tip of his finger between the stiff collar and his throat and was about to pull at the garment, when he realized that both the junior Lieutenants sitting opposite him were staring. Brian cleared his throat instead and made a half-hearted show of scratching behind his earlobe.

The transport skimmed along its pre-assigned route at a sub-orbital altitude. The trip from the Moscow Tactical Institute to Fleet Head Quarters in San Francisco only took forty-five minutes, but Brian would have been happier simply transporting to his meeting with Admiral U' Chtuklli. As things were though, neither Brian Harris, nor the Admiral himself were important enough to justify the use of the Fleet's planetary transport grid while the *Upgrade* was in progress.

Brian leaned forward in his seat and looked up towards the transport's cockpit. Through the open bulkhead to his left, he could see past the slight shoulders of the pilot and out the forward view port. The horizon streamed-by at a fantastic speed. At approximately "eye-level" Brian could see a bright white band of eternity

buffering a deepening blue atmosphere racing along the bottom of the transport and a pitch-black void speeding along the dorsal plates. He was riding a supersonic needle threading the narrow divide between Earth and space - life and death. He was aware that his finger was back at his collar. Twisting his head to face forward had just aggravated the situation.

“We should be arriving HQ in twenty minutes, sir.”

Brian faced forward. Across the cabin the young men were quietly looking at him again. He offered the Lieutenant who'd been speaking a smile and a quiet nod. Both Lieutenants were wearing duty overalls. He shifted his eyes to the rear bulkhead where an in-flight status panel confirmed their precise location and offered live ETA information in English, Russian, Vulcan and Andorian. He studied it for a moment before returning his attention to his fellow passengers. They looked fresh and eager. Brian wondered if they could possibly be more than two years out of the Academy.

“What brings you officers to Headquarters?” He resisted the urge to go back to pulling at the maddening collar.

“Sir, we're assigned to Communications Research Branch. Just finished a five-day furlough.”

“I see. From Moscow originally, or just sight-seeing?” Brian noticed that the young man speaking to him

was in fact fresh-faced, but his companion had been grossly misjudged.

“We are not Russians, Commander. Mr. Prell and I were in fact touring the galleries of Europe. Moscow was simply the end of our pre-planned journey.”

Brian did his best not to smile. He had been so preoccupied with his orders that he'd failed to take note that one of the officers he'd boarded the transport with was very obviously a Vulcan. *‘If the ears don't give it away, the haircut usually does’* his own first-year Cultural Anthropology Professor had been want to say whenever the topic of Vulcans came-up in Academy lectures.

“I see...Lieutenant?” Professor Jamison had been correct, Brian thought as he looked at the tall Vulcan. Ears aside, this man had a mighty bowl-cut any son-of-Surak would be proud of.

“Matrak, sir. Lieutenant, Jr. Grade. May I ask your name?”

“Commander Brian Harris. Pleased to meet you Mr. Matrak. Mr. Prell.”

The Vulcan seemed content with the brief factual response and returned to sitting quietly. Meditating, Brian realized. His partner though seemed eager to continue the conversation. He went on and on about the work he and Matrak had been doing at the Fleet Communications Lab in San Francisco and began asking Brian about what assignment he was on. Cautiously, Brian shared that he'd

been working at the MTI, but had been summoned to HQ for a meeting.

“Must be important sir; I’ve been riding these transports for the last year and a half and except for a Captain a few months back, I’ve never seen anyone in the reds using one.”

Brian smiled again and fought off the urge to attack his collar. The “reds” were what non-commissioned and Junior officers called the formal red tunics usually reserved for Command-level and administrative staff serving on active Fleet duty, or at HQ. The Fleet was slowly transitioning away from the formal tunics and turtlenecks in favour of a more comfortable tunic which required no undershirt in an effort to refresh the look of the Service as well as to respond to many complaints raised about the comfort of the “reds” in general.

“I really wouldn’t know, Mr. Prell. My orders were to report, so here I am on my way to report.” Brian turned his head to the side and watched as the transport slowed, banked slowly to port and began its final run towards San Francisco. Prell braced himself in his seat. Beside him Mr. Matrak remained silent, meditating peacefully.

Brian stepped out of the transport after insisting that Matrak and Prell disembark first. He stood in the open hatch for a moment before pulling himself through and stepping down from the gantry. The central landing platform was bustling with activity. Two other planetary transports had touched down behind the one Brian was leaving behind. Across the concourse, where the heavier stellar transports could more readily be serviced with the wider gravity platforms and Mark IV tractor emitters, sat a diplomatic shuttle and a full-on personnel transport. A steady stream of officers and specialists was flowing from the transport towards the stairs which led from the platforms up towards the command levels. The two young Lieutenants he'd shared the flight with from Moscow had melted into the mob of uniformed beings.

The *Upgrade* had commenced nearly six months ago and according to the timetable Fleet Command had distributed - it was still not yet half complete. The use of shuttles and transports across the planet had clogged most of the major cities and nearly every installation with bodies and equipment. The planetary power-grid was being used to ensure the orbital platforms remained functional while the sensor drones, dry docks and stations were systematically brought-up to specs. Admiral Cahill at the MTI had scoffed at the steps taken to ensure planetary

defence systems, though she had out of an abundance of caution supported the strategy in open committee. Something was worrying Fleet Command – something had prompted all of... this.

Brian made his way towards the escalators and found a spot behind a Lieutenant Commander and just ahead of two Ensigns who made his transport companions seem like senior citizens. Whatever he was being called-in for must have something to do with the anxiety he'd picked-up on from Cahill during his initial debriefing just two days earlier. He was sure of it.

At the top of the escalator the two Ensigns who'd been right behind him peeled off to the right and strode in a quick and determined manner towards a passage marked "Parade Grounds". Brian didn't have time to actually count, but he guessed there were easily a hundred to a hundred and fifty Ensigns, non-Comm and Crewmen streaming into the passageway. He continued across a slightly smaller platform than the one his transport had deposited him on, towards a second taller escalator. Working his way through the sea of Ensigns and stepping onto the moving staircase, Brian realized he was now in the majority. Ahead of him was the same Lt. Commander, behind him two Commanders and a Captain were now taking their places on the escalator. The dominant attire was now suddenly red, stiff and itchy.

"Here we go..."

“Excuse me, sir?” The Lt. Commander ahead of him turned around with a quizzical look on his face.

Brian noted the pale green of the man’s collar – he looked like a doctor, Brian thought to himself, then quickly realized that he’d just thought-out-loud. “I’m sorry Commander. I was talking to myself.”

The man, who might have been a ship’s surgeon – might just as easily have been a psychiatrist for all Brian knew, looked at him for half a second and then turned to face forward without saying a word. Brian pulled at his white collar again and wondered if the pale green ones itched as much. Everywhere below him was swarming with men and women – mostly human. He watched as the escalator carried him higher and higher above the primary platform where he’d just arrived. Hundreds of engineers were moving cargo pods and equipment from a massive cargo shuttle which had just touched down. On the second platform, the stream of Ensigns and Crewmen in scarlet coveralls showed no sign of letting up.

At the top of the second escalator Brian stepped out of the path of all the officers behind him to get his bearings. Two security checkpoints were manned and ready for any issue that might arise. Behind the bullet-helmeted behemoths manning the stations located directly in front of the passageways leading into the secure areas of the command building, were three identical information screens. Brian looked to see that he was half an hour early

for the meeting he'd been ordered to attend. He took a moment to determine which door he'd need to access to get to the Admiral's office. It'd been close to seven years since he was last at Headquarters and as with most things on Earth, much had changed...

A hollow ‘ping’ announced that the lift had arrived at the selected junction. Brian had been the only occupant to board the auxiliary turbolift at the rear of the Administration Building’s main concourse. He only had a vague notion of who Admiral U’ Chtuklli even was – according to Cahill, U’ Chtuklli had something to do with Fleet logistics. Whatever the Admiral managed thought Brian as he stepped out into a nearly deserted corridor lined with murals of old starships – it couldn’t be too terribly significant.

Directly across the double-wide corridor from the lift doors was a huge reproduction of a *Constitution*-class Cruiser and beneath it a small black plaque. Standing just ahead of the plaque, a chrome directory. To the left, according to the directory, were located several archive retrieval offices and a supplementary junction to the Communications Lab two structures over. To the right – Brian turned to glance down the empty, gently curving hallway - was the Deployment Resources office.

“Hmm...deployment...” He ran his finger ‘round his collar again, now convinced that his neck must surely have broken out in a full-on rash. He glimpsed the plaque beneath the picture and was indifferent to note that it was a depiction of *Constitution* herself – the first of the original 12 heavy cruisers the modern Fleet had been built around.

Making his way down the corridor he passed 13 more giant depictions of old ships, each with its own little plaque. He knew it was still early for his meeting, but as he walked the empty hallway – half-heartedly taking in each new cruiser, frigate, or transport, he began to grow concerned. He'd not seen a single door or hatchway since stepping off the turbolift. There were no windows. There was nothing. Just a seemingly endless passageway gently curving at just enough of an angle to limit his field of vision and present him with what seemed like an infinite corner around which he would never completely see.

Then just as he was approaching a ridiculously large painting of what appeared to be a Mark II probe, Brian caught glimpse of an armed security officer. At first, he could see the back half of the man's head and then just his profile from the right side. He was a Tellarite; one of the tallest Tellarites he'd ever seen. The officer stood at rigid attention beside a double wide doorway flanked by the Fleet banner and the blue flag of the Federation. Brian was surprised to feel a small wave of relief wash over him at the sight of another living being.

He approached the armed Tellarite and noted the man was a Specialist First Class. In order to gain entry to the Admin Building from the landing platforms Brian had been required to produce the file encoded orders he'd been transmitted while in Moscow. Stepping towards the double doors simply labelled "Deployment Resources" he

slipped his hand into the inconspicuous ventral pocket of his tunic and retrieved the bright blue file card he'd turned over to the security officers on the lower level. He was about to hand the card (a small plastic data square actually, a hold-over from the 60's) to the guard, but the Tellarite looked straight ahead and made no move as the doors slid open at Brian's approach.

Stepping into the office brought a second wave of relief. As the doors hushed closed behind him, Brian found himself standing in a bright white reception area complete with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a view of the backside of the Academy shuttle platforms. The scene was hardly inspiring, but the natural light and bright, blue skies were a mental relief for him.

"Can I help you, Commander?"

Brian turned to the right and saw a young Ensign seated behind a tall, white workstation. She was dressed in a formal red tunic and sported a bright red collared turtleneck herself. Just below the gold Fleet shield on her left breast was a silver and red service bar Brian was unfamiliar with.

"Thank you, Ensign. Commander Brian Harris here to see Admiral U' Chtuklli." He paced towards the young woman and handed her the blue plastic square.

The Ensign took hold of the file card and promptly inserted it into one of the readers moulded into her workstation. A flush-mounted screen flashed to life and

the young woman read the orders and verified the Commander's appointment in short-order.

"Thank you, Commander Harris. Please have a seat. The Admiral is in a meeting but should be with you shortly." She removed the data file and instead of returning it, turned slightly to her left and dropped the blue piece of plastic into a collection port.

Brian turned again towards the windows – nothing seemed to be happening over at the Academy. He spotted two very ridged looking red chairs flanking a potted palm. The sparse seating was arranged so that visitors could look out with wonder at the barren platforms while simultaneously keeping one eye on the Ensign at her work and the other on the nearly imperceptibly flush mounted door in the stark white wall – which presumably led into the Admiral's office.

Taking a seat in the chair closest to his objective, Brian noticed a small status screen and yellow actuator built into the small armrest. He tapped the single yellow button once and the screen came to life – displaying the time. Brian could see he was precisely on time. The Ensign quietly worked away at her elevated station. Outside, a dull grey shuttlecraft came into view. Brian watched as the craft spiralled down slowly, presumably from some vessel or platform in orbit, and landed gracefully at the Academy. From where he sat, he couldn't hope to see who or what was disembarking. When the excitement of the shuttle's

arrival was through, Brian again checked the time. The Admiral's meeting was now running ten minutes over.

He was convinced that whatever awaited him was nothing more than some over-hyped bureaucrat's notion of a critical posting – which could have just as easily been handled over subspace. The *Upgrade* had made desk-warriors out of every clerk at command apparently. Silently the white door to his left flew up and disappeared into the polished white bulkhead – leaving only a gaping hole from the sterile reception area into a darkly hued chamber beyond. Harris snapped his head to the left as a tall Andorian in a crisp red tunic stepped out from the Admiral's office into the gleaming white room.

"Harris." The man said through a wry grin. His blue eyes sparkling.

Brian sat dumb-founded, unable to respond. The tall, slim man allowed the right side of his mouth to curl-up in a too familiar, too satisfied sneer of triumph. Then he strode out of the Deployment Resources office without saying another word.

Shohr Ch' orithron. What in the name of all hells was Shohr doing here? Wasn't he supposed to be on the Victory? What in the...

"Commander Harris? The Admiral will see you now."

Without thinking Brian found himself rising out of the chair and zombie-walking towards the open door.

Brian stepped through the doorway and found himself walking along a plush blue runner. The floors in here were polished black. He passed two standard transporter pads immediately on his left. The blue carpet ran the length of a short four-meter hallway formed by the pads like a river. Walking past the dark transporters, Brian saw that the office then opened to a nearly ten-meter-wide chamber. There were two dark workstations abutting the rear bulkhead housing the transporter pads. The opposite side of the room from the control station had a comfortable looking seating area standing empty.

Ahead of him, along the blue carpet he could see the Admiral seated behind a massive black polished desk/workstation. The blue runner seemed to disappear beneath the footprint of the black edifice. A towering panel of status screens, interfaces and display panels rose like a monolith behind him. To either side of the computers and screens were two narrow floor-to-ceiling windows which looked out towards the Golden Gate Bridge.

The door panel silently descended from its roost in the upper bulkhead. Brian didn't need to turn around to know that his portal back to the reception room was now closed. He walked on towards the desk. The Admiral...an Andorian like Shohr, was focused intently on one of the screens mounted to his desk. The Commander stood at attention just to the side of one of the plush black patterned chairs which had been set up in front of the

Admiral's workstation. Absently, Brian wondered if he'd looked like an awed oaf stumbling into the room...seeing Shohr had shaken him.

“Be seated, Commander.” The Admiral didn't look up from his screen.

Commander Harris sat silently for what seemed like a half hour, just looking out the narrow window at the Golden Gate. As part of the *Upgrade* they were installing generation panels across the planet to capture solar energy. Dozens of worker bees zipped and wove around one and other laying cables and additional support structures along the bridge's centuries old span. He'd had himself convinced that whatever he'd been summoned here for must have been something routine – blown out of proportion owing to the inconveniences of the *Upgrade*. Now though...

"Your patience is noted Commander. I usually have a staff to attend to these matters. As we're rationing power there's no sense in maintaining personnel who have nowhere to work."

Commander Harris sat up straight in his seat and met the Admiral's piercing blue eye. The man wore a black patch over the left side of his face. Admiral U' Chtuklli was much older than Brian's 43 years. He was balding, his white hair cropped close to his blue scalp to perhaps distract from the fact that behind his antennae there was very obviously no hair at all. Andorians were fiercely proud people. Physical affectations to enhance their perceived prowess or might were not uncommon. The eyepatch though was somewhat out-of-character. Appearing before a

subordinate sporting what amounted to a bandage proclaiming weakness was not the Andorian way.

“I usually wear an implant, Commander. As frustratingly stupid as it sounds, it is not available to me owing to Starfleet Medical’s power rationing. This rag is meant to keep my appearance from unsettling those around me, here.” The Admiral kept his eye fixed on the Commander, but deftly switched off the screen he’d been working at.

“I see no weakness before me Admiral. You may appear as you wish.” Understanding Andorians wasn’t difficult, Harris had served his first tour aboard an Andorian Raider just after graduating the Academy alongside Shohr fifteen years ago.

The Admiral sighed, possibly with relief and pulled the tight black swath away from his face and quickly, but carefully over his antennae. He folded the fabric and placed it off to his right. The left side of his face was a tangle of white angry scars which stood out like lightning bolts against his blue skin. The socket where a brilliant blue eye had been, was a pitted white and black indent – the storm’s hideous vortex.

“You declined certification training for *Excelsior* Command postings.” U’ Chtuklli said this matter-of-factly. There was no emotion in any of this for him.

“I...yes. I was interested in being posted to Mars, more training on Titan didn’t seem like a productive use of

my abilities.” Truthfully Brian had never been interested in Command.

“Captain Bautlin had recommended you for that training. Why did you seek to insult her?” There was still no emotion in U’ Chtuklli’s voice.

“I had no intention of insulting my Captain. The choice was mine. As I stated, I felt my abilities...”

“Would be better utilized on Mars, yes. Tell me, Commander...did you enjoy your time working on Mars? Did you feel productive?”

Brian blinked hard and drew in a steading breath. The Admiral wasn’t being hostile as such, but Andorians had a way of attacking whatever and whoever they found to be weak or unworthy in a hundred understated ways before declaring out-and-out war. Had Shohr somehow poisoned this man against him? What in all hells was going on?

“As you seem at a loss, I will answer in your stead. According to Admiral Cahill you did ‘remarkable’ work developing the training protocols and fine-tuning the Type II array orientation materials. Your first-hand tactical experience proved useful to development engineers and your tact and ability to identify with your peers and subordinates was ‘invaluable’ in establishing the parameters of the scheduled future roll-out...and so on. Are you satisfied with that?”

“My apologies Admiral, I mean no offense...what is this about?”

“It’s about you Commander Harris. Just so we’re clear, I would not be having this meeting with you if it weren’t for the fact that Maureen Bautlin is owed a debt of lasting allegiance by myself personally. The Fleet is in dire need of experienced commanders. Your name appears at the lower half of the top tier of candidates I’ve been furnished with to keep our operations in this quadrant running. That said, since your time aboard *USS Victory* none of your choices indicate to me that you are worthy of consideration.” U’ Chtuklli allowed his antennae to straighten as the blood coursed through his veins. He didn’t suffer fools and he had a great deal of work to get done.

Captain Bautlin had been his commanding officer for three years aboard the *Victory*. She was a well-respected commander and a good Captain. He'd been a Lieutenant Commander assigned as the ship's Second Officer and Tactical Chief for the duration of his tour. One afternoon while patrolling the trade routes between Argus Prime and Betazed, *Victory* was thrown off her axis by an unidentified battle cruiser. The unknown ship had warped into a position just nine hundred kilometers off *Victory's* starboard bow and in so doing, had caused the *Victory's* inertial dampeners to overload as a displacement wave washed over the ship. There had been no advanced warning of the enemy's approach. No sensors had picked them up and none of the automated defensive systems had engaged. Bautlin, like nearly everyone else on the Bridge, had been thrown to the deck – hard.

Harris had been aligning the secondary targeting scanners, having turned his seat at tactical towards the bulkhead and away from his usual forward-facing position. As a result, the sudden lurching movement caused by the displacement wave didn't send him tumbling to the floor. His tactical alarms began sounding. The vessel which had very nearly collided with them was powering-up some kind of focused-energy weapon. Without orders and without thinking really, Harris swung around to his main console –

alarms blaring at him – and initiated a ship-wide RED ALERT. The few targeting sensors that were solely dedicated to Tactical control screamed that a discharge was imminent.

Phasers were not powered. Without any warning there'd been no reason for the phaser crews to be fire-ready. Harris could see that banks one and three were spinning up their charge cycles and would be online in thirty seconds... not enough time. He acknowledged the phaser crews' signals automatically and simultaneously triggered the load cycles for the primary automated torpedo banks mounted on the dorsal side of the nacelle pylons. His screen instantly flashed to life. Too close for a torpedo strike – he thought to himself, as his sensors ticked down the seconds. He manipulated the tracking wheel to line up the target with his right hand and pressurized the secondary torpedo bays mounted on the ventral pylons.

It took six long seconds for Harris to accomplish all this. His eyes were fixed on his targeting window. Around him the Ops officer tried to pull herself from the floor – Iisla's face was coated in a sheet of blood. She'd split her forehead open on the corner of her terminal when thrown from her seat. The helmsman lay motionless. The Captain was back in her seat, just now starting to call for a tactical report and damage information. Harris was too focused on the task at hand to respond to her. Shohr, Captain Bautlin's First Officer, was making his way to Iisla as she fell back to

the floor, leaving Ops unmanned. Six long seconds seemed to stretch on forever.

On the view screen the broad, seemingly vented blunt bulk of the unidentified craft began to glow. The *Constellation*-class's primary sensor arrays began coming back on-line and every light and alarm began flashing and howling. They were out of time.

"FIRING ONE!" Harris flicked the release toggle. On the view screen a streak of red/yellow plasma shot from the upper-port side of the screen and crashed into the enemy's vessel. "FIRING TWO!" A second bright blue plasma stream sailed out from the upper-starboard of the screen – sailing just over the hostile vessel's flank and exploding in a monstrous ball of plasma at the minimal safe distance from *Victory*.

As the shock wave of the photon explosion rushed over both vessels the point on the enemy ship where the first torpedo had slammed into the hull began to emit bright white and orange flares. Time stopped for everyone on the Bridge of *USS Victory*. Lights flashed and alarms screamed. The shock wave appeared on Harris' targeting scanner as an ill-defined displacement ridge of energy. He stopped breathing – fingers hooked over both toggles for the secondary torpedo bay.

"VENTING THREE AND FOUR! HELM ENGAGE IMPULSE ENGINES NOW!" Harris triggered both pressurized torpedo bays causing the empty tubes to

explosively vent into space. The force of the expulsion was just enough to pull the bow down and push the stern up. Both Iisla and Brooks were still on the deck. Shohr lurched across from the Ops panel to the Helm and slammed his hand down on the impulse actuator.

Victory was propelled forward just as the unknown vessel let loose a plasma wave. The discharge caught the last four meters of the ventral port nacelle. *Victory* rolled slightly to port, but her main impulse drive continued to push her down and away from her unidentified attacker. Seconds later the dormant torpedo Harris had sought to lodge in the enemy's superstructure detonated in the wash of energy the attacker's own weapons had unleashed.

After the explosion, nothing of significance remained of the enemy vessel. *Victory* had survived, miraculously with minimal casualties and only two fatalities. Lt. Brooks, the helmsman had suffered an aneurysm when he slammed his head against the raised portion of the decking during the initial incident. Crewman T'Cau, an exchange cadet from the Vulcan Science Academy had died of plasma burns when an EPS conduit had overloaded in Science Four.

The investigation into the incident revealed no conclusions as to the identity of the attacking vessel. *Victory*, while set adrift, was salvageable and was repaired in short order at the Fleet dry dock orbiting Betazed. Upon reviewing the events leading up to the attack both Captain

Bautlin and the Advocates General representative made several recommendations for improvements to the early-warning sensors and redundant inertial dampening field generators incorporated in all first-generation *Constellation*-class ships.

Finally, for his quick thinking and ingenious actions, Lt. Commander Brian Harris was promoted to full Commander and decorated for conduct above and beyond the call of duty.

Commander Harris kept himself focused on the Admiral. To look anywhere other than the Andorian's eye would be a sign of disrespect, or worse - weakness. He knew from his own time serving among Andorians that the Admiral was testing him.

"I feel my time on Mars helping to ensure nobody ever has to wait for a phaser to stand between them and death again was a worthy use of my time, sir."

The Admiral's antennae relaxed. The test was over.

"Are you interested in command?" Interest had little to do with things.

"I enjoyed my time on Mars, sir. What is it you're asking precisely? Did Shohr have something to do with this?" Harris knew that he was risking offence directly questioning the Admiral about another Andorian, but nothing was making sense and he needed answers.

The Admiral sat silently for a moment before pushing himself back from his desk. "Commander Ch' orithron has very little to do with your presence here, Mr. Harris. If you are interested in taking the assignment I am offering, you will report to Space Dock 17 at 1300 hours tomorrow. At that time Shohr Ch' orithron will officially take command of NCC-2089, *USS Isadore*. Captain Hutch has chosen to retire his commission after nearly 40 years of

service. Commander Ch' orithron has earned the right to be named Captain."

Isadore was a first-generation *Excelsior*-class starship. Harris had seen her in space dock just three days ago when he arrived from Mars for debriefing at the Moscow Tactical Institute. Just two years earlier the new flagship of the Fleet had launched – the first second-generation *Excelsior* equipped with upgraded engines, the Mark I phaser array... all the bells and whistles. Sadly, a design flaw in a largely benign sub-system having to do with deflector control contributed to the death of a Starfleet legend. As a result, all in-service *Excelsior* ships had been scheduled to undergo refits regardless of the *Upgrade* and the 2nd gen line was delayed while the system was redesigned.

"I'm not rated on the *Excelsior*-class, Admiral." The fact that he had little interest in command didn't seem like something he should bring-up.

"No. If you were, you may have been in-line for the *Isadore*. I have a real need for a commander with actual tactical acumen and an ability to operate independently. Captain Bautlin and Shohr Ch' orithron both say you're it. If you are, then be at the ceremony tomorrow at 1300. If you are not, don't be."

"This doesn't make a lot of sense to me, sir. There must be something more going on here..." Harris did long to return to his labs and test ranges. His collar was chaffing

horribly. He was uncomfortable and hot and not at all at ease with the prospect of commanding anything really...but still...

"Indeed, there is Commander. That, however, is a matter classified for Captains and above. At the moment it doesn't concern you. Tomorrow – if you decide to serve, that may change. Dismissed." The Admiral nodded towards the door, which flew open once again without a sound.

The Commander rose from his seat, stood briefly at attention, then walked back out into the sterile Reception area. The door closed behind him. Replacing the eyepatch he'd set aside a few moments earlier; the Admiral opened a secure channel to *USS Victory*.

"Maureen, are you engaged in pressing matters?"

"Not at all Admiral, we're in orbit around Saturn, on-station. What can I do for you?"

"I saw your Commander Harris just now."

"Oh, yes? Did he accept your assignment?"

"Not yet. If he turns out tomorrow, he'll be read in. If not, he'll disappear into obscurity, and I'll be a day behind in finding a useful candidate."

"He's exactly what you need. He won't disappoint you, Admiral."

"We shall see. Have you recorded the briefing materials as I asked?"

"Of course."

“Send them on my secure channel. If he does choose to show up, he will doubtlessly appreciate seeing a familiar face.”

Maureen had her file in que, the access codes and channel markers were already programmed in, all she needed was the Admiral's approval. A slight point of pressure on her side of the screen and the transmission was racing along subspace. “Done.”

“Thank you, Captain. I don't have to tell you that this is all classified.”

“No Admiral, of course not. Anything for Command Acquisitions.”

The old man smiled. “It's Deployment Resources, Maureen.”

“Mm-hmm, of course it is.”

Commander Harris spent that night in a single room at the Academy – an arrangement the Deployment Resources office had made for him. From outside, Brian could hear the bustling of cadets making their way along the corridors, discussing the day's offerings, complaining about early classes... living their lives. He rolled himself over on the thin single mattress and gazed bleary eyed at the interface mounted into the wall. 0505 hours. Academy life.

He'd set the computer's alarm to sound at 0630 hours, but as the banging and clamouring outside his small room continued, he resigned himself to the fact that the alarm was not going to be necessary. Brian sat up slowly and stretched. The room was meant for an upper-classman – easily an upper-classman ranked 'Commander' or above at that. He pulled himself up from the bunk, paced over to the private lavatory – a luxury in the world of barrack life. After using the facilities, he pulled off his Academy supplied sleepwear and stood under a hot shower for a full twenty minutes. During his own time as a cadet, Brian would never have hoped to have earned a room like this.

After his shower he stepped out of the small antechamber and found that his uniform had been sterilized and pressed from the previous day; a service the Academy routinely performed for all visiting VIPs. His reds were neatly folded and waiting for him in a compartment

built into the wall beneath the room's interface. Basic items such as sleepwear, fresh undergarments and a limited selection of Academy tuck-shop items were also made available in whatever size and configuration as might be requested. Brian took a moment to manually cancel the alarm he'd set. The activity outside his door had died down a bit, at least he thought so.

He pulled on his uniform pants and stepped into his boots but left the white turtleneck and red tunic neatly folded where he'd placed them on his bunk. He had no desire to be uncomfortable at breakfast and instead of donning his formal uniform, he requisitioned a loose-fitting off-duty 'Command' branch short sleeved shirt from the limited stock made available to him. It was a pattern not available to cadets – reminiscent of the relaxed styles of the 2270s. He tucked the tail of the shirt into his pants and fastened his belt.

After returning from breakfast, he packed a small travel case with the few garments he'd acquired and dressed in his full uniform. He dutifully returned his pass and made his way back to HQ. As he strolled along the Hoshi Causeway enjoying the warm morning sunshine, he realized the decision he'd been left to make was far from resolved.

Arriving back at the primary shuttle port he wasn't surprised to see that the next planetary transport to Moscow (he'd missed the early transport and would now

have to wait until 1245 hours) happened to be departing at more or less the same time as one of the orbital service pods slotted to attend Space Dock 17. He gripped the small handle molded into the top of his cylindrical travel case tightly as he stared at the departure board. He was under no orders. If he wanted to accept the Admiral's invitation, he was to report to Space Dock. If he wanted to head back to the MTI, he simply had to board the next transport...

Hours slipped away.

Brian found a seat on the concourse level of the shuttle port where a Bolian barista had established a small rest area. Business was brisk. Without any of the replicators online, all the little café had on offer was brewed coffee and a small assortment of real baked snacks. Crewmen, officers, service techs and even the odd civilian came and went – carrying away cups of coffee and only occasionally small treats. Nobody really sat down to enjoy a coffee and take advantage of the plush seating huddled around the long, low standing table which provided an unobstructed view of the main status boards below. Brian made his way slowly through five cups of coffee and watched seven orbital pods arrive and depart from the pads below. Not all of them had been destined for Space Dock, but a great many were.

"Another cup, Commander?"

Harris looked away from the board to see that his host had taken the time to ferry a carafe over to his seat

from behind the counter. He smiled at the man and slowly rose out of his chair and straightened his tunic.

“No, thank you though. You’ve been very kind putting up with me for this long.” Brian stooped to pull the carry-strap for his case over his left shoulder. He’d been gripping the handle so hard earlier that his hand had started to ache.

“It was no great ordeal, Commander. I’m pleased to offer whatever comforts I can and it’s gratifying to see someone taking the time to enjoy hospitality properly.” The man deftly picked up the officer’s empty mug with his free hand and made his way back towards his counter where two Ensigns were patiently waiting to order.

Commander Harris snugged up the strap hanging from his shoulder and made his way down the stairs to the main platform. The planetary transport would be arriving on pad 111-D in roughly eight minutes and the next pod for Space Dock 17 would be departing pad 089-C in twelve minutes. As he made his way down the final steps, Brian wrestled with which way he’d find himself turning. Left and he’d be reporting to Admiral Cahill before the end of the day. Right and he’d be...

Stepping out of the airlock into the dim gallery was a relief. The Yeoman pilot had been almost agonizingly cautious in his flight from San Francisco into orbit. It wasn't lost on Harris that the kid was probably on pins and needles having a uniformed Commander breathing down his neck for what should have been a routine run for dock workers. He hadn't noticed that the pod scheduled for the 1315 hour arrival at Space Dock 17 was designated for support personnel.

He'd stood packed between the young pilot and a burly kid dressed in a radiation suit for the brief ascent from Fleet Headquarters. The pod itself was little more than a flying box car with hand holds suspended from the cabin's ceiling. Unlike the models used for crew displacement and VIP ferry service, this particular pod was a bare-bones workhorse – no seats, no comforts at all. Fifteen dock workers and two techs disembarked before Brian could escape the claustrophobic box himself. First on, last off.

Standing just to the side of the airlock the Commander waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim lighting of the dock's viewing gallery. The 17's orientation had been altered so that the massive transparent aluminum viewing wall captured the bulk of the *Isadore's* secondary hull backdropped by the black curtain of space. The exterior mounted lighting panels blasted artificial sunlight onto

Isadore and the muted light which reflected off her hull spilled into the gallery to provide the room's only significant source of illumination. Harris counted roughly fifty officers and VIPs milling about in the gloom, attended by porters in black coveralls.

He spotted a Vice Admiral he thought he recognized, no doubt present to perform the ceremony. At the Admiral's side was Shohr – soon to be Captain Shohr, Brian reminded himself. There were a few Commanders and Lt. Commanders milling about as well. A selection of refreshments had been laid out along the rear bulkhead of the room. Light appetizers and a small selection of beverages. A tall woman, Deltan by the look of her, was having a quiet conversation with an older man sporting medical branch colours. They spoke in politely hushed voices and seemed to be drinking some sort of luminescent liquid from the modest bar. Possibly the *Isadore's* doctor and First Officer, thought Harris.

He began taking a few steps towards the bar himself when he was stopped by a shorter man dressed in the same black overalls as the other porters in the room.

"Commander Harris, would you follow me please?"

Brian looked at the man, somewhat surprised by how quickly he'd suddenly appeared in his personal space. There was nothing remarkable about him and the Commander was about to ask this unfamiliar porter just who he thought he was speaking to, when he noticed the

silver bar with red markings attached to the man's overalls just below the embroidered Fleet insignia. The Ensign at Deployment Resources yesterday had worn the same decoration.

"...and you are?" He tried to sound relaxed, but he was instantly regretting his last-minute decision to board the pod instead of the transport.

"This way, Commander." The man motioned with his left hand towards the far end of the gallery, away from the bar and the bulk of the uniformed officers and VIPs and gently caught the Commander's elbow in the palm of his right hand to usher him along.

"Where is it that you think we're going, mister?" Harris kept his voice low, but his surprise and irritation were clear in his tone.

"I'm Lt. Commander Xillian, Deployment Resources. I'm taking you to your cabin Commander. It's best if we're discreet – please keep your voice down."

The two men walked to the far end of the gallery and stepped through the same hatchway the workers Harris had shared the pod with had used. The small chamber beyond the dim gallery housed an airlock open to a service gantry spanning the nothingness between the dock's interior frame and a corresponding airlock open to a cargo hold on *Isadore's* aft port side. Brian walked briskly along the gantry, stepping aboard *Isadore* to find himself standing in a loading bay.

“Are we stowaways?”

“No sir. This way please.”

Harris watched as the short man in the black overalls continued to walk across the bay towards a double door. All around them crewmen in scarlet uniforms secured containers and inventoried items stacked in perfect rows along recessed cargo holds. Nobody paid them any particular attention. Brian readjusted the strap on his case and hustled to keep pace with his guide. “Xillian” paused just long enough at the bay doors to key in a code on an access panel which allowed the double doors to slide open, granting both of them access to an interior corridor. Without saying a word, Xillian led Brian down the corridor, round a junction and to a turbolift.

“Deck 15, quarters.” The lift hummed and sped along.

“Commander Xillian, was it?”

“Yes sir.” Xillian watched passively as the motion indicator lamps flashed along above the lift’s doors.

“What are we doing?”

‘*DECK 15 – CREW QUARTERS.*’ The *Isadore* computer’s automated voice announced, and the lift doors hissed open to reveal a deserted corridor.

“Xillian” led him from the turbolift around a corner and into a small cabin on what appeared to Brian to be a deserted deck. The man in the black overalls hadn’t answered his question yet. Brian was preparing to mentally go from yellow to red alert – Xillian had motioned for the Commander to step into the cabin, but Brian insisted that his guide take point. The shorter man kept a straight face and stepped to the cabin’s door – triggering the mechanism and then stepped inside. The lights automatically activated the moment the computer sensed biosigns. Brian looked into room and at his quiet companion standing patiently at a single workstation at the rear of the cabin. Nothing seemed out-of-place. Before stepping inside though, Harris took one more look up and down the empty corridor – not a soul to be seen.

The cabin door slid shut behind him. “I asked you a question back there, Lt. Commander.” He’d had enough of the cloak and dagger routine.

“Yes, Commander Harris. I’m sorry. My orders from the Admiral were to get you aboard ASAP. Forgive any perceived slight.” Xillian motioned towards the double-wide bunk built into the bulkhead of the cabin’s right-hand wall. A flat grey footlocker sat at the foot of the bunk.

Brian stepped over to the chest and looked at the name plate: Captain B. L. Harris. “What’s this?”

"The Admiral took the liberty of arranging some personal effects for you, sir. Also, you'll find a data key within that will allow you to access your orders... don't bother trying to open it now. The locks have been time-coded and won't disengage until the *Isadore* is underway."

"I'm having trouble processing all this Mr. Xillian..."

"Just a moment, sir." Xillian stepped towards the interface on the cabin's workstation and waved his hand over the recessed sensor. "Computer, tie-in to Deployment Resources data link, J-23-K-1006-5."

"TIE-IN CONFIRMED."

"Confirm protocol K-006."

"LOCAL PROTOCOL CONFIRMED."

"Download file J-6-003."

"WORKING... WORKING... DOWNLOAD COMPLETE."

"There you are sir." Xillian said with a satisfied smile as he walked away from the desk and towards the door.

"Hold up mister. What do you mean, there I am? You've not told me anything."

"I don't have anything more to tell you, sir. Oh, except to pass on the Admiral's sincere wish that you remain in this cabin until *Isadore* takes on her full support-complement in two days. Other than that, our business is concluded." Xillian offered the Commander a slight nod and strode past him and out into the empty corridor.

Brian stood, very nearly dumbfounded watching the door open and close as the short man who'd led him from

the dock reception and through the bowels of the *Isadore*, walked out without saying a word. He gave his head a slight shake, cursed and stepped to the cabin door himself. He half expected the door to be locked, but it slid open easily and he passed through into the empty corridor. Dead silence greeted him. There was no sign of Xillian. No sign of anyone at all. He stepped back into the cabin and walked directly to the workstation and took a seat.

Activating the interface just as Xillian had done, Brian grunted his satisfaction as the terminal display powered-on without issue. "Computer, display file... J-6-003."

"NO FILE EXISTS."

"Computer, list the most recent download from this terminal."

On the screen in front of him the *Isadore's* computer produced a standard coding string used to activate automated diagnostic checks of the software responsible for running the cabin's environmental controls. Brian leaned back in his seat and rubbed at the left side of his neck where his collar was irritating him.

"Computer... tie-in to Deployment Resources data..."

Before Harris could recite the jumble of alpha-numeric jargon he was feverishly trying to recall Xillian saying, the display screen flickered oddly, and a virtual interface appeared prompting him for an access code. He

leaned forward and studied the screen. It wasn't a standard Fleet template. Even the font looked ... off. Xillian had said that there was a data key ... to let him access ... From the screen he looked over at the footlocker.

“What in all the hells have I gotten myself into?”

“QUERY NOT RECOGNIZED.”

Xillian made his way back along the secondary gantry towards the Spacedock. Behind him the airlock leading to the ship's cargo bays secured itself automatically. Less than a minute later he was securing the dock's side of the gantry. The Vice Admiral had just officially transferred command of *USS Isadore* to the freshly minted Captain Shohr Ch' orithron. When the panel monitoring the airlock reported green, Xillian moved along the rear wall of the gallery where Captain Ch' orithron noticed him. He gave the slightest of nods.

The Captain thanked the Admiral once again for officiating the ceremony and in short order signaled to the senior staff of the *Isadore* that the time for their departure had arrived. The porters hurriedly collected empty glasses and bussed plates. Officers either filed into the access port for the main gantry or began making their way towards the waiting areas by the transport airlocks. Xillian took charge of a small antigrav unit and pulled the unopened cases of Altair water to a waiting service elevator. As the elevator doors closed the short man in the black overalls caught a glimpse of Ch' orithron as he strode out towards his ship. The light bouncing off the blue/white hull of *Isadore* caught the silver and red pin on Xillian's uniform.

Aboard *Isadore*, Shohr ordered his new Chief Engineer – an enormously rotund Bolian who'd been

waiting for the Captain and First Officer at the airlock, to secure all hatches and clear all gantries. The Chief nodded his compliance as *Isadore's* new captain strode directly to the turbolift. Lt. Commander Donat had hoped to make a good first impression on his new commanding officer, but the tall Andorian had barely looked at him as he barked his orders mid-stride.

The familiar sound of an emulated bosons' whistle shrilled across the ship-wide communications band. "Now hear this, now hear this: This is Chief Donat, secure all hatches, cast-off all gantries and umbilicals. Make ready for departure."

In the quiet of his cabin Brian looked from his unresponsive computer to the wall mounted Comm panel.

"The hells with that."

He pulled himself out of his seat and headed directly for the door – stooping only slightly to snatch the strap on his travel case. Stepping out once more into the eerily empty corridor he paused for just a second to be sure he had his bearings before making his way back towards the turbolift Xillian had brought him up on. *Isadore* had been in space dock for nearly two months of refit time and a good number of her crewmen had naturally rotated out to other assignments. She'd be picking up new personnel en route to her next assignment. Brian knew all this, it was standard practice for any ship rotating home after a tour –

somehow though, he didn't feel any better about the gloomy haunted corridor.

The lift's doors were labelled with a site-code that made no sense what-so-ever to Harris. He'd only ever been aboard an *Excelsior*-class ship once and that was only for a reception in its mess hall – what? Four years ago? Beneath the code was a single word he did understand: “Auxiliary”. Brian stood directly in front of the lift doors. Nothing happened. Not surprised, he reached-out and fingered the summon pad mounted beside the door's frame. A five-centimeter square display sparked to life.

‘Sleep Mode 002 – Enter Access Code:’

“Of course. Wonderful, just wonderful...”

Brian slapped his hand against the turbo lift's door. Xillian had used several codes as they'd made their way from the dock across the gantry and up here. If the entire deck was unmanned the ship's computer would put whatever auxiliary systems it could to “sleep” in order to conserve power and reduce demand on the ship's energizers... all standard procedure.

Once again, the whistle piped across the general address system. The lifeless corridors gave the whistle an eerie echo. “Crew of *USS Isadore*, this is the Captain. Energizers to power... ahead one quarter impulse. Today we begin our tour of duty. A tour I expect all of you to give your full devotion to and ensure our collective success and

honour. Do not fail me. I shall not fail you. To stations. Bridge – OUT.”

‘Warm and approachable as ever Shohr.’ Thought Brian to himself as he stepped back from the auxiliary lift.

Without a code he had no hope of getting off this deck, let alone this ship. He looked back towards the cabin where a footlocker with his name on it was waiting. There’d certainly be a primary lift down one of these corridors which operated, but without knowing where he was in relation to anything else aboard, the time wasted locating a central junction would be pointless. He chose to return to his cabin and contact the Bridge directly.

Stepping through the door he’d meant to head directly to the communications panel built into the bulkhead opposite the bunk – but a low pinging drew his attention to the footlocker. The soft trilling was as jarring in the stifling silence permeating the entire deck as the sharp boson’s whistle had been. Xillian had said the locker was rigged to open once the ship got underway. Brian stared at the chest, listening to the pings for several seconds before deciding to open the lid. Inside, atop a pile of uniforms, toiletries, and the like, was a black data card marked with a thin silver and red bar along its leading edge. He removed the plastic square, walked to the computer and dropped it in the reader. A code auto populated the workstation’s display screen, and the computer and interface panel came to life.

The screen was populated with the standard ship menu. None of his initial queries appeared to have caused anything special to be called-up for his inspection – though there was a flashing notification of a transmission waiting to be reviewed. Brian looked up at the cabin's interface and noted the same flashing prompt on the Comm panel.

His stomach suddenly rolled over, and he knew the ship had just gone to warp. The likelihood of getting Shohr to turn around to deposit him back at Space Dock was next to an impossibility. Brian opened the communications link and played the only file that appeared on his screen.

"Hello Commander..."

Harris sat back in his seat, surprised to see Maureen Bautlin seated at her familiar desk in the *Victory's* Ready Room.

"I'm pleased you chose to accept this assignment, the Admiral had doubts – but I assured him you would be up for the challenge. First, I'd like to extend an apology for the manner in which you've been maneuvered up to this point... it was deemed a necessary security precaution.

That said, I can now offer you some further detail on your mission. Six weeks ago, Captain Chol E'Gnath, commanding officer of USS Sheaffe NCC-0564, along with his Science Officer and two Lieutenants were lost while surveying a Class R asteroid between Ivor Prime and the

Typhon Expanse. Fleet Command has not made this event widely known. Sheaffe's Third Officer is presently serving as acting captain.

She's a Saladin-class Destroyer – completely refit in '80 and augmented further just a few years ago. She's one of the practical test-platforms for the type II array you've been helping with on Mars, as a matter of fact. Sheaffe and her sister Saladins have largely been dispatched to the outer-most starbases along our borders with the Romulans and the Cardassian Union to service our scientific and exploration mandates, as well as to show our willingness to defend those systems within our sphere.

A year and a half ago, while mapping the Expanse's far edge, Sheaffe launched a pair of Class V probes to collect data on a possible pulsar which had registered some unusually high energy readings beyond Kea IV. While I don't have insight into what data was collected, I can tell you that upon reviewing the Sheaffe's findings the Fleet committed itself to the "Upgrade program" we're now approximately half-way through.

It's widely understood that the "Upgrade" is meant to modernize all ship-building facilities, defensive platforms and detection stations in Sector 001 within an incredibly short window of time. What isn't widely discussed is the massive redeployment of assets throughout the quadrant at large under the guise of operational needs related to this "Upgrade". While our fleet of Saladins is largely stationed

between the Romulan Star Empire and the Cardassian Union for obvious reasons – the bulk of the Fleet's power is being strategically spread along the Romulan Neutral Zone buffering the Klingon Empire and the Federation.

We've had no official Romulan representative available to the Council since the Khitomer affair and any diplomatic communications with the Star Empire have been spotty at best. Our Klingon allies have mapped increasing Romulan movements for over a year now from Narendra to Malkorkin and are growing understandably concerned. We've been able to confirm concerning levels of Romulan activity close to the Narendra system from our own listening posts around Kazis IX. The Romulans have offered no official explanation of this activity – barely passing on their position that what occurs in Romulan space is of no concern to either the Federation, or our “war dogs”.

Fleet Command has ordered the bulk of our Miranda assets to take up patrols around the Terran, Vulcan and Tellarite sectors. Constellations are being deployed for deep space placements in the other member systems along with the Excelsior fleet. As Constellations and Mirandas greatly out-number our primary Excelsior fleet the plan has been to have two ships supporting every Excelsior capital ship assigned to protect each member system. They're calling these 'support groups'. We're trying to keep any Romulan anxiety to a minimum, but tensions over the last few months especially are running high.

Shohr is taking Isadore to the Archanis Sector to lead a 'support group' on what may well be the front-line of a new Romulan War. On the way he will be rendezvousing at Yadalla Prime with NCC-2593 to take on recently certified engineering and support personnel. You will disembark at that point and be ferried to a substation orbiting Dessica II. There a long-range class VII Vulcan shuttle will deliver you to the Sheaffe at Archer IV in the Omicron sector. She'll be resupplying there as part of her scheduled tour.

It will take you roughly twelve weeks to reach your destination, sorry.

For the few days you'll be aboard Isadore you're asked to remain on deck fifteen – out of sight. Powers that be feel the Sheaffe's command situation must be kept quiet... I'm only guessing, but they may be trying to screen what Romulan eyes might view as an exploitable weakness in an already "weak" force along their borders. You're expected as a passenger only for the trip to Dessica II, but once you're aboard the T'poth your official promotion to the rank of Captain will be entered into the register. You are to take the Sheaffe and her crew in hand as her new commanding officer and investigate further the source of the readings that have gotten the Council so concerned.

I can't say I agree with the sparse resources they've seen fit to deploy to the Typhon and Omicron sectors – especially given what limited information I've been privy to, but the combustible situation brewing between the Klingon

and Romulan Empires is being given top priority. They needed someone with practical experience to take charge of Sheaffe.

As it is, I pushed the Admiral to offer you this post. We have hundreds of fresh-faced kids with notions of glory and service, but we're lacking proven commanders. This "Upgrade" they're pushing through has seen us launch no less than six new ships and four refits with crews... in some cases even Captains, with little in the way of real-world experience in a matter of months.

I don't have the full picture, though I've shared everything I possibly can with you.

I understand that the Admiral's department has included a more detailed briefing encoded in a file you will be able to access from your quarters aboard the Isadore. They've also supplied you with new uniforms and appropriate badge of rank – again, you'll have to wait until you're aboard the T'poth to wear them, but let me be the first to congratulate you, Captain Harris. Every success, Brian."

Maureen's image faded and for a full five seconds the Fleet Security screen appeared with the message: "The preceding material is classified. You are under orders not to discuss this or any other related material with anyone. This file has now been deleted."

Brian clasped his hands together and drew a deep breath. His desire to return to Spacedock and simply get

back to work on Mars was dead. He knew it was futile, but he tried to replay the file and found nothing at all. The footlocker stood open on the floor at the foot of his bunk. He rose and walked over to the chest and began unpacking its contents – on the cabin's interface he could see that the ship was travelling at a speed of warp five, conditions nominal.

Four crisp red tunics – all of which were of the new design and could be worn with or without the high-ribbed turtlenecks Brian so loathed, were laid-out on the bed. Matching pants and boots and two new belts had also been included. A flat silver clamshell box containing the elongated shoulder insignia of a Starfleet Captain lay open atop the first of the new uniforms. Brian gazed down at the pin, watching how its silver and gold accents reflected the cabin's artificial light – unsure if it was something he wanted, or not.

Shohr had gotten the full pomp and circumstance of a ceremony. Brian would simply slip into the uniform aboard some Vulcan shuttle. He looked at his new uniform for a few moments while cradling a second black data card he'd found within the footlocker. Once again, the only marking on the card was a silver bar with red hash-marks. He had homework to do and no distractions. Brian gently closed the silver case and went back to the computer. There was a mission at the heart of all this. His objective was what mattered, the rest of it was a means to an end.

“This is Lt. St. Cyr to shuttle *T’poth*, you are cleared for approach to disembark Captain Harris. Cut power to your impulse drive and maneuver on thrusters to the transmitted co-ordinates – our tractor control will lock-on and guide you from there. Copy?”

“*T’poth* to *USS Sheaffe*, transmission received and understood. Disengaging impulse engine now.” The slim Vulcan at the shuttle’s control panel turned and nodded towards his passenger.

Brian had just fastened the bib on his new tunic. He was wearing the white shirt he’d picked-out at the Academy and was pleased not to have to suffer through wearing the hated turtlenecks any longer. Stowed across the shuttle’s cramped cabin was the footlocker. “Proceed, Toth, thank you.”

“As you wish, Captain. Engaging maneuvering thrusters.”

The *T’poth* slowed and after a few well-timed bursts of her thrusters, she hung in space a mere two thousand meters directly abeam and only slightly above the primary airlock next to *USS Sheaffe*’s shuttle bay on deck eight. Once in position, another signal from the starship bid Toth to shut down all thrusters. No sooner had the shuttle’s thrusters extinguished themselves then a pale blue tractor beam emitted from four separate projectors around the

circumference of the airlock. Slowly the *T'poth* was pulled toward the ship; each of the four beams working in tandem, exerting less force on the shuttle's starboard and more on its port, gently turning the vessel round to expose its own airlock and docking collar.

Inside the shuttle Toth monitored closely the approach vectors as his nimble shuttle was pulled closer and closer to the bulk of the *Sheaffe's* saucer. Behind him, his human passenger was preening in what Toth suspected was a never-before-worn uniform. The human preoccupation with appearance was only one of their curious vanities Toth had long struggled to understand. He said nothing and remained focused on his sensors. In the extremely unlikely instance of system failure, he would have to reengage thrusters and maneuver his vessel to a safe distance to avoid a catastrophic collision. As the *Sheaffe* continued to manipulate and roll the much smaller shuttle – drawing both ships' airlocks slowly together, Toth remained entirely focused on the mechanics of the situation.

Captain Harris felt the shuttle butt against the *Sheaffe* as a soft lock was achieved. The Vulcan pilot ran his hands nimbly over the control panel when a green indicator began flashing. Magnetic locks powered up and the small craft resounded with a dull metallic 'clank' as *Sheaffe's* docking clamps engaged – hard lock. A gentle

chime sounded inside the cabin and at the same moment a small overhead light illuminated above the hatch.

“Captain, we have successfully docked,” said Toth.

“Very good. Thank you for your service, Sub-Lieutenant.”

The shuttle’s hatch hissed and retracted behind the ship’s bulkhead. Toth stood silently at his station. Half a heartbeat behind the *T’poth*’s hatch, the gleaming white airlock doors on the starship hissed in a slightly lower register and rolled back, granting Captain Harris access to his ship. Brian stepped through the airlock and aboard the *Sheaffe*. A young crewman, a Lt. Commander and a Master Chief stood to attention as a Petty Officer piped the new Captain aboard.

“Permission to come aboard.”

“Permission granted, Captain. I’m Commander Declan.”

“Thank you, Commander. I’m informed my orders have been transmitted.” Harris stepped completely clear of the airlock towards the ship’s Third Officer – who’d now been acting as Captain for months. Brian tried to ignore the gnawing sensation that this Declan was far more qualified to command than he was. The man was tall with a head of auburn hair and at least fifteen years Brian’s junior.

Declan held out a data pad to the Captain. “Yes sir, as of this moment by order of Fleet Command, I transfer all

command codes to you. Master Chief, so note in the ship's log and execute the transfer."

"Aye, sir." The Master Chief, a thin Bolian who looked to be in his late fifties, stepped towards an interface mounted to the bulkhead beside him and made two quick entries. He then fell back to attention.

"Captain Harris, the ship is yours." Declan stood erect as the Captain took the pad from his hand. He wasn't entirely happy about Starfleet sending out a new Captain instead of allowing him to continue in E'Gnath's stead, but orders were orders.

"Thank you, Commander." Taking the pad in-hand and quickly verifying the orders thereon, Brian looked to the young Crewman. "I've one footlocker aboard; please off-load it to my quarters so that Sub-Lieutenant Toth may be on his way."

"Aye, sir."

The cargo off-loaded, Toth sealed the airlock. Moments later *T'poth* pulled away from the *Sheaffe* as Captain Harris and Commander Declan made their way to the turbolift and the Bridge. The Crewman had departed the compartment a few seconds earlier to ferry the footlocker to the Captain's quarters on deck five. The only one to see the bright flash of the *T'poth* engaging her warp engine was the Master Chief, who remained at the observation port to co-ordinate with St. Cyr at Ops.

Harris and Declan rode in silence for seven decks.

Brian had spent two days reviewing the materials he'd been provided aboard the *Isadore*. Much of the raw data meant little to him – he'd have to rely on the expertise of a true science officer to help him make sense of the pages of energy readings. He'd also read up on the details concerning the ill-fated survey mission. Official ship logs. Supplemental logs. Mission logs. In-depth psych profiles and personnel files on the *Sheaffe's* senior staff. Status reports on ship's systems before, during and after the loss of the captain and his away team. Abstract tactical position papers speculating on potential Romulan deployments and responses were less concrete – but it was clear the readings encountered by the *Sheaffe* were being regarded as potential evidence of a new Romulan weapons system.

The lift arrived on deck one and the doors hushed open. The Captain stepped out, Lieutenant Commander Declan just behind him. "Captain on the Bridge!" Declan announced.

Everyone immediately turned to face the turbolift and rose to their feet. Brian looked across the Bridge at the Operations station where a short, fit looking Lieutenant stood to attention. He knew from the files this hard looking, blue-eyed human was St. Cyr. The Communications Officer, Lt. M'narr was on his feet as well

at the console immediately behind the empty Command chair. Brian tried not to linger too long on the half-Nausicaan, half-Betazoid Lieutenant, and even managed to keep from grinning while pondering how such a pairing could have been possible. No one manned the Science station.

“As you were.” He waited for the officers to take their seats and resume their duties before walking towards Command and taking a seat himself. Declan took up a wary post at the Engineering console just to Harris’ left. He didn’t sit. “Mr. St. Cyr, has the *T’poth* cleared our operational area?”

“Aye sir, she jumped into warp two minutes ago.”

St. Cyr was new to the position of Ops – which itself was a relatively new configuration aboard Fleet ships. In the interests of efficiency, the familiar configuration of Navigation and Helm control working in tandem side-by-side was being phased-out. During her latest refit, *Sheaffe* saw her Helm position combined with practical Navigation. The old Nav station, now Ops, was left with long-range sensor mapping controls, while it now handled the ship-wide and mission status monitoring, tractor control and limited internal security status workloads.

“What is our status, Ops?”

“Sir, the ship is holding in standard orbit around Archer IV. All systems report nominal. Engineering is

securing our re-supply of secondary antimatter containers.”

Brian referred to the status screen built into the right-hand armrest of his Command chair and saw that all compartments reported ‘green’ with the one exception being the engineering deck. “How long does the Engineer need to secure the antimatter?”

“Another twenty minutes at most, sir.”

“Very well. Comm...” Brian turned his seat 180 degrees to the left, came face to face with Declan, then turned his head to the left to look M’narr in the eyes.

“Sir?”

“Inform Archer Control we will be departing within the hour. Any and all personnel still on the surface are to report back to the ship on-the-double.”

“Aye, sir.”

Turning back to Declan... “Commander, I need the senior staff assembled for a briefing in thirty minutes.”

“Section heads as well, sir?” Declan plucked a mobile pad from the console beside him.

“No. The immediate need is for the senior Bridge officers and Chief Engineer to read in. Have the ship’s surgeon attend as well.” Brian watched the young Commander enter names and details onto his pad and waited half a beat before adding... “Mr. Declan, once you’ve sent notification to the appropriate personnel, I’d

like you to meet me on deck four so we can work out our agenda ahead of the briefing.”

Morris looked up from his pad. “Of course, Captain... I’ll just need a moment to...”

Brian rose out of the Command chair and walked in four confident strides towards the turbolift. “I’ll see you in the conference room then. Mr. St. Cyr...”

“Sir?”

“...within the hour. Be certain all’s in order before the briefing.” The lift doors hushed open. As Captain Harris stepped inside, St. Cyr called out all would be in order. Just as the doors closed, Brian caught a glimpse of Declan standing a little dumbfounded, pad-in-hand.

On the Bridge St. Cyr was trying to raise Chief Engineer Bradley – who no doubt was personally supervising the antimatter storage. M’narr was informing Archer IV of their immanent departure and Morris Declan was struggling to keep himself composed. The other men kept any comments they might otherwise have had about Morris’ unceremonious fall from command to themselves. Declan managed to walk his pad over to M’narr for registry in the ship’s log, without betraying too much of the rage bubbling within.

Maureen had mentioned that *Sheaffe* had been refit fifteen years earlier, one of only a dozen *Saladin*-class Destroyers to bridge the gap between design generations. She was only five years out of the yard when her refit was ordered. Most of the *Saladins* in the Fleet were baffed-out, underpowered and overworked relics – broken-down for parts, or scrapped outright. *Sheaffe* and those of her sisters too soon out of the shipyard to be torn apart, were refit and modernized with new Avidyne engines and the same energizer assembly used successfully in the *Constitution*-class Heavy Cruisers. Their warp engines were upgraded, and their notoriously fickle single nacelles updated and outfitted with dual coil assemblies.

The conference room located on deck four was a bleak nearly empty chamber – horribly out-of-date and clear evidence that *Sheaffe* hadn't been significantly touched in all those fifteen years. The bulkheads were still the stark white that was thought to be so fashionable in the late 2270's. Nothing adorned the white walls. The conference table was obviously the original piece *Sheaffe* launched with twenty years ago; a dated, trapezoidal affair with a three-sided display terminal mounted in its center. At the far end a hook-like extension with a single workstation cut into the table itself, where an access panel could be operated to pull up briefing materials from the

ship's library or from data file cards. At the opposite end of the table an opaque view screen was built into the white wall. The only colour in the room came from an old 'UFP' banner somebody had suspended from the top edge of a tall podium standing in the corner next to the display screen.

Brian took a seat at the workstation and activated the antiquated toggle that powered the viewers and screen. He removed the black data card he'd been carrying since his time aboard the *Isadore*. The other card – the one which had provided him access to the briefings, had corrupted itself after its initial use. He dropped the card into the table's reader slot and used the controls to call up the briefing files he'd been writing during his voyage. As the program loaded on the big screen, Declan stepped into the room.

"Lt. Commander Declan, reporting as ordered."

Brian glanced towards the Commander while scrolling through the material now being displayed on all four screens. Morris Declan was not a bad man by any means – at least not according to his personnel file and psychological workups. He was a proud man, though. He was young, headstrong, and at least in the bureaucratic sense – successful. He'd also been left in command of a starship for months and was now having to deal with the reality that his time in the big chair was over. Harris was no psychologist or councillor – but he knew Declan needed to

be handled carefully and swiftly if he was going to be an asset moving forward.

“Have a seat Mr. Declan.” Brian toggled the screens off, satisfied that his materials were queued-up properly and ready to go. The young officer took the first seat opposite to the Captain’s position at the terminal.

“Sir, if I’ve somehow given offence...” Morris felt he was doing a decent job at keeping the anger out of his voice but trailed off into silence as the older man who’d just taken command raised his hand to signal for silence.

“Mr. Declan, I am here to fulfill a mission. I’m not here to soothe egos or handhold hot-headed young men with hurt feelings.” Brian watched as the officer in front of him rippled with emotion. “I’ve been travelling at high warp speeds for weeks to be here now. The fact that Command has trusted you to keep this vessel and her crew on-task for months says a lot about the respect you have earned. That they have also apparently gone out of their way drag me all the way out here to take command, says something as well. Thoughts?”

Morris took a steadying breath. “I’m a Starfleet officer, sir. I follow orders.”

“Yes, but you’re angry.”

“I’m... curious, sir.”

“As to why they sent me all the way out here, when they had you right here all along?”

“Not to put too fine a point on things, yes.” Morris couldn’t help his voice trembling slightly. He was angry, worse he was hurt, and he’d just tipped that card for this stranger to see.

Brian leaned forward slightly and allowed his expression to soften. “The truth is Mr. Declan – I don’t fully know the answer to that myself. I was offered this assignment out of the blue by an Admiral I’ve barely heard of... you see, I’m a Starfleet officer as well. In a few moments we’ll be joined by your peers, and I will share with all of you our orders. What I need to know right now though is whether or not I can count on you to serve as the professional your file purports you to be?”

Declan sat quietly for a few seconds. He’d walked-in wanting to hate this bastard. Now he was looking into the eyes of a man just doing his job – asking him outright if he could be trusted to do his duty. “Captain Harris... I just want to know I’m doing what’s best for my ship.”

“That’s probably the best and most honest answer you could give me right now. Understand, Commander, none of this is personal on my end. The briefing will begin in a little more than twenty minutes. I’d like an up-to-date duty roster on-hand and a tie-in to navigation sensor logs established beforehand.”

“Yes, sir.” Declan rose, waited to be dismissed, then headed back to the Bridge to make the arrangements. He was still unsettled, but perhaps not as angry as before.

Brian stood at the head of the table and looked around the room. St. Cyr and M'narr were present along with Mr. Declan, the three of them sat on one side of the metal table. The ship's Chief Medical Officer – the only true Commander on board, Dr. Catherine Lo, sat across from Declan. Next to her was Lt. Kross, the ship's helmsman who'd been on the surface when Harris had come aboard. Next to him sat Lt. Commander Arthur Bradley, Chief Engineer. There were two empty chairs at the far end of the table.

"There was a service for the away team?" He had his hard data ready to go, but it was important that they all understood that he was cognizant of their loss.

"A memorial was held after we recovered what we could and made our report to Sector Command, sir." Declan said from his end of the table.

"Very well. My purpose here is not to mourn with you. I'm sure you've all done that in your own ways. I have been tasked with taking charge of this ship and unravelling a mystery Command has been wrestling with for close to two years now. The charts and much of what I'm about to share with you in this briefing are considered classified. Nobody is to discuss specifics outside of this room. Understood?"

The senior officers all nodded. Brian stepped over to the workstation and snapped up one of the toggles. The main screen came to life and a detailed chart of energy readings appeared. In the center of the table the view screens mirrored the image.

"My God... what is that?" said 'Art' Bradley.

"*USS Sheaffe* launched a Class V probe while exploring the far perimeter of the Typhon Expanse nearly two years ago to investigate readings thought to be from a pulsar somewhere beyond Kea IV near the Romulan border. The data you relayed back from that probe yielded these results. I've been assured that these values are correct."

"Those outputs far exceed our instrumentation... they're not possible."

"Command shares your wonder Mr. Bradley, but the readings are correct. Your probe recorded radiation levels that are eighteen times higher than anything Fleet Science has ever encountered before." Brian advanced to the next chart.

"These are the gravimetric variances which interfered with the ship's long-range sensors. From the logs I understand that these variances grew exponentially the closer you tried to maneuver towards Kea IV to scan for this supposed pulsar?"

"Yes, sir. The Captain... Captain E'Gnath, wanted to confirm the telemetry our probe was returning. He

ordered that the ship be taken deeper into unclaimed space to get clearer readings, but the closer we got, the more interference we encountered.” Kross, the young blonde-haired navigator sat transfixed by the detailed readings.

“Captain E’Gnath ordered the ship to investigate, but then ordered a pull-back while still 40,000 AUs from Kea IV. Why?”

“We, uh, we don’t as a general rule venture into the space on the fringes of the Romulan *border*, sir. It’s a Treaty stipulation that they have exploration rights in the Kea system.” Declan sounded unsure of himself.

“The log states that the interference became so pronounced that the probe’s subspace link was completely obstructed?”

“Yes, sir. Nothing registered. Not the probe, not long-range sensors – I had to use basic inertial control readings to confirm our actual movements. We had no choice but to reverse course and back out slowly...” Kross spoke clearly but remained focused on the screen and didn’t make eye contact with Harris.

“That’s right... nothing was registering. It took us close to an hour of blind retreat before sensors came back online and we were able to ‘see’ anything at all.” Declan had been at Ops that day working beside Kross.

“Captain E’Gnath and the Science Officer, Commander Tracey, both noted the event in their formal

reports to Command. Nearly six months ago, while operating on the fringe of the Expanse out of Ivor Prime, you detected those same gravimetric variances again.” Harris advanced to the next readout chart.

“Yes, sir. Ms. Tracey confirmed the gravimetric emissions were identical to the ones we’d encountered at the far end of the Expanse, but they were at significantly lower levels. The Captain ordered us to investigate and...”

“...and that’s when you encountered the asteroid.” Brian advanced his presentation again and an image of the massive rock one third the mass of Earth appeared on the viewer.

“It appeared to be a rogue asteroid, Captain. We plotted a slow trajectory for it back through the Expanse leading in a perfect line out past Kea IV and towards the speculative co-ordinates of the pulsar we’d tried to investigate previously.” St. Cyr rose from his seat and proceeded to point out a hazy distorted area wrapping around the asteroid’s flank on the view screen. “Tracey had detected spikes in radiation coming from here and here. gravitons.”

“Long-range sensors were failing the closer we got to the asteroid – just like before, but the Nav array picked up significant variations in the surface at those points... fissures, we guessed. Captain E’Gnath speculated that they might be impact damage – that maybe the rock had been

knocked off its original course and sent our way.” Kross finally took his eyes off the viewer.

Brian noted how St. Cyr, the hardest and most professional of the group seemed inclined to protect his young golden-haired shipmate. “Mission logs indicate that the Captain, Commander Tracey, along with Lt. Cooper from astral-geology and Ensign Susan Kyle as pilot, used a shuttlecraft to survey the asteroid and try to determine the source of this radiation which had blinded the ship. What happened next?”

“They touched down on a plain on the asteroid’s northern hemisphere. Susan managed a landing on short-range sensors, then they suited-up and set out to try and take readings and collect some samples. I was monitoring each of them in real time. Then all of their bio-signs went flat.” Dr. Lo had been silent to this point. She’d been the *Sheaffe’s* medical officer for three tours of duty and had just signed on for a fourth. Her files had been extensive. She was a tall austere looking woman who was actually a year older than Bradley – but her long black hair and pale skin-tone gave her the appearance of woman much younger. Brian imagined in her day she was likely a very attractive lady.

Brian looked to Declan. Kross took his seat as Morris cleared his throat... “We monitored a huge spike in radiation levels... then a blinding flash. Everything overloaded and shutdown. We were drifting dead for

almost eight minutes. When sensors came back online, they were gone.”

“Command has gone over the data you submitted, and they concur that an explosive event took place, resulting in the loss of the away team and the shuttle. I understand you did manage to recover...”

“Some hull fragments and a piece from the shuttle’s impulse manifold, Captain. Everything else was smashed to atoms or thrown into space,” said Art, mournfully.

“You did mark the asteroid though?”

Art looked up from the display terminal. “Of course, sir. Are you here to conduct an investigation?”

Brian left the image of the asteroid on the screen and sat down. “No. Command has accepted the official reports. Tell me Mr. Bradley, can we locate the asteroid at this time?”

“I modified a distress transceiver with three fission packs... we should be able to detect the variance in subspace, even through the gravimetric interference and all the subspace soup in the Expanse.”

“Very good Mr. Bradley; ingenious actually. Here then, is our mission. We are to try at all costs to obtain samples from that rock and investigate the source of those energy emissions. Now, was it Commander Tracey who theorized a pulsar was the source?” Brian looked around the room as he walked back towards the workstation.

“Lieutenant Commander G’pnor, Astrophysics. G’pnor interpreted the initial data and felt it likely that a pulsar was the source. Ms. Tracey concurred.” Declan watched as the Captain called up a detailed chart – a deployment chart of starships.

“This Commander G’pnor, where is he now?”

“G’pnor disembarked at the end of tour a year ago, sir.” Declan couldn’t take his eyes off the screen, he realized they were looking at the location and assignment of every Fleet asset across two quadrants.

“I see. Is there anyone still on board who may have worked with the Commander?”

“Uh... Lt. Casso...”

“Stellar Cartography? Fine, fine.” Brian had studied the roster provided him before the briefing and knew Casso was presently off duty, likely racked out in her quarters. He’d speak to the Junior Officer later.

He saw that everyone, except the doctor, was mesmerized by the deployment chart on the screen. “The first thing we’re going to do is track down that asteroid, confirm what we know, and flesh-out what we don’t about its composition and point of origin. Then we’re going to use what we may learn to circumnavigate the Expanse and trace those energy emissions to their source – be it a pulsar, or hells know what.”

Both Arthur Bradley and Morris Declan pulled their eyes from the screen to regard their new Captain. Brian

knew they wanted to know what he might be implying, but he pressed on...

“You see here our total fleet deployment. Note the mass of ships focussed along the *border* of the Klingon and Romulan Star Empires. We’re on the crest of war. For reasons not entirely clear, Command needs to know just what it was you encountered two years ago. Something has the Admirals spooked and we are the only ones they have available to get them answers. I’ll have more for you as we get underway. Stations.”

The senior officers filed out of the conference room in silence. Brian powered-down the presentation viewer and ensured the files from his personal data card had been downloaded to the ship's computer. His intention was to break orbit and start tracking the asteroid immediately. From the corner of his eye, he watched as Dr. Lo drew up a med-kit and laid it upon the conference table.

"Captain Harris, it is standard procedure for all newly arriving crew members to report first to the Duty Officer for assignment and then to Sickbay for medical clearance. You seem to have forgotten to come by and introduce yourself." Lo was a stern woman of indiscernible age. She delivered her remarks without so much as a hint of irony, or amusement.

Brian stiffened. He was tired. After weeks of confinement aboard the *T'poth* all he wanted to really do was get underway then stretch-out in his quarters after a long hot shower and sleep... maybe after a good steak dinner – Vulcans being vegetarian meant that by-and-large their guests were expected to be vegetarians as well. The fact that he felt like an imposter wasn't helping matters. "Doctor, I really need to get to the Bridge – we are on a bit of a time-crunch here."

"I did pick up on the serious nature of our assignment, Captain. That doesn't relieve me of my primary

duty though." She walked towards him with a tricorder and hand scanner.

"Fine, get it over with. You have my medical records anyway, so I don't really see the point in..."

"I only received transmission of your records two days ago and they were hardly complete." The small cylinder in her left hand whirred soothingly as she studied the tricorder in her right palm.

"I promise I'll report to Sickbay just as soon as I get us underway."

"No need to promise, Captain, I'm making it an order. You show signs of general fatigue, stress and... when was the last time you ate?"

"Hopefully in the next half hour. I've been cramped-up for weeks in a little metal box welded to a demon-fast warp propulsion plant. I think the fact that I'm tired and a little rattled should come as no surprise."

Lo turned her tricorder off. The readings would be uploaded to her computer in Sickbay. She pocketed the scanner and looked the Captain in the eye. "You're expected in Sickbay by the top of the hour. No exception."

On the Bridge, Brian took his seat in the Command chair. Kross and St. Cyr were at their posts, M'narr was standing by for orders to contact Archer IV with word of their departure. Lt. Commander Declan manned the tactical station at the portside view screen, while Engineer Bradley had transferred engineering control to his Bridge station. Science One, the primary station to Harris' right where the First Officer was traditionally posted, remained vacant. A young Ensign sat one seat over from the empty workstation at Science Two.

"Mr. M'narr, have you been able to pinpoint the asteroid's subspace signal?"

Behind the Captain's chair, M'narr pressed his hand to the monitor he wore over his left ear to confirm the signal he'd just moments ago and tuned into. "Yes, Captain. I've got a subspace contact at bearing 323 by 186.7... signal appears to be travelling at a velocity of .45 of light speed."

"It was barely moving when we encountered it the first time," offered Declan, looking across the primary console at Captain Harris.

"Mr. M'narr, inform Archer Station that we're breaking orbit. Mr. Kross, make your heading 323 by 186.7, full impulse."

"Aye, sir." As Kross entered the co-ordinates into the console, *Sheaffe's* impulse engines charged and sparked to life. *USS Sheaffe* banked gently away from Archer IV and sped at full sublight speed towards the Typhon sector.

"Mr. Declan, confirm the velocity of the asteroid the first time you encountered it?"

"It was tumbling from the Romulan side of the Expanse at less than .005 light speed, Captain." Morris was more or less over his initial indignation at Harris' arrival, but he felt like a man out of place now.

"Science... Mister...?"

"Stevens, sir."

"Mr. Stevens, long-range sensors to the matching co-ordinates please." Harris watched as the young officer input data and adjusted the tracking sensors. He was apparently trained in how to use the equipment, but his inexperience at the station was obvious.

"...yes...sir. Co-ordinates locked – I have the signal."

"What do long-range sensors read?"

"... long-range..." The Ensign activated his station's reader, peered down his scope and scratched his head.

Kross interjected, "Now passing the moons of Porthos, sir. At present speed estimate contact with signal in 89.8 hours." He kept his voice steady and professional.

"Thank you, Helm. Mr. Bradley, are we ready for warp speed?"

"Yes, sir. Reactor is online and ready to go," said Art from his seat just a few feet to the Captain's left.

"Mr. Kross, warp five. We'll make course adjustments as needed when we close on the target."

"Aye, sir. Warp five." Kross leveled up a sliding control bar on his panel and the low hum of *Sheaffe's* matter/anti-matter reactor reverberated ever so slightly along the floor decks. "Estimated time to contact now four hours, six minutes, Captain."

Brian felt the familiar churn in his guts as the ship broke the light-speed barrier. *Sheaffe* sliced through the blackness towards the Typhon Expanse.

"Long-range sensors don't show anything at the coordinates, Captain. Nothing at all..."

Brian nodded at the Ensign who was clearly in way over his head, then turned around to address the communications officer. "Mr. M'narr, be sure to hold that signal...and give me a ship-wide channel, please."

"Channel open, Captain."

Brian activated the transmitter built into the Command chair.

"Attention all hands... at 1414 hours today I, Captain Brian Harris, by order of Starfleet Command, took charge of this vessel. I wish I'd had the opportunity to meet each of you personally, but we are pressed for time and tasked with a mission of the highest priority. Your section heads will be briefed as soon as time allows. For now, I ask all of you to

perform your duties as the professionals I know you to be.
Harris, out.”

Sheaffe screamed through the vacuum of space, traversing the ethereal line on Mr. Kross' star charts that divided the Omicron sector from the Typhon sector. The Expanse itself was still hours away. Owing to the surprising velocity the asteroid had somehow picked up in the nearly six months since their first encounter, the *Sheaffe* was up against a precarious deadline as the rock tumbled toward Romulan space. As it was, the course plotted by Kross skirted the Neutral Zone nearly all the way to the projected intercept point at the very edge of the Typhon Expanse.

Both the Federation and the Romulan Governments agreed to permit scientific exploration of the Typhon Expanse. The Expanse served as a natural barrier along the border between Empire and Federation space. It was almost entirely within the Neutral Zone between the two powers and stretched out into the largely uncharted and unclaimed space beyond.

"Mr. Stevens, any contacts on long range?" Brian had the ship's chronometer mounted above the main view screen set to display a countdown to intercept. He kept his eyes fixed on the digital numbers ticking away as he queried his young Science Officer.

"No, sir. No contacts of any kind. Target rendezvous co-ordinates still coming back as a blank."

Ensign Stevens was perched at the edge of his seat, face buried in his sensor scope.

“Never mind the asteroid, Mr. Stevens. You’re sure there’s no other vessels or obstructions in our path?” Harris broke his focus from the countdown and rubbed his eyes. He could hear the young man snapping toggles and manipulating instruments.

“No vessels, sir. Picking up some ionized gas deposits closer-in... I’m getting some...”

Captain Harris looked over at the young man, still squinting into his scope and feverishly working the confinement aperture controls. “Ops, give Mr. Stevens some extra power to the long-range sensor array so he can sharpen his annular confinement.”

“Aye, sir.” St. Cyr made an adjustment on his console and no sooner had his hands stopped moving than the Captain heard Stevens sigh a relieved breath.

“It’s a singularity, sir. No doubt about it. Looks to be a Class Two and it’s tracking right in-line with our target’s projected flight path.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stevens. Now we know why that asteroid has picked-up so much speed. It’s being pulled into a black hole. Estimated time for target to reach the event horizon?”

“If... if the object continues on its trajectory at its present speed... maybe a day...”

“As it draws nearer the singularity though, it’s only going to pick up more speed.” Declan offered from his seat at tactical.

“Mr. Stevens?” Harris watched as the Ensign sat up-right for the first time since activating the station’s scope. The young man looked shaken.

“I don’t have enough concrete information to calculate an exact timeframe, sir. I... the best I can do that is, is to estimate speed and course based on the subspace signal, but even that is distorted...”

“Best guess, Mr. Stevens.” He watched the Ensign turn back to the scope and run several numbers through his computer.

“Best guess, sir... give or take... say, twelve to eighteen hours.”

The chronometer stood at a little more than two and a half hours to go before contact. Brian watched quietly as the Ensign strained over his scope. Kross kept a steady hand on the Helm panel and both he and St. Cyr continuously consulted the bulging positional display rooted into the deck between their stations. Though no vessels had been detected, that didn’t mean that cloaked Romulan patrols weren’t even at that moment shadowing *Sheaffe*, or thousands of remote listening sensors weren’t relaying their movements back to Romulan Command each second of their passage along the edge of the Zone. The

situation was changing, and Harris had to adapt and help his crew adapt as well.

“Alright, listen to me...”

Brian looked first at Bradley, then to Declan, then clockwise around the Bridge – he knew they’d all be attentive to his orders, but he wanted to look each of them in the eye before continuing.

“Our window to accomplish this part of the mission just got a lot smaller. This is what we’re going to do... Mr. Kross, warp six please. Mr. Stevens, you’re to monitor for vessels or other hazards. The closer we get to the asteroid the less effective your sensors will be, but you are to keep your eyes open even if all you see is static – understood?”

The young man nodded, and Brian continued.

“Mr. M’narr, keep your transceiver locked on the subspace signal and work with Ops to keep us on target. Mr. Declan, long-range sensors are useless with this thing. Aside from simple visual acquisition, we’ll need to see this thing somehow – I’d like you to use the short-range targeting sensors to pull telemetry for Mr. Kross and the rest of us to keep from slamming into the damn thing.”

‘The rest we’ll make up as we go along’ - he didn’t bother saying out loud.

The sound of the turbolift doors opening caused Brian to take his eyes from the main viewer. Dr. Lo stepped onto the Bridge with a pad and a serious looking triage kit slung over her shoulder. Harris cursed to himself quietly.

“Captain, I know you’re engaged, but this can’t wait.” She walked directly towards Command and rested her pad on the extended work surface protruding from the Captain’s armrest.

The others remained fixed on their tasks – paying the doctor no mind. Brian fought the urge to protest the intrusion, but it wasn’t easy. “Doctor, we have ninety minutes until...”

“Fantastic. I can get this done in ten minutes if you co-operate.”

From behind the doctor, Brian saw Art Bradley smile and shake his head. Clearly, he wasn’t going to get the doctor to back down – Art’s expression was one of bemused resignation. He wasn’t going to make a scene in the middle of the Bridge, but he was going to have a long private talk with the doctor as soon as the situation allowed. As the doctor rested her kit on the floor and stood up with a hypo in her hand, Brian allowed himself a sharp sigh before unsnapping his tunic and pulling his arm free.

Saladins – which employed the same saucers as the *Constitution* Heavy Cruisers, provided no ‘Ready Room’ for

the Captain's use on deck one. The Doctor administered an inoculation against the ambient radiation emitted from the Typhon Expanse. Brian reflected that the lack of a private refuge was the *Sheaffe's* greatest failing so far.

On the main viewer was a tactical chart of the sector. Brian had asked Declan to plot the origin point for the energy signature detected beyond Kea IV using archived mission data, as well as the point at which they first encountered the asteroid. St. Cyr then plotted the position of the subspace signal they were racing to intercept – cross-referencing the object's real-time position with M'narr, who was tracking the signal live. Ensign Stevens had been directed to access the data Harris had downloaded from his Deployment Resources files and had extrapolated the asteroid's course from the reams of metrics generated from the ship's initial scans months earlier.

Much of the tactical display was based on educated speculations concerning the passage of the asteroid through the Typhon Expanse. A red point representing the asteroid moved slowly towards a yellow terminus zone – the estimated event horizon of the singularity. A white point zipping at a much quicker rate towards a blue zone bordering the yellow terminus – the best-possible point of interception, represented the *Sheaffe*.

Brian followed the projected trajectory of the asteroid along a parabolic arcing path which looped

gracefully from the estimated location of the supposed pulsar, along the Federation border close to Ivor Prime, then into the Typhon Expanse itself.

The doctor continued her obligatory examination in silence.

He followed the course Ensign Stevens had plotted for the asteroid – the graceful arc sharpened, imperceptibly at first and then more noticeably as the line flowed through the Expanse on its way to the newly discovered singularity.

Dr. Lo replaced the last of her hand-held tools in the case at her feet. Then picked up her pad and began making an entry. “Thank you, Captain, you’re apparently not about to drop dead.”

Brian stood and put his arm back into his tunic. Adjusting his uniform and then refastening the buckle at his shoulder. Again, he fought back the urge to comment on the doctor’s timing. Instead, he ran his hand down the front of his uniform to ensure it hadn’t bunched and said... “Thank you, Doctor. Perhaps we can have dinner this evening, once things are wrapped-up here... and discuss ship’s protocol.”

Lo hoisted the strap on her triage kit back over her shoulder. “That sounds nice. We can perhaps review some of the recent cases of thoron radiation poisoning – what they used to call Typhon Plague. It’s almost always fatal and so interesting in that victims nearly always die in complete agony. Let’s say 2030 hours? Time permitting.”

She tucked her pad under her arm, nodded and walked back towards the turbolift.

“She’s a good doctor, sir. Longest serving medical officer in the sector,” offered Bradley once the lift doors had shut.

“Hells of a bed-side manner too.” Harris remarked taking his seat and returning his attention to the tactical display.

“Personality of an arthritic Gorn, no argument there, sir.” Bradley smiled and turned back to his own console.

They were now at warp 6.88 and while *Sheaffe* was capable of an emergency maximum speed of warp 8, her increasing proximity to the Expanse could destabilize her uniquely narrow warp field.

Sheaffe slipped along at close to warp seven for another hour before the effects of the approaching Expanse began affecting her performance. Though not unexpected, the subspace eddies infamous throughout the Typhon Expanse, began to register on St. Cyr's consoles causing the emergency alarm to sound. As the ship closed on the signal, reports from Ensign Stevens grew more and more dire. Long range sensors didn't register the asteroid, but the singularity Stevens had identified hours before turned-out to be a larger Class three. The estimated event horizon and point of no return for the asteroid had to be greatly expanded. Stevens also confirmed M'narr's calculations that put the target at a velocity of 0.52 of light speed – a marked increase from the 0.45 their original modelling had utilized.

"Captain, I can't guarantee a stable warp field too much longer. We're going to have to disengage the drive before we tear through one of those eddies." Bradley said this without taking his eyes off his own instruments.

"Ops, time to intercept?"

"Sir, we should be on top of it in twenty minutes if we maintain course and speed... but we'll be warping into the terminus of the singularity according to the latest readings."

“Stevens, what’s the latest regarding that hole?”

Brian turned to face the Ensign who was still hunched over his station, moving frantically between his sensor scope and the dual readouts mounted to the bulkhead just above.

“Uh...the...the sensors...” Stevens squinted into the scope, then smacked the side of the device with an open hand. “The sensors are soupy, sir.”

“Soupy? Wonderful. You keep focused on your job Mr. Stevens no matter what.” Brian could feel Bradley’s eyes boring into him from just over his left shoulder.

“Captain, we have to throttle back. He’s losing sensors and we’re running blind.”

“As you were, engineer. Mr. Kross, alter course by 12 degrees starboard, Z plus 3 degrees – I’m taking us across the border to shave some time, any objections will be noted in the ship’s log.”

Kross glanced down at his directional screen. Long range navigation sensors were starting to glitch. They would be blind soon. “12 degrees starboard Z plus 3 degrees, aye sir.”

“Mr. Declan, compensate for our new heading and display tactical graphic.”

From his post at Tactical, Morris called up the graphic and superimposed the new intercept point and ETA. According to the rough tactical display, *Sheaffe* would be converging with her target in eight minutes and a scant 15,000 kms short of the event horizon. An alarm buzzed;

Brian looked down from the tactical display towards the helmsman.

“We are now inside the Romulan Neutral Zone, Captain. We are in violation of Treaty.”

“Sir, long-range sensors are off-line... sorry.” Stevens could see nothing looking down his scope, but he held his position, nonetheless.

Brian took in every detail from the tactical screen before ordering St. Cyr to switch the viewer to short range visual. To Art Bradley’s visible relief, the Captain then ordered Kross to disengage the warp engine and continue on course under impulse power. Morris Declan began sweeping for contacts using the tactical short-range targeting beams. From his post almost directly behind the Captain, M’narr called out positional co-ordinates to Declan and Kross from the Communications panel – they were operating like a mid-20th Century combat submarine.

“We’re now passing into unclaimed space, Captain.” Reported Kross as the buzzing alert on his panel ceased. They’d been in the Romulan Zone for a full two minutes and had likely set off a hundred alarms on the Romulan side.

“Thank you, Helm...everyone, keep your eyes open for a planet sized rock.” Harris sat forward in his chair and stared intensely at the view screen.

“Got something!” Declan used his directional wheel to focus the forward portside targeting beam. As he

adjusted his instruments, the exterior view shifted to follow the active beam. Suddenly the image of the asteroid filled the screen. Kross noted Tactical's co-ordinates and adjusted his course to match. Moments later they were in orbit around the asteroid as it tumbled towards the black hole.

"We've got one shot at this, people." Brian wiped his forehead. He was beginning to sweat. He noticed they were all perspiring. "Mr. Bradley, ready tractor beam."

"Sir?" Art swallowed hard. He was suddenly not feeling well at all and sweating like a pig. He didn't know why the Captain called for the tractor but powered the emitters all the same.

"You retrieved shuttle debris from a high orbit after the explosion, correct?" Brian cleared his throat and watched his Engineer nod his understanding.

"Tactical, load forward tubes, but don't arm the torpedoes. We're going to slam them into a chunk of that thing and hopefully break something loose Bradley can grab."

Lo wiped her brow and looked up from her desk at the status board on her office interface. Most of the tiles intended to report the ship's speed, heading and general disposition were blank. Only the chronometer and general internal readouts were illuminated. According to the computer the environmental settings were nominal, but she felt almost tropical sitting in the middle of Sickbay. Catherine was just about to contact engineering to have someone verify the environmental readings when the main double-wide doors slid open, and a young crewman dressed in a white radiation suit staggered in pulling the lifeless form of a second engineer behind him.

“Huh...hmmmp, DOCTOR!”

Lo rounded her desk and ran to meet the struggling crewman as he collapsed under the weight of his comrade into the arms of D'nore Imy, her senior Nurse. The two medics on duty sprinted over and carried the unconscious engineer to the diagnostic bay. D'nore, a young Bajoran/human of only twenty-two years helped the weakened crewman onto the closest examination bed while Catherine caught her breath and followed Br'ev and William the medics. She recognized Crewman Bahr as she navigated past Imy to access the diagnostic panel.

“Bahr, what happened?” She powered on the diagnostic bay scanners and instantly the contamination alarms began to sound.

“Doctor, look.” D’nore was preparing to scan Crewman Bahr with a medical tricorder when the indicator strip on the sleeve of the Crewman’s radiation suit caught his attention. He gently held up Bahr’s left arm so Catherine could see the bright pink warning indicator.

Lo looked from her diagnostic panel over to Imy and his patient.

Sickbay’s internal sensors, which activated the instant the diagnostics bay was powered on, and the young man’s indicator strip both reported the same thing – radiation.

Acting quickly, Catherine ordered her medics to retrieve radiological monitoring tags (RMTs) for all six of them.

Williams, the junior medic followed Br’ev’s lead. Without hesitation Br’ev ripped open the correct storage container and began handing RMTs to his young wide-eyed human partner.

Williams had just graduated basic certification months earlier and this was his first deep space assignment.

The boy had managed the everyday well enough, but Br’ev – a veteran of two tours, did not trust the young

twenty-year-old to “fly solo” in an actual emergency just yet.

Br’ev’s own grandfather had been a volunteer in the Space Force when the first war with the Romulans erupted.

From his father’s accounts, his grandfather had died a hero saving his ship from a Romulan ambush – succumbing to atomic radiation fallout from the crude nuclear warheads both sides had set-to-war with.

Radiation was not a matter to be taken lightly.

For Br’ev it was an evil which had stalked his nightmares from his days as a child on Mars listening to his father’s tales of ‘Grunge’s’ dying moments in the blackness of space.

Lo asked Bahr again what had happened.

“Monitoring coil dynamics... deck thirteen... Pearson vomited... collapsed...” Bahr lurched to the side and vomited himself, just missing D’nore.

“Who else was on that deck? Bahr, BAHR! I need to know who else...”

“Ugghhh... nobody, Doctor. Just Pearson and I...” He vomited a second time.

Catherine ordered that both men be stripped out of their contaminated gear. As Br’ev began running scans on Pearson she contacted engineering and initiated an evacuation/isolation of deck thirteen. The RMT affixed to her breast was already spiking.

“Mr. Kross...on my order commence a low run along the asteroid’s surface...get us within five kms. Mr. Declan, once we’re at altitude... take your shot... use the targeting beams as best you can to smash those torpedoes into the target just back of the horizon... Bradley...” –cough– “...Bradley, you’re to capture what you can in the tractor... pull it into the hangar. Understood?”

“I’m flying on visual only sir...”

“I know, Mr. Kross... do your best.” Brian ran his sleeve across his forehead. St. Cyr had pulled his tunic open and from where Brian sat, he could see the sweat pouring down Declan’s face. Clearly something was wrong with the environmental settings, but that would have to...

“Sickbay to Bridge, answer please!”

Harris looked down at the controls on his chair. The status indicators were all green, except for the engineering compartment – which flashed yellow. The Captain opened a channel with Dr. Lo. “Sickbay, this is the Captain. What’s the matter... Doctor?”

“Captain, I just ordered deck thirteen evacuated and sealed. We’ve got wide-range radiation exposure contaminating that entire Deck, two crewmen are down with severe radiation sickness.”

Brian looked over at the engineering station where Bradley was frantically trying to run his own diagnostics

while confirming with his team that deck thirteen was clear and sealed. It wasn't an environmental issue causing them all to sweat and slump, it was radiation. The small window they had to harvest a sample shrank a little more. The doctor recommended that RMTs be issued ship-wide – Ensign Stevens retrieved a supply from the emergency locker located in the bulkhead just beside the main viewer. Everyone clipped a tag to their chests. All of the RMTs were registering medium/high levels of exposure.

“Why didn't internal sensors... detect the... radiation?” Declan managed to croak.

“Must... must be related to the asteroid's effects... on our long-range sensors...” –cough– “...Sickbay has an independent system... shielded secondary EPS feeds...” –cough– “...Bradley, make ready on tractor beam. Mr. Kross, ready?” Brian slumped slightly in his chair.

“Aye...ready, Captain.” Kross wiped his own forehead. His head was pounding.

“Declan... confirm those torpedoes are not armed... this thing blew an away team to hells... don't need it tearing the ship... apart.” Harris watched Declan consult his instruments and then offer a weak thumbs-up. Brian realized they were all fading fast. Lo was back on the speaker demanding that the ship pull out. “Ops... program escape trajectory back to our side of this... nightmare... direct.”

“Course... plotted... just using star groupings though...”

“Fine. Ops... it’s fine... Helm one third impulse... we have one shot, we don’t stop... go!”

Breaking orbit, the starship sailed towards the spinning rock like a hawk diving on a field mouse. She moved closer and closer to the face of the asteroid then suddenly her nose dipped for a few seconds before rocketing up again. She sped along the surface of the asteroid at less than three kilometers altitude. A flash, then a second bright red flash marked the departing inert photons from their launch tubes. The first torpedo screamed along ahead of the bucking ship and smashed full force into the side of a jagged mountain. The second torpedo shot past the crumbling edifice, only to impact into the surface of an open plain beyond.

The ship fell to barely eighteen hundred meters altitude before beginning to climb again to chase after the debris the first torpedo hit had sent scattering into space. *Sheaffe* banked slightly to starboard as she climbed – Kross was concerned the trailing edge of the nacelle might impact what was left of the range of mountains Declan’s first strike had decimated. As she pulled away from the asteroid her blue/white tractor beam flared out of the primary emitter and swept port to starboard capturing all that it could then drawing what debris it had snared into the shuttle bay. Without slowing, the ship continued in its arc increasing

speed from one third to full impulse and successfully pulling free from both the asteroid, the singularity and the leading edge of the Typhon Expanse.

"Engineer... are we secure...?" Brian's head was pounding, and he fought back the urge to vomit. Stevens was lying on the deck – conscious, but unable to move.

"...Bay doors show secure..." Art slumped at his panel.

"Helm... execute return trajectory..."

"...Aye... Captain... we're running blind, impulse might not... be enough..." Kross tried to focus on the screen ahead of him, but his vision was blurring. They were relying entirely on St. Cyr's preprogrammed course now.

Brian looked over at his engineer. The older man was struggling to hold himself up and barely managed to look back at the Captain and nod...

"Warp two helm, go..." Brian's eyes fluttered as he gave the order, and he sank in his chair.

Sheaffe accelerated smoothly past light speed, leaving a long arcing trail of dust, ice and spent plasma behind her.

His mouth was dry and tasted of burnt hair. He breathed deeply – his stomach twisted. He curled and rolled to his side trying not to vomit. Where...

Fzzzz – “I see you’re awake, that’s good.”

Brian took three more sharp breaths, fighting back the urge to be sick and slowly opened his eyes. For a moment he thought he was blind. The scent of sterile bedding filled his nose. He was... he was on the Bridge, last he remembered.

Fzzzz – “Captain Harris? Are you going to vomit?”

Brian managed to hold up his hand and waved off the question. Slowly his eyes adjusted, and a dull-grey bulkhead came into focus. His head was pounding.

Fzzzz – “You’re in Sickbay, Captain. You’ll need to be kept in the decontamination chamber for another hour and half before I can be sure you’re clear.”

He pulled himself up to a sitting posture – stomach roiling the entire time. It was Dr. Lo’s voice he was hearing over the chamber’s intercom relay. He sighed, realizing that he’d sat up the wrong way around and was facing the rear wall of the chamber. Slowly he turned and was rewarded with a small glimpse of the good doctor through a tiny viewing port in the chamber’s only hatch.

“St... status?” He managed to push the word out.

Fzzzz – “You’ve been in there for almost seven hours. You got a heavy dose of thoron radiation. You’re lucky I...” She stopped when she noticed Harris waving his hand weakly.

“Ship status...” –cough, cough– “Ship’s status, casualties, damage reports?”

Fzzzz – “Of course. We’re in orbit around Pi. You and crewman Pearson remain in Sickbay with severe thoron radiation sickness. The rest of us have been recovering nicely. No other casualties to report.”

“Pi?”

Fzzzz – “When we warped away from that asteroid we ended up going in the wrong direction. From what I’ve been told Mr. Kross realized what was happening and managed to pull the ship out of warp and put us in orbit here before he lost consciousness like the rest of you.”

“Captain on the Bridge.”

Brian stepped out of the turbolift accompanied by Dr. Lo – it was the only way she would agree to release him from sickbay immediately after clearing the decontamination chamber. He still felt wobbly on his feet. Declan was just getting out of the Command chair as Brian stepped down from the outer station ring. He glanced at the young Petty Officer who’d announced him – he hadn’t met her yet. She was standing at M’narr’s communications station.

“Commander Declan, status?” Aside from Declan and the doctor, he recognized nobody on the Bridge.

“Sir, we’re in standard orbit around Pi. Has Dr. Lo updated you on casualties?”

“Yes. We’re fortunate there. Why are we still in unclaimed space?” Brian looked towards the Engineering station, but the seat was empty.

“Uh... the trajectory we programmed was incorrect. We went to warp and had Mr. Kross not realized the error, we’d have ended up somewhere in Romulan space, sir.” Declan stepped aside as Captain Harris took the chair.

“Commander, that’s not what I asked.” Brian looked to his status board and saw that engineering, stores and the hanger deck all reported RED status.

“Sir, this is an unclaimed system. It used to be a Romulan colony before the war, but they abandoned it a century ago. There’s one settlement of roughly 12,000 people – they’re mostly disenfranchised Romulans. There are a few independent homesteaders from the minor systems, even a Terran sub-set that run ranches in the flatlands around T’hak Lat. Science vessels exploring the Expanse use Pi as a waystation... Romulan and Federation both. We’ve resupplied here on a number of occasions – it’s a safe port.”

“So, even if a Romulan patrol should wander by, we wouldn’t stand out?”

“No, sir.”

“Please tell me, Mr. Declan, were we at least successful in achieving our objective?”

“We collected close to 600 kilos of material from the asteroid sir, yes.” Declan stood back when he saw the Captain’s shoulders slouch forward as the man sighed in relief.

“Staff meeting tomorrow 0700. For now – you have the Bridge, Commander.” Brian rose and walked back to the turbolift with the doctor.

The next morning Brian woke in his own quarters for the first time in nearly three days. His footlocker was still sitting on the floor next to the workstation where the crewman had left it after unloading the *T'poth*. His head no longer ached, but his stomach knotted and cramped with hunger.

“Computer...” The interface panel on the other side of his cabin lit up in response. “Time?” From where he sat on the side of his bunk, he could see the chronometer display activate, 0442. Before climbing into bed, he’d taken the time to deactivate the computer’s speech A.I. He wasn’t fond of talking machines.

After showering and dressing in a fresh uniform – concealing his issued RMT tag under his tunic, Brian made his way to deck seven and found the ship’s mess. Walking through the open bulkhead, he made time to acknowledge a table of crewmen wolfing down their morning meals before reporting for their early duty shifts. They were all incredibly young. Too young, Brian couldn’t help thinking, as each of them rose to shake his hand. He thanked them all for their diligence and bid them a good morning before making his way towards the dispensary himself. As he walked away from the crewmen, he was grateful that his stomach hadn’t gurgled, betraying his own hunger.

“Captain E’Gnath used to take his morning meal in his quarters.”

Brian had been studying the offerings for the day on the menu screen and hadn’t noticed the old Master Chief walk up from behind. The man was perhaps the thinnest Bolian he’d ever encountered.

“Good morning, Chief...” and his stomach roared and cramped at just that moment.

“Master Chief Nams Licanat, Captain. Pleased to make your acquaintance – if I may, sir...” Nams smiled and moved past the Captain to retrieve a tray from dispenser – C12. “Are you a coffee drinker, sir?”

“Uh...yes, thank you.” Brian followed the Chief’s gaze and saw an open port on the opposite wall where a supply of thermal mugs was available beside a coffee dispenser. The Chief carried the sealed tray past the Captain and called for him to come share a table under one of the mess’s four viewing ports.

“Forgive my presumption, sir. We had to dispose of about a quarter of the ship’s rations after that radiation bath we took. Most of what’s on that menu board is just repurposed ration packs – I snagged you one of the last remaining ‘geeling egg omelettes, real delicacy.”

Brian opened the tray and was immediately drawn in by the scent of cheese and herbs. “I hadn’t heard about the rations, Chief. I had to...”

“Spend some time in the good doctor’s chamber? No shame there, Captain. Please eat, eat.” Nams watched as the Captain began devouring his omelette. “We’re replenishing it of course. Have you ever tried g’ax?” He smiled when Captain Harris looked up from his breakfast with a quizzical expression. “They’re rather like... goats, I’d say. Think of a goat on Earth, only four times as large. There’s a little cabal of ranchers down there on Pi who breed and butcher them. Delicious and an excellent source of protein.”

Brian finished his breakfast and had three cups of coffee without having to say more than five words to keep the ‘conversation’ with Master Chief Licanat going. By the time his Bolian breakfast companion finally seemed to be gearing down, a steady line of crewmen, Yeomen and Petty Officers began lining up for their chance to grab something to eat before heading off for duty. Harris watched his young crew shuffle awkwardly pass, some staring at him, others trying not to make eye contact.

“I’ve very much enjoyed this, sir...” Nams arranged his utensils on the side of his own tray of ‘geeling eggs preparing to leave.

Brian looked away from the others quietly claiming their breakfasts to meet the Chief’s smiling gaze.

“...the officers usually take their meals one compartment over – ‘officers mess’ and all, but it was a real pleasure to spend this time with you, Captain... and, if it’s

not out of line, a wise decision on your part to let the crew see their Captain. Builds good will.” The Master Chief rose and walked his tray to the collection stall.

Brian smiled at a young Yeoman walking by to find an empty seat in the rapidly filling mess, then he took the last swallow of coffee from his mug before taking his own tray to the stall. He watched as Nams walked out of the mess in the company of two crewmen talking to both of them at once and shook his head in bemused bewilderment. It was time to make his way up to deck four.

Everyone except St. Cyr was in attendance. Lt. Commander Declan apologized for not being able to have all the senior staff present and explained that St. Cyr had to be present on Pi to complete negotiations for the impromptu resupply. Before Brian could call the others to order, Dr. Lo had produced her tricorder and demanded to read the RMT the Captain had been obligated to wear as part of last evening's negotiations to sleep in his own bunk as opposed to a bed in Sickbay. When the doctor was satisfied that the Captain was free of radiation, the meeting began.

Brian's first concern was the status of the samples they'd managed to collect from the asteroid. He was pleased to hear that while he spent most of the previous day unconscious and locked away in the doctor's decontamination chamber – progress had been made. Of the 589.3 kgs snared in the tractor beam they'd lost 127 kilograms of ice to melting. The remaining material had been collected and packed into triple-layered disposal canisters commonly used to off-load toxic trillithium from the antimatter reactor waste collectors. Bradley reported that his crewmen were still scrubbing the main hangar trying to purge the ambient graviton radiation from the deck. Extremely small samples were being analyzed in

Geological Sciences and the Plasma/Radiation/Astrometrics labs on deck three.

The Captain then asked his Chief Engineer for a full damage and status report. Aside from the mopping-up in progress in the hangar, Bradley reported that deck thirteen had been completely vented into space before they established orbit around Pi. This was an extreme measure, but one that Bradley – supported by Declan – felt had to be taken. Bradley felt he couldn't trust the compartment radiological readings, or even his own team's tricorder readings of what lay behind the emergency bulkhead seals on that deck. He had the compartment vented and only after entering orbit and confirming that they had properly functioning scanners did he have the compartment repressurized and scrubbed. As it was, deck thirteen was "clean" – though radiation protocols would remain in place until *Sheaffe* returned to Federation space. Brian then asked Declan for clarification on the issue of untrustworthy tricorder readings and the like.

Though the science teams had only just started breaking down the asteroid material, one of their first discoveries was a terrifying one. While they knew the graviton heavy material nullified long-range sensor beams – it was quickly discovered that it also scrambled internal electronics. Everything from tricorders to antigrav units and even the shuttle secured at the rear of the bay when the collection teams were attempting to contain the

samples, became unreliable – functional in most respects, but faulty in their basic computations.

Lt. Kross had spent the previous evening running diagnostics on the conn and found that the pathways linking the navigational array to the computer relays had been corrupted. For Brian it was a possible explanation for the drastically flawed escape course the *Sheaffe* had followed after collecting the samples. Since St. Cyr, who'd programed the co-ordinates, wasn't present to offer an opinion on what may or may not have affected his inputs, all agreed that faulty relays were most likely to blame. The rest of the day would be spent running diagnostics of all critical systems from the upper scanner array to the space matrix coils.

Dr. Lo was asked to give an update on crewman Pearson – who was still in Sickbay undergoing treatment for thoron burns to his lungs and kidneys. The doctor felt confident that Pearson could return to light duties in another forty hours, provided his final round of regeneration therapy and observation went well. The senior staff were briefed on the Captain's condition – a somewhat embarrassing few moments for Brian. The Captain now realized that had he simply reported to the doctor upon boarding, his inoculation would likely have had time to take full effect and he wouldn't have spent a full day in Sickbay.

His own few moments of discomfort aside, Brian was interested to hear how the rest of the crew had fared. For the most part, personnel had experienced moderate to serious effects from the radiation exposure – recovering on average within an hour to two hours with medical intervention once the ship was clear of the asteroid. Crew members on the Bridge, at the lowest decks and closest to the exterior bulkheads had been affected more severely than those stationed at more core-centered stations. The doctor was working to map what she theorized was a pattern of undulating radiation which had washed over and through the ship during its mission.

M'narr reported that while the subspace transceiver array was undamaged, the newly discovered effects of the asteroid's radiation on the internal relays had temporarily crippled their ability to transmit on subspace securely. Most of the science and engineering staff were engaged in diagnostic duties – so he proposed to dismantle the main communications panel to repair and replace the relays himself. Declan was noticeably hesitant, while Bradley pointed out that whether the broken panel was in pieces on the deck, or broken and just taking up space – what would the harm be? Brian had the benefit of having seen firsthand M'narr's Academy engineering and subspace engineering ratings and hesitantly consented.

A complete list of the stores' items – largely food stuffs, lost to the radiation was presented to the Captain.

Kross then shared the most up-to-the-minute inventory of replacement items St. Cyr was negotiating for on the surface. G'ax indeed would be on the menu.

The situation regarding Pi was briefly discussed. Brian felt somewhat better briefed than he might otherwise be thanks to his breakfast with the Master Chief. Everything Nams had shared over eggs and coffee checked out. What the Captain was surprised to learn though, was that a formal agreement stood between the Federation, the Continuing Ruling Council of T'hak Lat and the Romulan Star Empire. Under the agreement, scientific ships from either side could use Pi as a resupply point or safe haven – provided they left orbit and got on their way within 78 hours. The clock was ticking. Departure was given a “soft-go” for 1900 hours.

“Mr. Declan, could I ask you to hold back for a moment?” Brian moved towards the far end of the conference table and took a seat.

Morris was just about to leave with Bradley when the Captain called him back. They had a lot to manage in a little under twelve hours, he and the Engineer were going to co-ordinate clean-up and diagnostic efforts. Art paused for just a second and offered Mo a slight nod. The Conference Room door hushed closed once Bradley had cleared the sensors. They had Master Chief Licanat’s team working on the relay diagnostics – but Declan wanted to be hands-on himself after listening to Bradley explain how the radiation’s effect on their systems could have just as easily triggered a core breach or a ship-wide emergency decompression as it did a navigation error. Morris walked to the far end of the room and took the seat opposite Captain Harris as requested.

“Yes, sir?”

“Commander, I had the opportunity to review the Bridge recordings immediately following my... my loss of consciousness. Your report stated that it was Mr. Kross who realized our heading was taking us into Romulan space – that it was the helmsman who corrected the course and guided us to safe harbour.” Brian looked directly at the Lt. Commander as he said this, watching for a reaction.

“My report was accurate, sir. Mr. Kross’s actions saved us from...”

“It may have been Henrik Kross’s hand that altered our course, but the recordings clearly showed you directing his actions from Tactical. In fact, Henrik’s own report states he’d been rendered almost blind by the radiation at that point and was only able to alter course and disengage warp drive by feel and with your cues.”

“Captain, I was just doing what I had to.”

“Lt. Commander, I’ve read your personnel file, psych evals... even Captain E’Gnath’s personal logs concerning his impressions of you. I feel I was mistaken in how I chose to... handle you.” Brian stood up slowly and walked along the table towards the UFP banner, then turned and looked at Declan still sitting at the end of the table. “From this moment forward you are the Executive Officer aboard the *Sheaffe* – if you care to serve as my First Officer, that is.”

Morris said nothing for a moment. The Captain stood waiting for an answer, the antique banner serving as a colourful backdrop.

“Agreed, provided you tell me how you knew to blast inactive torpedoes at that thing to get the samples, sir. I never would have thought of that.” He was almost embarrassed to admit his awe, but he’d had more than twenty-four hours to reflect on the manner in which Harris had co-ordinated the mission once things began going

sideways. He'd been so cool and smooth in his adaptation to the fluid nature of their situation... Declan couldn't help but be impressed.

Brian nodded and smirked slightly. "I pulled something similar out of my, hat... years ago while serving on the *Victory*. I used an inert mark V to punch through an adversary's shields to bury it into their hull. Hundred-to-one shot that it wouldn't be repelled, but it worked..."

Brian looked at the younger man and realized it was more than mission objectives, briefs and personnel reports that had made him uneasy around Declan. Morris wanted command – in all honesty, he was more qualified for it than Brian would ever be. He cleared his throat and tried to push away the envy and shame he suddenly felt.

"We didn't have time for a shuttle or a team between that singularity and the radiation. We didn't know if that whole damn rock would explode if we used phasers. So, I used what I knew. We took our one shot and thankfully got the hells out of there before anyone got seriously hurt."

Declan rose up from his seat and shook his head, smiling to himself. "Hells?"

"So many worlds, so many people in the Galaxy – stands to reason there's no shortage of hells. So, now that I've admitted to being a bit of an ass – and you perhaps can see that I'm a little more than a stuffed-shirt bureaucrat, can we get our ship moving by 1900 hours, Exec?"

“Yes, Captain. Of course, sir.” Declan nodded slightly, a sign of contrition.

As he exited the meeting room and made his way along the corridor, Morris reflected that all in all, he didn't have a lot to be upset about. He'd volunteered for deep space assignment aboard the *Sheaffe* just after his first two-year assignment out of the Academy was up. Certainly, he'd deprived himself of a place aboard a *Miranda* or possibly even an *Excelsior*, but by volunteering he fast-tracked his career and jumped from Ensign to full Lieutenant in less than half the time it would have normally taken. Within the first ten months aboard he'd qualified himself to write the Lieutenant Commander's aptitude tests. Had *Sheaffe* not been side-tracked by that damned asteroid, he'd likely be qualifying for full Commander status by this point. A bump to full Captain would have been nice, but he was still well ahead of the game. Besides, Harris had demonstrated that there were still a few tricks left to learn along the way.

After settling the issue with Lt. Commander Declan, Brian collected his copies of the daily duty roster and the day's diagnostics schedule and left the conference room. His next piece of business – he double-checked the duty roster as he stepped into the corridor, was presently on duty in the labs on deck three. Walking along from the conference room he could see that he'd just missed the turbolift. The Captain decided not to bother waiting for the next lift and used the engineering access ladder which ran alongside the turbolift shaft from deck five below up to deck two.

He pulled himself up the narrow shaft and stepped out into the main corridor which circumnavigated most of the labs and offices on deck three. He could hear the chatter and noise of the specialists working with the heavy-duty diagnostic scanners on the deck above. He took a moment to study the directory displayed on the interface opposite the turbolift. He needed to confirm his sense of which way the Astrometrics lab lay.

A few moments later he was standing in the middle of a cramped room bursting with equipment and bustling with scientists. The "lab" had originally been laid out for plasma studies, but after the ship's most recent refit the Radiation and Astrometrics departments had been condensed into the space as well. A Yeoman noticed the

Captain standing in the path of the on-coming cart of mineral samples he was moving and snapped to attention.

Brian's attention fell immediately towards the rigid Yeoman. "As you were, Yeoman..."

"F'rein, sir."

"Yeoman F'rein. Can you direct me to Lt. Casso, Yeoman F'rein?"

The young man remained completely stiff, but managed to point out a short, auburn-haired woman working in the back corner in front of an isolation cell. Brian dismissed the Yeoman and stepped aside to allow him and his cart to pass. The Lieutenant was dressed in a form fitting light blue jumper – as were all the other scientists working at various stations throughout the lab. As he approached her, it was evident she was engrossed in whatever it was she was studying – so much so that he worried that he might startle her. A bold, yellow and black warning strip ran in a long, unbroken arc around her station, and it was on that line that he stopped and cleared his throat to get her attention.

"Just a moment, F'rein. Tell Ensign Kates to work with the samples I've already given him for now..." She remained wholly focused on her scope.

"I'd be happy to pass that on to the Ensign, Lieutenant – but I'd appreciate a word as soon as you're able."

Amber turned away from her sample and blinked twice at the ship's Captain. He was standing just outside the warning track for the isolation cell's emergency containment field. She felt her mind go blank for just a second – trying to pull her mental focus from her work to engage with...

"I'm Captain Harris. I'm sorry I didn't have an opportunity to introduce myself when I came on board, but I need a few moments of your time now, please." Brian was struck by the young woman's remarkable grey/green eyes. He couldn't help thinking in that moment that they were the colour of the sea after a storm.

"Yes, Captain. Yes, of course... I, just a second..."

She turned back to the scanner and deactivated the scope, then locked the unit into a rotating diagnostic cycle to keep the sample under constant monitoring. When she stepped away from the console the Captain had already moved over to a worktable along the rear of the lab and pulled two stools together where he evidently intended to speak with her.

"I understand you were part of the team that originally analyzed the energy readings *Sheaffe* detected beyond Kea IV. You postulated that the source was possibly a pulsar?" Brian didn't wait for the Lieutenant to get settled at the table before speaking.

"I...I was assisting Commander G'pnor who'd managed to isolate a regular repeating pattern of energy pulses which was patterned out and theorized..."

"Theorized? So, you weren't convinced that the readings were definitively generated by a pulsar, then?"

"I... G'pnor was the senior officer – the expert in Astrophysics."

"He was convinced then, you weren't?"

"Not 'he' sir, just G'pnor. G'pnor's people don't have gender or sexual identities." Amber hadn't been convinced the readings were generated by a pulsar at the time. G'pnor had been the senior officer in-charge and he made the determination – dismissing her dissenting opinion out-of-hand. G'pnor had been an arrogant fool, but she wasn't about to share that observation with her new captain... just yet.

"I'd like you to forward me a complete summary of your findings thus far as relates to these samples, by 1300 hours. Then report to Science One at 1800 hours for pre-departure. You're going to serve as my new Science Officer." Brian rose and adjusted his tunic. The scientist just sat at the table not blinking.

"Science... I'm not..."

"Mr. Declan will serve as this ship's First Officer – his expertise at Tactical will keep him at that station, leaving an opening at Science One. I have Ensign Stevens settled-in at Science Two, but I need someone familiar with this specific

portfolio giving me the best possible information to navigate us through our mission. Understood?”

By the time the *Sheaffe* broke orbit around Pi and engaged her warp-drive for the Ivor System, Brian had read the reports submitted by his new Science Officer relating to both her initial findings concerning the samples they'd collected from the doomed asteroid, as well as her own initial thoughts concerning the original readings *Sheaffe* had taken nearly two years earlier. The Master Chief's team had swept the critical control systems with their diagnostic equipment and confirmed that all systems were now responding correctly. Engineer Bradley had certified all of the Chief's findings and had his own team go over the warp drive as well to be sure *Sheaffe* was fully operational. M'narr's efforts at replacing the relays at communications were progressing – though still not complete by the 1900 hours departure deadline.

Brian kept the ship at Yellow Alert while they navigated through unclaimed space. With no long-range subspace communications they would be unable to call for assistance if they ran into any kind of trouble. Lt. Casso was settling in at her new post – now having access to the full computing power of *Sheaffe*'s three processing cores and her entire scientific database. Once M'narr finished with the communications system, Casso would be able to access the secure Federation database as well, without restrictions. For the moment her attention was dedicated

to the long-range sensor sweeps the Captain had ordered while they made their way at warp six towards the Federation border.

Brian reflected – Commander G'pnor had postulated that the intense energy signature the ship had detected emanating from beyond Kea IV was likely the result of a massive pulsar, given the regular repeating pattern detected by the ship's sensors. Lt. Casso hadn't been so sure. At the time the ship's sensors couldn't register the magnitude of the energy they'd encountered. The readings had blown far past the measured frequencies *Sheaffe's* standard sensors could accurately detect. Casso felt that the energy readings couldn't possibly be generated by a single pulsar. While Fleet Science officially concurred with G'pnor's theory, the actual readings Brian had been made privy to supported Casso's misgivings. Unofficially, it seemed understood that whatever was throwing off the energy wasn't a pulsar... the best minds at Fleet Science concurred with Casso, whether she or they knew it or not. This was reassuring to Brian – he'd apparently lucked-out picking a competent Science Officer.

Earlier in the afternoon, after having met with Casso and checking-in with Bradley and M'narr, Brian had sought out the Chief to see how the diagnostics were progressing and to get his breakfast companion's unofficial take on his recent staffing decisions. Licanat was pleased to report that, for the most part, the relays in question were passing

the scans with no issues – the radiation appeared to only affect their performance “*in-the-moment, as it were*”. A few systems – like the navigation computer input interface for example, did require some repair, but by-and-large the damage was minimal and easily corrected.

When gently pushed for information on Casso, Nams went into a rather long dialogue about G’pnor and how the young Lieutenant (whom Nams felt was a natural genius) was stifled by the former Commander’s less than endearing personality. G’pnor had apparently left the *Sheaffe* as a kind of protest after the subspace telescope had been removed from deck two to make room for a stand-alone energizer for the experimental phaser array that had been installed during the ship’s last refit. Nams, on reflection, felt it was very odd that *Sheaffe* should be chosen to test a cutting-edge weapons system when so far out from support and so close to the Romulan border... then he went on about how fine an officer he felt Declan to be, not overly “likeable”, but dedicated to his ship and the crew under him...

Brian reflected that Nams had made a solid, if jarring point. There was no logic in *Sheaffe*, or any vessel being chosen to carry a prototype phaser array this close to the Romulan border. The risk of the system falling into enemy hands was staggering. As Nams went on and on about... whatever it was that had entered his head, Brian kept thinking about the man who called himself Xillian,

about the service bar with the red hash-marks he wore on his black tunic... the same bar the Ensign at the Admiral's office had worn... the black data cards...

Brian turned Nams' observations over in his mind as he sat silently on the Bridge.

"Captain, estimate three hours, forty-five minutes to the Federation border at present velocity."

Brian looked down at the status panel on the arm of his chair – all systems nominal. Behind him M'narr was sequencing the last of the relays in the communications panel. The briefing he'd read through months earlier while aboard the *Isadore* was very clear. Find the asteroid, collect samples, if possible, report; then proceed to primary objective and investigate the source of the "*extraordinary graviton emissions*" and report. They'd managed the first part of their assignment. Brian turned to his right and looked over at Lieutenant Casso, who was still wearing her blue overalls – she'd apologized when reporting for Bridge duty for not having a formal uniform. Harris had forgiven the scientist that shortcoming.

"Science, anything on long-range sensors?"

"Scanners negative, Captain. No vessels, no obstructions detected." She was running multiple sensor sweeps from her post and showed a level of comfort with the equipment young Mr. Stevens had sorely lacked during his time at Science Two.

“Mr. Kross, once we’re across the border make your heading for Ivor III. We’ll be putting into orbit around the second moon.”

While the Fleet maintained an unofficial Starbase on Ivor Prime, the communications hub for the sector was located on Phanta II – Ivor III’s second moon. Brian would have M’narr establish a secure link with the Comm station on the moon and they would upload a complete report on the asteroid and the status of the ship. It would be secured, transmitted and received five times faster than a standard ship-to-shore transmission.

The Comm panel mounted to his cabin's bedside table trilled softly twice. Brian opened his eyes and breathed deeply. He'd only crawled beneath the sheets an hour before, hoping for a few hours of rest before they arrived at Phanta II. The panel trilled again. Harris rolled over to find the interface in the near total darkness of his cabin.

"Harris."

"Captain Harris, Bridge."

Brian sat-up on his bunk and swung his legs over the side of his bed. "Yes, Mr. St. Cyr?"

"Sir, you wanted to be informed when Lt. M'narr had restored subspace communications."

"Very good, thank you..."

"...and Lt. Casso has requested you join her on deck three in Astrometrics."

Brian stood, acknowledged St. Cyr and closed the Comm channel. They were still hours out from Ivor III, Casso, Declan, Kross – all of the primary Bridge crew were supposed to be getting some rest. St. Cyr had insisted on working a double shift and M'narr, who was determined to finish his repairs before *Sheaffe* entered the Ivor system, were the only two senior officers still on duty. Harris had dismissed his staff once they'd safely crossed into

Federation space – trusting the Bridge to St. Cyr and throwing Ensign Stevens onto long-range sensor duty.

He called for the lighting elements over his workstation and momentarily shielded his eyes from the sudden illumination. He'd spent the last two plus hours going over his Deployment Resources data file concerning his instructions on how to report to Admiral U' Chtuklli – the black data card lay on his desk. Sleep wasn't going to happen. Harris stood for a moment in front of the mirror beside his wardrobe and decided that his appearance was passable. He pulled on his tunic and stepped into his boots, before stepping out into the corridor beyond to find the turbolift.

The ship was running on 'night-mode' and the corridors were mostly empty. Brian closed his tunic as he walked towards the lift but chose to leave his bib open. A moment later he found himself standing in a warren of workstations and labs looking for his Science Officer. The corner he'd first found her in was dark and empty. Two junior technicians were huddled over a sensor junction at the worktable along the rear bulkhead – scanning and recording the degradation of the components caused by the ship's exposure to the graviton and thoron radiation cocktail. The techs, startled by the sudden appearance of their Captain, directed Harris to the Plasma Energy lab across the corridor.

He found Casso in the Department Head's office making use of an advanced micro-spectrometer she'd previously had no access to. Being the ship's official Science Officer had opened many doors for the young scientist apparently. Brian could see that she'd not yet been to her quarters – she was still wearing her overalls and looked completely exhausted.

"I need my Science Officer alert and prepared, Lieutenant. You were ordered off shift hours ago."

"Yes, Captain, I know. I couldn't sleep. I... well, the report I turned in – it wasn't complete." She arched her back and rubbed at her eyes.

"I didn't expect a 'complete' report from anybody, Lieutenant. Just initial findings. Fleet Science will take the raw data and..."

"Captain, I expected to see confirmation that the material was the source for the gravitons at least, but that wasn't the case. Those samples have just handed us a bigger mystery."

"How so?"

"The samples, they should have yielded some base minerals or common elements... but the scans I ran in Astrometrics returned readings inconsistent with anything you'd expect to find. When I got to my quarters a few hours ago the computer had the initial results waiting for me – so I came down here to pull those results apart."

"What in all the hells are you talking about, Casso?"

“The samples Captain – I don’t think it was an asteroid at all. I’m pretty certain they’re actually stellar material.” She turned the monitor around so that the Captain could see the spectrometer’s findings.

The numbers made little sense to Brian – he was a tactician, not a scientist. “What are you saying, Casso?”

“That asteroid was, according to what I’ve seen here anyway, a piece of a star. A chunk of a sun that somehow broke away and solidified... petrified...”

“Is that even possible?”

“There’s nothing even close to it being recorded. From what I can tell the material’s sub-atomic structure is still actively going through the fusion process, only it’s been slowed somehow to almost nothing at all. The graviton radiation looks to have saturated the samples, but it’s not being generated by this material.”

After getting clearance from Sector Control on Ivor Prime, *USS Sheaffe* entered a Polar orbit around Phanta II. St. Cyr confirmed the presence of a facility on the dark side of Ivor III's moon. No detectable life-signs. Captain Harris ordered him to cease probing the surface. Lt. M'narr had verified the Federation transponder signal identifying the installation as a "friendly" asset and signalled the seemingly lifeless structure using a binary code supplied by the Captain. In short order, M'narr had access to a secure data stream and was prompted for a series of access codes Captain Harris relayed in sequence.

Except for Brian's mechanical code prompts to M'narr at the communications panel, the Bridge was eerily quiet. The Captain had ordered all Department Heads to collate their findings on the asteroid samples and encode them for transmission. Bradley had provided a detailed status report of the damage incurred during the mission to retrieve the samples. Brian's personal logs – sparse as they were, were also included in the data package along with Dr. Lo's report and the official ship's log commencing from the moment Harris boarded the *Sheaffe* to take command. The reports filed could not be amended or altered in any way, so in the span of the few hours between being called to meet with Lt. Casso in the Plasma Energy lab and arriving in

the Ivor system, both he and Casso had written up supplementary reports to add to the package.

“Captain, Phanta II indicates all systems ready to receive our upload.” M’narr was using his alpha-numeric keypad to interact with whatever computer apparently ran the facility below them. His keyed codes and queries generated near instantaneous response prompts which he read off his station’s small display screen.

“Thank you, Mr. M’narr. Confirm our data package is complete.” As much as Brian disliked talking machines, he disliked talking to machines even more.

“Confirmed, sir. All files are present – including the supplemental data Lt. Casso added this morning.”

“Very well, transmit the package.”

M’narr ‘dropped’ the package of logs, reports and analyses into the waiting mainframe below. A single icon appeared to indicate that the waiting computer had received the data. Then a second flashing icon appeared. “Captain...sir, there’s a transmission waiting for you.”

“Explain?” Brian turned in his chair to face his Communications Officer.

“It’s indicating that it has a transmission to upload. For your eyes only, sir.” M’narr looked up from his screen and turned to meet his Captain’s gaze.

Brian authorized M’narr to upload the transmission to the terminal in his quarters. From what the Lieutenant could see on his Comm screen the file wasn’t marked

urgent. In fact, it appeared to have been sitting on file at Phanta II for almost two weeks. As eager as he was to get what he assumed must be an update from Deployment Resources, Brian ordered Kross to plot a course to Altair II. His operational orders had been clear on how he was to proceed after successfully collecting his samples. Now that he'd sent his report, he was to make best speed for unclaimed space and try to reacquire the energy readings *Sheaffe* had discovered nearly two years earlier.

"Mr. Bradley, all systems go?"

Arthur consulted his panels at the Engineering console off to the Captain's left to satisfy himself that the information his screens were reporting fell in line with what he'd personally confirmed just a few hours ago in main engineering. "Yes, sir. All systems nominal; warp power available."

"Very good, Mr. Kross. Warp five, go."

"Aye, sir. Breaking orbit. Course laid in for Altair II."

Sheaffe accelerated to full impulse and pulled away from Ivor III's dark little moon. Once clear and after making a few maneuvers to point her bow in the right direction, Kross reported, "Engaging warp drive, Captain."

Brian's stomach did its little flip as it was unceremoniously dragged along faster-than-light with the rest of the crew in the bowels of the *Sheaffe*. "Mr. Declan?"

"Yes, Captain."

“You have the Bridge.” He rose and waited for Declan to move from Tactical to Command before pacing towards the turbolift, exhausted.

As the lift doors closed, he watched Declan take his seat. ETA for Altair II was a little more than forty-nine hours – lots of time to read or watch whatever it was the good people at Deployment Resources had apparently sent along for him. As he rode the lift in silence on his way to deck five it occurred to him that some background music in the lifts might be nice – nothing too contemporary, maybe a quiet Bolian love ballad... something just distracting enough to pass the time.

"Captain Harris, as I record this you are aboard the T'poth – en route to rendezvous with USS Sheaffe NCC-0564.

There have been some developments along the border we share with the Klingon and Romulan Star Empires which may indirectly impact your mission parameters. Days ago, a Federation support group detected a Romulan vessel adrift on our side of the Neutral Zone.

From what we've learned from the limited information gleaned from the Romulan crew and our... allies in the Klingon Empire – the Warbird was intercepted by a Klingon Bird-of-Prey in the Zone beyond the Kazis system. The Romulans managed to avoid capture and destruction at the hands of the Klingons and when we found them, they were in the process of scuttling their systems.

The vessel in question was a thirty-year-old Vas Hatham-class Warbird. She was commanded by a junior Sub-Lieutenant and crewed by four non-commissioned soldiers.

The Klingons are demanding we turn the vessel and her crew over to them. It's a point of some embarrassment that an antique crewed by children was able to avoid a ship full of Klingon warriors. The fact that our Klingon friends were actively hunting in our Neutral Zone has tempered the out-cry from Qo'noS, so far.

The Romulans completely erased their computer core and scuttled their cloaking device before our support group intercepted them. So far, they've been mostly uncooperative with our interrogators. We did find a modern planetary generator in their shuttle-bay which they claim was being transported to a colony within Romulan space.

As you're aware, the Fleet has mobilized to fortify our borders in the Omega and Archanis Sectors, largely as a result of initial Klingon reports of unusual Romulan activity. The Khitomer Accords aside, the fact that the Empire's fleet was concentrating in increasing numbers along their borders gave us reason enough to mobilize. In light of what we've so far discovered aboard this Romulan relic though – we're starting to question some of the assumptions both the Empire and some of the minds at Fleet Command have been operating under.

We confirmed this activity the Klingons first reported by way of long-range sensor readings months ago; the intermittent energy readings we detected were seemingly consistent with those we'd expect to see generated by Keras-class Warbirds and the like. Speculation is growing though that such emissions could be simulated by running large industrial generators at high capacity for short periods of time.

In short, Captain, we feel it's more and more possible that the Romulans may be running a giant false-

flag operation to antagonize and possibly distract us for reasons yet unknown.

In the time since your departure, our Science Department has further refined the initial readings taken by the Sheaffe beyond the Typhon Expanse. It is no pulsar. What did generate those readings, and why...we don't know.

We're growing more and more concerned that the Romulans are somehow connected to these extraordinary findings. Their antics along the Klingon border may simply be an effort to distract us from their true focus. Your mission to investigate and gather data concerning the origin of those graviton emissions has now become absolutely critical.

As you may have suspected, this possibility of Romulan culpability was largely behind the Council's move to adopt and engineer the Upgrade Program the entire Fleet has undertaken. The possibility that the Romulans have developed some new crippling weapons system has destabilized the entire Federation.

I await your preliminary report and sample data from the asteroid Sheaffe encountered. If you're viewing this material, you've already uploaded your findings. You are to proceed as directed to investigate the source of the gravitons and use the same protocols provided to transmit all data back here via Phanta II.

I must tell you that while we're working to convince Command that the Romulan threat they've mobilized for may not be as dire as has been feared – the growing likelihood of large-scale Klingon incursions into Romulan and Federation space is rapidly becoming a reality. We are possibly in a tactically unsound situation with the bulk of the Fleet concentrated at the wrong end of the Quadrant – chasing Romulan ghosts and now babysitting petulant Klingons. In short, we have no reserves to send your way.

As it was explained to you when you accepted this assignment, you were chosen because of your practical tactical experience. It now appears likely that you will have to rely on that experience to get the job done at all costs, Captain. We must have more information.

This transmission ends."

Brian watched as the image of Admiral U' Chtuklli faded to black, and a stark line of text filled the screen on his cabin's workstation:

'THE PRECEEDING MESSAGE WILL NOW BE CORRUPTED. YOU ARE UNDER ORDERS TO DISCUSS ITS CONTENTS WITH NO ONE. STARFLEET ORDER # 003-S31-00987-6 CAD.'

His terminal reverted back to the general query screen. Brian knew from experience aboard *Isadore* that it would be pointless to try and replay the message, but he tried to locate the file again anyway. There was nothing in

the archive and no record of a transmission ever being received from Phanta II.

“Captain, we’re now beyond Federation borders.”

“Acknowledged, Ops. Maintain present heading, increase speed to warp 6.5.”

“Aye, Captain. Holding 127.4, increasing speed to warp 6.5.”

Brian watched as his helmsman carried-out his orders. St. Cyr at Ops quietly cross-checked Kross’s inputs and monitored the ship’s status board as the warp core strained to increase their velocity. He’d ordered the ship to hold short of crossing out of Federation space for hours in order to assess the crew’s proficiency at fire control, targeting and emergency response. Having spent his last posting working to develop tactical systems and relying on specialized ships and crews to generate real-world metrics – he was less than impressed with the *Sheaffe*’s response times. Of particular concern to the Captain was the lag between the phaser crews’ target acquisition and engagement. In all, *Sheaffe* had lost close to 16 hours conducting the drills, getting underway only when Captain Harris was marginally satisfied with their performance.

It had been Declan who had suggested that the duty schedule for the phaser crews be amended to ensure better coverage around the clock and to shuffle existing teams around. The removal of the starboard dorsal phaser emitters in favour of the experimental array during the

ship's last refit freed up half a crew to be redeployed. Harris was impressed with his First Officer's solution – although the lagging proficiency of his phaser teams' performance was still disheartening. Commander Declan's own ability to manipulate the new *floating* targeting sensors linked to the autonomous type II phaser array was impressive. Brian doubted if even he could match Declan's acquisition and engagement times. Sadly though, the array wasn't tied into the ship's main power systems – relying instead on the energy generated by a small, independent energizer installed on deck two. The array was good for two full-power bursts, but that was all. The energizer required a full sixty-five second cycle to recharge before the array could be used again... an eternity in a real tactical situation.

Bradley and his engineers proved themselves adequate in their emergency drills. His Bolian friend, the Master Chief, led an equally adequate performance on damage control. Dr. Lo's medics excelled in their response and triage times – truly standing head and shoulders above all other Departments aboard the ship. In truth, Brian would have preferred to take a full two weeks of drilling his crew before taking the ship into action – but his orders precluded that possibility. He had to satisfy himself with the phaser crew 'solution' and trust that between Bradley and the Master Chief that the ship wouldn't be allowed to tear itself apart if they ran into any real trouble. Small-scale

drills were to continue in all Departments while *Sheaffe* made her way into unclaimed space.

“Captain, I’m detecting three vessels coming within sensor range...”

Brian looked over to where Lt. Casso was manning her sensor scope at the primary Science console. She was now wearing an appropriate uniform. Much to his satisfaction, she looked as though she belonged at Science One – unlike the hapless Ensign Stevens who was still having issues coming to grips with his duties at Science Two, according to reports from the Beta Shift.

“Can you identify the vessels, Lieutenant?”

“Yes, sir. They’re reading as Class four freighters. Altarian transponders. Heading 86.2 by 63, travelling at just over warp two.” Casso looked up to face the Captain.

“Have they detected us?”

“Unlikely, Captain. Their sensors are inferior to our own.”

“Helm, adjust our course to give those ships a wide berth.”

Kross acknowledged his orders and deftly pulled *Sheaffe* out of the path of the Altarian freighters. Brian then directed his Science Officer to continue her long-range scans for other vessels. He hoped to guide *Sheaffe* to her target coordinates without drawing any undue attention to their presence. As he watched his crew guide their starship

along, the Admiral's warnings of Romulan deception and false flags ran through his head. They had no backup. They didn't have the training they'd need if...

...an indicator on the arm of his chair began to flash, which pulled him out of his own grim thoughts. He selected the acknowledge key and could see that Dr. Lo had uploaded a file for his attention. Brian looked up briefly at the view screen, then over to Declan sitting at his Tactical station – another phaser drill was in progress. Keying the Comm feed at his hand, he requested the Yeoman on duty to download the doctor's file to a pad and bring it to the Bridge. A moment later a young man handed him the radiation mapping Dr. Lo had extrapolated from their sortie to the asteroid.

The trilling from Science One was the first indication that something was wrong. Before Casso could announce what had triggered her station's alarms, the warning alarm at the Helm began to sound – collision alert. Brian leaned forward in his seat, almost dropping the pad he'd been studying. Then tactical alarms began sounding along with a shrill alert from St. Cyr's Ops terminal. The view screen was set to project a forward view and nothing of note appeared in visual range. Harris signalled for a Yellow Alert and pushed himself out of his chair to walk over to Casso.

"What is it?" He watched as his Lieutenant consulted her screens and activated the console's scope. From across the Bridge Declan was raising deflector screens and ordering all hands to secure to quarters.

"Captain, it appears to be graviton emissions. Massive emissions, like before." She was hunched over her scope trying to make sense of her readings.

Brian tuned out the various alarms and focused on the view screen, then looked towards the star charts displayed on the console separating Ops from the Helm. "Mr. Kross, confirm our position."

"Sir, we're at co-ordinates 113.0 by 34.9...we're still thirteen hours out from our target destination." Kross leaned over the charts and triple checked what his instruments were telling him.

“All stop.”

Kross acknowledged the order and brought the *Sheaffe* out of warp. The ship slowed to a full stop and hung in the oily blackness of deep space. Lt. Commander Declan ordered Ops to silence the various alarms. Within moments every sensor beam available was being utilized to sweep the vast nothingness around the lone white spec that was *Sheaffe* – searching for the invisible in the dark.

“Sir, long range sensors aren’t returning anything...”

“Mr. Declan, tactical scans?”

“Captain, we’re definitely encountering massive graviton emissions...targeting beams are returning a distortion variance nearly identical to those we encountered over the asteroid.”

Brian moved from Science One to Tactical to see for himself the returns Declan was getting from his short-range targeting beams. Casso continued to adjust her instruments in an effort to glean something of use from the static her long-range sensors were flooded with.

Catherine looked up from her monitor and towards the status panel in her office. The ship was registered as being at a complete stop. Dr. Lo had served aboard *Sheaffe* as Chief Medical Officer for fifteen years and she knew the ‘feel’ of the ship better than Arthur Bradley – she didn’t need to consult a screen to know they’d stopped moving. Why they’d dropped out of warp though, that was a question her gut couldn’t answer right away. According to the panel, the ship was still at Yellow Alert.

“Br’ev?”

“Yes, Doctor.” Br’ev was just outside the office, securing triage kits and prepping Sickbay for potential casualties.

“We can’t possibly have arrived yet, why have we stopped?”

“I don’t know, Doctor. I could ask...”

Br’ev let the words die in his throat when the Comm panel on the doctor’s desk began to sound. Catherine instinctively triggered the receive button and Lt. M’narr’s voice rang through the hidden speaker. “Bridge to Sickbay, Dr. Lo please attend the Bridge as soon as possible. Bridge out.”

Catherine switched her monitor off, then rose and hurried past the medic, stopping only momentarily to collect a triage kit for whatever might be awaiting her on

Deck One. “Br’ev, finish getting the biobeds online and standby for further instructions.”

“Yes, Doctor, of course.” Br’ev watched as Lo strode out of Sickbay.

Catherine stepped into the turbolift just across the corridor from Sickbay and less than a minute later found herself standing on the Bridge, looking from station-to-station, searching for whoever might require her skills as a doctor. The Captain, Mo Declan and the young Lieutenant from Stellar Cartography were clustered around the tactical console...M’narr was at his Comm terminal...everything seemed to be as it should be.

“Doctor, yes. Join us here please.” The Captain waved her over, then returned his attention to the tactical computers.

Catherine took a steadying breath, then paced over to the corner where she’d been summoned. Nobody on the Bridge appeared to need medical assistance of any kind and the fact that she’d left Br’ev alone to prep Sickbay caused a flash of frustrated anger to spark. She was about to protest when Lt. Casso turned and walked to meet her.

“Doctor Lo, when you plotted the radiological exposure across the ship, did you use internal sensor readings, or simply collate the data you gathered from the radiation tags you collected after the event?”

“Wh...? The mapping? I used both internal data, RMT decay rates and environmental records...what does

that have to do with anything?" She was clutching her triage kit a little too tightly against her side, she realized.

The Captain kept his back to her and chatted with Declan. Morris was entering data into his terminal at the Captain's direction, apparently.

"So, the summation that the exposure to the gravitons occurred in osculating waves is based on empirical data then. The decay rates for thorons are known, but graviton radiation decay rates are a mystery." Casso was making notes directly over the medical file Lo had uploaded for the Captain.

"I've spent more than fifteen years in this sector – I have a pretty sound understanding of how thorons act. Captain, why am I here? I have things to do." She watched as Harris pulled himself away from the Tactical console and turned to face her.

"Yes, I'm sorry, Doctor. Mr. Declan, throw that up on the main view screen please."

The starfield that had taken up the bulkhead at the front of the Bridge disappeared. Seconds later a simple representation of the *Sheaffe* replaced it. Catherine looked at the schematic on the main viewer, then turned back to the smaller display at Tactical. Mo had simply enlarged his own readout. The Captain nodded and in the corner of the screen, just below *Sheaffe's* nacelle, a timer appeared.

“If we’ve done this right, Doctor, the gravitons you mapped will appear in blue, the thoron radiation will be represented in red. Mr. Declan, if you please.”

The timer began counting up from the moment the ship entered into orbit around the asteroid. Steadily the display grew red in a slow, consistent manner as the ship maneuvered through the background thoron radiation emanating from the expanse – growing more intense the closer the *Sheaffe* came to the leading edge of the Expanse itself. Then, as the ship progressed in its timeline through the mission, waves of dark blue began to wash up and over the vessel. The lower decks were often hit first, but the representation clearly showed the gravitons washing through *Sheaffe* in organized and distinct waves as opposed to the consistent background thoron radiation. The doctor watched as the screen turned a burgundy colour for a few seconds – marking *Sheaffe*’s closest pass towards the expanse, then lightening substantially as the ship pulled away from the asteroid at speed.

“That’s... very interesting, Captain. I’m still not clear on why you called me up here.”

“Lt. Casso correlated your mapping with the navigational records. The graviton waves intensified when the ship passed above fissures in the asteroid’s surface – which suggests the most punishing gravitons came from beneath the surface.”

“Yes, alright?” She relaxed her grip on the kit she’d brought from Sickbay. Declan had restarted the timer and the red and blue light show repeated itself.

Casso stepped forward, still holding the pad with Dr. Lo’s initial report. “Ma’am, none of our sensors seem capable of operating in the presence of these gravitons – yet somehow, you’ve been able to detect and map them... how?”

Catherine could see the bewilderment on the younger woman’s face. The Captain stood stoically behind the young scientist with an almost pleading look in his eyes. She glanced back up towards the main view screen just as Declan’s tactical graphic was lashed with a sharp blue wave. She’d literally completed dozens of these reports concerning thoron radiation events that affected the ship over the years.

“I just used the readings collected...thoron radiation is a known element for us, everything else is treated as an unknown. I never specifically identified the separate readings as being gravitons.”

“I understand Doctor, but please... how were you able to chart those separate readings so accurately?” Casso turned the pad towards the doctor and highlighted the quantified values for the officially unidentified radiation spikes which stood out from the thoron radiation.

“I don’t know how accurate it is really. I specified a standard deviation of 1 to 2 rads...” Catherine could see the

Captain growing agitated – not that she cared. The Lieutenant though seemed almost desperate. “...look, I don’t know how scientific it is, but I just took the thorons out of the equations and what remained I charted as gravitons. There was nothing to measure really, but that nothing was actually something – when taken in context with the RMT readings, I had to quantify the negative spaces in the data... do you understand?”

The Captain shook his head slightly, no he didn’t understand clearly. Declan just sat silently fixed on his colour show, but the Lieutenant – her face sparked comprehension.

“You were able to map the gravitons and assign value based on the absence of anything else in the data... a negative return is not the same as nothing. That’s wonderful.”

“For the love of all hells, what are you two talking about?”

Catherine smiled at the Captain’s outburst.

Sheaffe skirted the fringes of an immense graviton field. Lt. Casso, with assistance from Dr. Lo, was able to map using negative returns from the ship's lateral starboard sensor array. Comparing her own graviton field readings with the files Captain Harris had brought with him from Fleet, Science revealed that the phenomenon had grown somewhere from ten to twelve times since it was first encountered outside the Kea System. The field was clearly expanding. In order to maintain contact, while at the same time navigating with reasonably reliable long-range sensors – *Sheaffe* followed a painstakingly charted course along the edge of the graviton field at a speed no greater than warp three. Using a tactical chart on the main viewer the helmsman had to make a dozen finite course corrections every few moments.

The strain on Kross was becoming apparent and at warp 2.89 the journey to their target co-ordinates would take more than a day – the back-up helmsman, Ensign U'vari was on standby to relieve Kross at four-hour intervals. Declan did double duty shifts at Tactical. Co-ordinating his efforts with Lt. Casso to augment the experimental targeting sensors tied to the Type II phaser array to eventually help the ship navigate within the gravitons.

In Engineering Art Bradley was monitoring the field dynamics of the *Sheaffe's* warp bubble. He'd been Chief Engineer since the middle of his last tour and had come to understand the delicate balance required to keep his ship cradled safely within the narrow field generated by her single nacelle. The previous Chief – a gruff old bastard who'd cut his teeth aboard *Mirandas*, had never shown *Sheaffe* an ounce of respect – calling her and all *Saladins* “teetering scooters” and “marvels of corner cutting”. When he retired four years earlier, the son-of-a-bitch hadn't recommended Art to succeed him. In fact, he'd not recommended anyone from his engineering staff – saying instead that Starfleet would do well to find a circus chimp to run their “unicycle”. The job fell to Bradley none-the-less, and he'd gone above and beyond to cultivate a deep understanding and respect for *Sheaffe's* engine and unique configuration.

At Science One, Casso worked with the changing inputs provided by Declan. The algorithm she'd adapted from Dr. Lo's research had worked well with helping the sensors detect the event horizon of the graviton field, but the ‘negative return’ generated could not penetrate into the field itself. Casso hoped that she might find a way to adapt the new targeting beams to augment the sensors. She'd discovered that the general sensor beams the ship relied upon were absorbed by the intense graviton radiation and returned no data – leaving the ship “blind”.

The targeting beams, which had a much-reduced range than the main sensor beams – were essentially simple lasers. Their primary function was to find and “paint” a target for the ship’s offensive systems to lock onto. Amazingly, the prototype targeting beams were relatively easy to adapt to function within the graviton field. A curious coincidence indeed.

“Eating alone, Captain?”

Brian looked-up from the pad he'd been studying to see Chief Licanat standing above him holding a steaming cup of coffee. “Chief...taking a break?”

Nams smiled and took a seat across from his Captain without being asked. “Well sir, Art's got my boys running relays between decks eleven and thirteen running diagnostics of diagnostics. I think I've filed the same status reports thirty times today... Eating lite?”

Brian put his pad down beside the plate of Deltan crisps and sharp cheddar he'd been picking at. The Officer's Mess was deserted except for the two of them. “I was just taking some time to go over...”

“No need to explain yourself to me, sir. I'm just grabbing a coffee before heading back down to Engineering. Doing a double to try and keep the boys focussed.” Nams took a long draw on his cup, while keeping his eyes fixed on his captain.

“Chief, wha...?”

“Let me interrupt you, sir. I sometimes overstep and for that I do apologize. We Bolians are known for our talkative nature and I'm afraid, as I've gotten older, my own tendency to carry on has only grown.” He raised his cup and sipped again at his coffee.

Brian genuinely liked Licanat. He'd gone so far as to look up the man's service record after their impromptu breakfast following his stay in Sickbay. Nams Licanat had been a Master Chief non-com for fourteen years. He began his career as a crewman aboard the *Phlon-p'ex*, a medical frigate in the Muratas sector. After two tours he put in for a transfer – spent some time retraining, then was assigned to the *Sheaffe* as an Engineer's mate. He'd served without incident for four tours aboard the *Sheaffe* – being the only crew member still onboard who'd known the ship prior to her refit. He progressed through the various specialist ratings and eventually earned his present rank of Master Chief under Captain Margot Listner – *Sheaffe's* fourth captain. All this Brian knew, but as much as he liked the man personally – he now worried that his Master Chief was blurring some professional lines.

“My point, Captain, is that I sometimes ‘beat around the bush’, as you humans say. If I’m over-stepping, please let me know.”

Brian opened his mouth but remained silent while looking at the Bolian. Perhaps he should have said something about those professional lines, or even dismissed the Chief altogether... instead he surprised himself when he heard himself ask, “Chief, have you ever heard of Deployment Resources?”

“Is that something to do with the graviton field then?” Nams nodded at the pad.

“No, that’s... it’s a proposal concerning sensor modifications. You’ve never heard of a department in Starfleet called Deployment Resources?”

“Sorry no, sir. I’ve spent most of my career out here – not much time or use for Starfleet Departments... Amber Casso is one sharp young woman. She’ll be able to help you with whatever modifications you need done, to be sure.”

“You’re right, she’s very clever. I trust you and your techs will be able to assist as well.”

Nams smiled again, raised his mug and finished his coffee.

“On a different note: have you ever had any experience with Romulans out here?”

Licanat’s smile dropped away.

“Devious people, the Romulans. Years ago, when I first came aboard, we were surprised by two of their warbirds as we were leaving Altair III. *Keras*-class, both of them. We were one of the first Starfleet ship to see them up-close...”

“Really? What happened?”

“We were leaving Altair III after the captain had mediated a trade dispute and just as we were preparing to go to warp, boom! Warbird dead ahead of us. I was on deck eight – didn’t see it for myself, but we went right to Red Alert. Hadn’t even made it to our action stations when, boom! Warbird decloaked directly astern. The whole ship

went mad. Then just like that – poof! – they cloaked and were gone.”

“What did they want?”

“Who knows? With the Romulans you’re always guessing. Likely just wanted to put a scare into us. Show off those monster Warbirds. You have to remember, back then we were still used to seeing them riding around in Klingon designs. Are we expecting Romulans, sir?”

“I don’t know Chief, but I think we’d best be prepared for anything, yes?”

“Aye, Captain...I think we should. Let Ms. Casso know I’m ready to give her whatever she needs to make those modifications.” Nams rose, nodded and slowly made his way back to Engineering, clearly preoccupied with Romulans.

“Captain, we’re now approximately half a parsec abeam from the target co-ordinates.” Kross kept his eyes focused on his positional readings.

“Thank you, Helm. All stop.”

“Aye. All stop, Captain.”

Brian turned towards Casso at the Science station and asked if she was ready to engage the modified targeting sensors. The range on the beams had been more than doubled, but there was little that could be done to expand the actual returns they’d be able to generate. Licanat was able to handle most of the hardware mods himself, but Arthur Bradley had to be relied upon to tie the beams for the prototype array into *Sheaffe’s* primary power grid. If the experiment worked, they would be able to navigate within the greatly expanded graviton field and attempt to trace the gravitons to their origins.

Casso was just beginning to implement the start-up sequence for the dual targeting beams when Morris Declan approached the Captain from Tactical. “Sir, a moment please?”

“Yes, Mr. Declan?” Brian hadn’t shared anything other than the bare bones of his assignment with any of his senior staff.

“Is there anything further we should be aware of, or alert for?”

“Specifically, Mr. Declan?” Brian knew what was to follow. Nams had been on the Bridge for hours, hustling between Declan’s station at Tactical and Amber’s post at Science One.

Morris cleared his throat, leaned in towards the Captain and in a hushed voice said, “The Master Chief was saying something about Romulans, sir. Are we expecting...?”

“Mr. Declan...we don’t know what to expect. I need you to be listening for anything that might pose a danger to this ship, understood?” Brian kept his own voice low but suspected that M’narr and likely St. Cyr and Kross could hear every word anyway.

Declan stood up straight and quickly scanned the Bridge to see who was perhaps paying too much attention to his conversation with the Captain. “Of course, sir. It’s just...”

“Commander, I need to know that Tactical is handled. That’s why I’ve asked you to man the post. Romulans, stray comets, Orion Pleasure Barges – whatever we might run into, I’m depending on your skill and abilities to help me keep this ship safe while we carry out our mission. Are you prepared, sir?”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Very well.” Brian offered Declan a slight nod – suddenly aware that he now wished their roles were reversed.

“Ms. Casso, targeting scanners to maximum. Mr. St. Cyr, Tactical to main viewer. Helm, make your course 90.4 by 0.25 – warp three.” Declan stood beside the Captain and watched as each officer followed his directions. Seconds later and *Sheaffe* was travelling beyond the speed of light towards the original coordinates where she’d first encountered the graviton field.

Brian watched the tactical layout on the main view screen as their progress towards their destination was depicted in real time. Declan circled the Bridge once – moving from station to station checking on each member of the crew, then took up his own post at Tactical. Control of the array’s twin targeting beams lay with Casso at Science One, but the tactical display and tie-ins with Kross’s navigation computer relied on Declan. For the most part the targeting beams worked well illuminating a path through the gravitons. A few minor course corrections to avoid potential obstacles and two occasions where it was necessary to decrease speed to warp two to allow the beams to sweep clear new trajectories were the only deviations required for their first run through the field.

“Mr. Declan, we’re now arriving at target coordinates.” Kross kept his focus on his navigation readouts – still not trusting the limited inputs provided through the Science station.

“All stop, Helm. Science, full scan please. Captain, we’re here.” Declan cross-checked his own equipment at

Tactical and made some adjustments to his feed. For the first time in a week, he felt useful.

Brian waited until Kross confirmed that *Sheaffe* was answering all stop before he called on St. Cyr to switch the main viewer to a standard forward view. The display was hazy – occasionally obscured by moments of distorted static. All that could be seen was the blackness of space and a sparse starfield. A pale red point of light lay almost directly ahead of them – Kea IV. Further out from Kea IV was the bright white star at the centre of the Kea system. He glanced down at his own status screen to verify his ship had made its first lag through the graviton field without issue – all compartments reported nominal conditions.

“Mr. St. Cyr, ship’s status?” Brian pulled himself out of the Command chair and made his way towards Science One.

“All decks report green status, Captain. Mr. Bradley is requesting twenty minutes to realign the primary inertial dampeners. Sickbay reports three cases of nausea.”

Brian turned to face his Ops Officer. “Very well, twenty minutes. I want status updates from all Departments before we get underway.”

Amber powered down the targeting beams and put the array's independent system into a diagnostic mode to ensure the modifications they'd made weren't causing any harm to the processing unit *Sheaffe* was now dependent on for navigation. Captain Harris and Lt. Commander Declan were both standing on either side of her station waiting for her initial report. She activated the ship's standard sensors and put the system into a routine scan cycle before rising from her seat to address Harris.

"We were able to navigate through the field with the assistance of the targeting beams, Captain. However, at warp three we are truly pushing the edge of the beams' ability to map out a safe trajectory at a range sufficient enough for us to make course corrections if necessary."

Brian turned to Declan and watched as his First Officer nodded in agreement with Lt. Casso. At warp three they made somewhat respectable time covering the distance to the "start point" of their journey, but the prospect of having to proceed at even slower speeds was not a welcome one. Harris decided to leave the point alone at the moment, at least until Bradley was able to forward his report from Engineering. "What do sensors tell us about the field, Lieutenant?"

Amber turned and looked down at her readouts. "Standard sensors are returning nothing for the most part, sir. The gravitons just absorb our beams like a sponge."

"What do you mean "for the most part" though?" Declan asked the young scientist.

"There appears to be holes in the field."

"Holes? What kind of holes, Lieutenant?" Brian moved towards the console himself and glanced down at the screens.

"We're reading patches of graviton-free space. Interspersed at irregular intervals populated with high levels of neutrinos clustered together sporadically." Casso motioned for the Captain to move out of her way and when he stepped over beside Declan, she leaned forward and peered into her station's scope. "The largest section, or hole, we're reading presently is just under 80,000 Km³. Several others range from just over a few meters to a kilometer or more."

"Extrapolate?"

"The graviton field, while intense and greatly expanded since our last contact – doesn't seem to be consistent."

"Can we run on regular sensors?" Declan tried to lean over and make sense of the readouts displayed on the screens behind Casso but was at a loss to grasp the sporadic returns.

“No. As long as the gravitons permeate the region we can't rely on standard sensors. The targeting beams are our safest option to navigate in the field, especially if we're going to be travelling at warp speed.”

Brian turned away from the Science station to take-in the view on the main screen. Ahead of them lay Kea IV, a dusty red dot in a field of black, backlit by a distant sun. Behind him, Declan had moved into position to use Casso's scope. Amber moved over to allow him room to work and picked up a pad she'd uploaded her findings to. “Can you determine the origin point for the gravitons, Lieutenant?”

Casso consulted her pad and called up earlier readings the modified targeting beams had returned before she'd powered down. “Negative return analysis would indicate that the flow of gravitons seems to be coming from beyond Kea IV... possibly from Beta-TS 4645-002, the system's primary star.”

“Distance to the star, Mr. Kross?”

“At warp three sir, estimate 30.2 hours.” The helmsman turned in his seat to face the Captain and the Science officer.

“What do we know about the Kea system, Ms. Casso?”

“The circumbinary system is comprised of four major planetary bodies, that we know of. Kea IV is the outermost planet – barely class M, believed to be uninhabited. The other three planets vary in size and

composition, none of them have been surveyed by the Federation.”

“Circumbinary?”

“Yes, Beta-TS 4645-002 has a twin – a dwarf star that orbits the primary star every 10 days. That was determined by an Altarian astrological survey conducted twelve years ago in cooperation with the Romulan Civilian Astrometric Authority – the survey results were only shared with the Federation five years ago as a gesture of goodwill on the part of the Altarian Trade Commission; um, they wanted to expand their routes in the Typhon system, and we managed to leverage our influence to get them to disclose...”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. The politics of trade routes aside – we are in fact dealing with a binary star then?”

“Well... technically, but from what we’ve been given to understand the second star is a fraction of the size of the primary body – possibly even a piece of 4645-002.”

“A piece of stellar material caught in orbit then?”
Brian turned to look his Science officer in the eye. Their conversation about the suspected nature of the asteroid was foremost on his mind and he could see Casso was following his thinking.

M’narr broke in just then. “Captain, Mr. Bradley is on the Comm for you.”

Brian returned to his chair and opened a channel to the Engine room. The Chief Engineer reported that the

gravitons had been so intense that the screens had not been able to block them entirely. Several members of the engineering crew had grown nauseous on the lower decks – a few had even required a trip to Sickbay. If they were going to continue navigating through the field, they'd have to raise full shields and amp-up the inertial dampeners. Brian gave his Chief permission to take whatever measures were needed to safeguard the crew and reluctantly agreed to limit their speed to not more than warp 2.5 moving forward.

Running with full shields, dampeners reset to maximum and the full demand of the indispensable array targeting beams now modified to draw power from *Sheaffe's* main reactor meant that they would be taxed to their power supply limits. Casso's discovery of patches of graviton-free neutrino-rich space interspersed throughout the field, while interesting, would go uninvestigated for the duration of their trip. There was simply not enough power to run at warp, hold the shields, continuously run the powerful targeting beams and operate the standard sensor arrays.

After hearing the update from Dr. Lo in Sickbay, Brian gave the order to get underway. The trajectory Casso had managed to pull from her spotty sensor readings indicated that the most likely point of origin for the gravitons was to be found at the centre of the Kea system. With the modifications to the dampeners completed Chief

Bradley had assumed the Engineering station on the Bridge, trusting that his team below had things in hand. Declan had used their time to refine his tactical readouts further by uploading star charts from the navigation computer and working with St. Cyr to interface the simulated plotting chart with Casso's real time sensor returns, limited as they may be.

Brian felt his stomach flip in the old familiar way as he gave the command to engage at warp 2.5. They'd be at warp for at least thirty-six hours before reaching the centre of the system. Once they were underway, the Captain ordered Declan, Bradley and Casso off duty until the next shift. Brian wanted to spread his assets between the two shifts as equally as possible – Declan and Casso would anchor the beta shift, while he'd manage with young Mr. Stevens during the alpha shift. They were beyond claimed space. They had no backup and no idea what they might encounter at any moment. Now was not the time to risk facing the unknown with weakness.

Six hours out from Beta-TS 4645-002, the tactical proximity alarms began sounding. Ensign Stevens felt his heart sink to his stomach as both of the targeting beams he'd been responsible for monitoring suddenly switched from their long-range scan function to an automated target acquisition mode. For nearly two full seconds *Sheaffe* barrelled through space at warp 2.5, completely blind.

"Target lock engaged, we're blind Commander! We're blind!" Stevens ran his hands across the controls at his station trying desperately to free the targeting beams with no success.

"Confirmed, sir, we have a proximity alert off our starboard bow. Our beams are locked on." Lt. D'marche was somewhat cooler than Stevens, but the strain was obvious in his voice.

"Helm, emergency stop. Yellow Alert!" Declan leaned forward in the Command chair waiting for his helmsman – Ensign Dover, to confirm the ship was no longer charging through space.

"Emergency stop, aye.... coming to all stop, Commander."

In the darkness of his cabin Brian sat up in his bunk. He could feel that the ship was no longer moving. Before

he could reach out for the Comm panel the amber light on the receiver began flashing urgently.

“Harris, go.”

“Captain, Bridge. We’ve had to drop out of warp, sir. Our targeting sensors have locked onto some kind of debris.”

“Debris?” Brian rubbed the sleep from his eyes and called for the lights in his quarters.

“We’re locked on to it sir, approximately 16km off our starboard bow. Mr. Stevens is having some difficulty refocussing the array targeting beams, but...you’d might want to come up and see this for yourself, sir.”

“Understood, Mr. Declan. I’m on my way.” Brian pulled on a pair of uniform trousers and stepped into his boots. He didn’t bother looking out a fresh tunic, opting to wear the white command T he’d had since his brief stay at the Academy months ago.

The Captain passed two damage control teams fully dressed in their white radiation suits on his way to the turbolift. The ship was at Yellow Alert – action stations were manned and ready. He stepped into the lift just as two crewmen rounded the corner carrying emergency engineering kits – staging themselves to offer support to damage control if the need arose. The doors hushed closed and for a few seconds Brian could hear nothing but the quiet hum of the lift transiting the four decks between living quarters and the Bridge. Seconds later the doors

hushed open and the Captain stepped onto his Bridge where the sound of alarms and the voices of his officers washed over him.

“Captain on the Bridge!” announced M’narr.

All eyes turned and fell on Harris, dressed in his bright white T, hair dishevelled. “As you were. Mr. Declan, what do we have?”

Morris rose from the Command chair and asked Ops to try and bring up the target on the main viewer. The tactical display flickered for a moment, then was replaced by a fuzzy feed from somewhere beyond the *Sheaffe*. The image crackled and distorted with waves of static, but every few seconds managed to snap into focus to reveal a large asteroid field. The Captain looked to the viewer and slowly made his way down from the lift to slide into the Command chair.

“The targeting beams locked onto what appears to be... this isn't possible, a tritanium signature, sir! It looks to be on the surface of that large asteroid.” Declan pointed to the viewer.

“Tritanium, how is that...? Let's keep speculation to a minimal people. Tactical, report.” D’marche turned to face his Captain and spoke: “It’s definitely tritanium, sir. Mass significant enough to trigger our proximity alarms. We are unable to break target lock.”

Brian nodded, grateful to have a problem he could solve. “Mr. Stevens reset the array acquisition sub-

routines. The new targeting system gets caught in a hard loop sometimes.” He listened to the young man working at his station’s keys and dials, then nodded to himself when he heard the Ensign sigh with relief as the array’s targeting beams reset.

“Mr. Stevens, now that you’ve got the array back under control, can we get a better view of whatever it is we’ve found?” Commander Declan made his way towards Science One to assist the junior officer.

St. Cyr slowly adjusted his own instruments and the image on the viewer magnified to five and then ten times its original size. He apologized after several moments of adjustments – it wasn’t possible to maintain resolution past ten times magnification. The image they all saw projected on the main viewer was a dark, angular piece of metallic wreckage. It was approximately fifteen square meters in area and looked to be embedded in the rocky surface of what otherwise appeared to be an unremarkable asteroid. The black shard of... whatever it had once been, lay in the middle of a large impact crater. Whatever it was and wherever it’d come from – it had slammed into the asteroid at an incredible rate of speed.

With no way to gather any more detailed information on the debris without functioning sensors, Harris directed his crew to prepare to resume their course for the centre of the Kea system. Engineering reported that all was ready. Ensign Stevens, having been shown how to free the targeting beams, was recalibrating his instruments in preparation for resuming his navigational sweeps. Declan was conferring with Tactical, and the *Sheaffe* was just about set to engage her impulse engines when another proximity alert began sounding – this time from St. Cyr's console at Ops.

“Ops, report?” Brian leaned forward in his seat.

“Sir... it's a proximity alarm, port bow this time.” St. Cyr scrolled through his readouts and tried to tie-in to the regular sensors for clarification, with no luck.

“Mr. Stevens, what are we detecting?” Harris turned to face the young Science officer. The Ensign was struggling with the tracking controls on the array's targeting interface. “Mr. Declan, assistance please.”

Morris crossed the Bridge from Tactical to Science One in four graceful strides. Without saying a word, he slid in beside the Ensign and deftly began tracking the new contact which had set off the ship's short-range proximity sensors. The Captain sat silently watching his First Officer work the controls, waiting for an explanation.

“Got it. Looks to be... from what I’m getting back, sir – it’s another asteroid. Bigger than the first one.”

“Tactical, on viewer.” Brian faced forward as D’marche activated the display and an ill-defined blurry mass faded in and out approximately eight kilometres off *Sheaffe*’s port bow.

Ten minutes later, after Declan had given Ensign Stevens a quick tutorial on how to manually control the prototype “floating” targeting interface – *Sheaffe* had identified more than three dozen asteroids of varying sizes drifting in a parabolic formation. The field of ship-crushing rocks seemed to be spread out in a widening arc from somewhere deeper within the Kea system. The targeting beams were able to lock onto three additional tritanium signatures within the growing asteroid field.

“Speculation, Mr. Declan?” Brian kept his eyes focussed on the viewer where another hazy contact was being “lit” by Ensign Stevens’ beams.

“There shouldn’t be any asteroid fields this close in, sir... and as far as I know tritanium is supposedly only hypothetically possible. Helm, what do our charts tell us about this system?”

Dover called up his navigational star charts, then called up the ship’s library charts – the unofficial maps and charts used by the Altarians and studied them as well. From where he sat, the Captain could see the charts populating the spherical display console between the Helm

and Ops. Brian waited as patiently as he could for his helmsman to confirm what Declan had already said.

“Sir, there are no asteroid fields... meteor phenomenon, comet activity or anything even close to this noted on either our official charts, or the trader charts we have on file.”

“Captain, we can’t even be sure we’re even capturing a tenth of what’s out there with these limited feeds. I don’t see how we can proceed at warp...” Declan pulled his hand down his face in frustration.

“Mr. Bradley...” Brian didn’t mean to interrupt Declan, but he needed to be sure there was no way forward at speed, before resolving them to a monotonous slog through unknown space.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Our main deflector – is it capable of offering sufficient protection from... that?” He nodded towards the speckled tactical display on the main viewer. Ensign Stevens had lit up a dozen more asteroids.

“Not a chance, sir. It’s meant for micro-meteors and dust... not shuttlecraft sized boulders and small planets. If we warped into one of those monsters, we’d be the interesting piece of garbage decorating the rocks for the next ship passing by.”

Brian sighed. He’d known what the answer to his question was going to be, but he had to ask. At impulse on a perfectly straight course, they’d be lucky to reach the

centre of the system in under eight days. The Captain looked over to his Executive and gave the man a grim nod.

“Mr. Dover, make for the designated coordinates, impulse power only. Mr. Stevens, beams forward, maximum sweep. Let’s not fly into anything.”

Sheaffe coasted towards the asteroid field and began picking her way around the chunks of rock and stone. Both D’marche and Ensign Stevens worked feverishly at their perspective consoles trying to keep Dover abreast of every obstacle in his path. Brian consulted the shipboard computer – there were still three hours before the next shift would come to relieve the Bridge crew. He pulled himself out of the Command chair – now suddenly aware of how tired he was himself, and informed Lt. Commander Declan that he had the Bridge.

Moments later Brian was back in his quarters lying quietly on his bunk trying to sleep.

It took *Sheaffe* nearly a full twenty-four hours to navigate through the worst of the asteroid field. Both alpha and beta shifts had toiled painstakingly at their stations to help guide the ship safely around the rocks. As limited as their makeshift 'sensors' were, Lt. Casso and Ensign Stevens managed to record more than fifty tritanium signatures scattered among the field. The ship emerged halfway through the alpha shift's second day. Without long-range sensors, the event was realized slowly. The speckled tactical display began to clear gradually. Hundreds of contacts slowly dwindled to dozens of contacts, then to a scattered few. For a full ten minutes there were no contacts at all and Brian very nearly asked Casso if she was conducting her sweeps correctly.

"Captain... we seem to be clear of the asteroids." Amber had her face buried in her console's scope, sweeping her beams in overlapping arcs.

"Mr. Lomart?" Brian rubbed his eyes, blinked and tried to refocus on the drab tactical display he'd been staring at for six hours.

Ensign Lomart, who was manning Tactical for the alpha shift, was just as focussed on his own console's readouts as Casso. Though Brian had never met the man before, he'd been impressed by the Ensign's personnel file – Lomart had spent a year at the Moscow Tactical Institute

earning his specialist certification during his third year as a cadet.

“Confirmed, sir. No contacts detected here either.”

“Captain! I’m getting astrological returns, we have sensors!” Lt. Visha at the Helm began flipping toggles and calling-up sensor readings on her own monitors as Casso quickly turned her attention from the targeting feeds to the primary systems at her science station.

“Ops, viewer ahead.” Brian sat up straight, suddenly invigorated. The dull tactical plot dropped away and a clear view of space beyond *Sheaffe*’s bow appeared. “Ms. Casso, report please.”

For the first time in days the full array of long-range sensors cycled, scanned, recorded and probed successfully the space surrounding the ship. Amber was relieved to discover that they’d ended up crossing into relatively “clear” space. The Captain ordered the ship to a full stop in order to allow Casso to gather as much data as possible. The sensors could not penetrate the field behind them, but the space ahead – though showing indications of some graviton pockets, was essentially clear.

“Bottom line this for me Lieutenant, are we able to rely on sensors from here on out?”

“I can’t guarantee anything, Captain... but I believe we can manage without the targeting beams for now – they’re showing signs of strain at any rate. The negative

returns on the residual gravitons ahead seems to indicate a far less dense concentration.”

Brian nodded and directed the helmsman to plot a direct course to Beta-TS 4645-002. Lomart was instructed to maintain his tactical sweeps.

“Lieutenant Visha, verify our location and make sure we haven’t drifted off course while we were dodging space rocks, please.” He contemplated rousing Declan to share the good news but decided to let the man sleep. They were still facing the unknown. He noticed then that his helmsman was still methodically working at her console. “Lieutenant, is there a problem?”

“N-no, sir. It’s just...” Visha called-up the official star charts for a third time on her reader and consulted the live feedback the navigational sensors were returning. She couldn’t help wrinkling her nose in frustration.

“Just what, Lieutenant? Are we parsecs off the mark, or something?” *Hells*, thought Brian, *what now?*

“No, sir. Star fix confirms we’re only slightly off our plotted trajectory, it’s just that...I should be reading all four planetoids orbiting the Kea Twins. I’m only getting three.”

Brian turned to Casso. He didn’t need to say anything to his Science Officer, he could see that she was already at work running her own detailed scan of the system. “Captain, ambient gravitons aside – we’re getting close to a %78 read on the system, and there appears to be only three planets – Kea I is not registering.”

“According to my charts, Kea I is a Class B Geomorteus planetoid, roughly 10,000km². Some molten spots on its surface, but largely inert.”

“A giant rock?” Brian interrupted Visha, never letting his attention slip from Casso at Science One. Her face was now slack and shocked – clearly, she was thinking the same thing he was.

While sensors couldn't return anything useful from the graviton field behind them, a quick virtual modeling of the system as it was presently registering illustrated Brian's hypothesis. The twin suns sat at the centre of the system, Kea II and Kea III traversed their orbits further out around the twins and an empty orbital path hung conspicuously around the stars like a belt without a buckle. Casso projected the further orbit of Kea IV – which could not be read by sensors deep within the graviton field, as well as the projected trajectory of the asteroid field they'd unexpectedly encountered.

“Kea I?”

“It's a possibility, sir. I can project the course for the field back to the original orbit of Kea I.” Amber plotted the astrometric curve into the virtual model.

“What could have caused a Class B planetoid to... explode like that?”

“Explode, or shatter. There's no way of telling from here.” Amber studied her model, made a slight adjustment

– rotating the perspective some ninety degrees to view the system from the smaller star’s perspective.

Brian asked Ops to summon Lt. Commander Declan to the Bridge, then asked Casso to upload her model to the larger of the three view screens at the Science station. There was no way for them to know how expansive the asteroid field had been. In fact, there was no real way for them to conclusively prove that the field was the debris of Kea I – but it seemed chillingly likely. Brian traced his finger along the plotted trajectory Casso had input for the field. He drew the tip of his finger around Kea II, all the way back to the empty orbital tract Kea I was supposed to occupy. Kea I had an odd elliptical orbit, looping between both stars at the centre of the System, cutting very close to the smaller of the two and carrying further out from her larger sister...

Brian withdrew his finger and turned to Casso – for the second time both of them seemed to share the same thought.

“The samples we collected in the Typhon sector...”

“You said they were consistent with stellar matter.”

Brian looked back at the screen, mentally continuing the plotted course around the suns.

“If there was some kind of event... perhaps an eruption, or massive flare, maybe?”

Declan stepped off the turbolift just then and immediately made his way over to the Science station.

After briefing him on their present status and the revelation that Kea I no longer seemed to be in its orbit, both the Captain, the Science Officer and Declan agreed to prepare a Class III Probe to reconnoitre their target coordinates. Declan assigned Nams Licanat to see to the probe and Brian arranged to dismiss the Bridge's alpha shift early in order to get Kross and St. Cyr back – they were going to risk warp speed.

Sheaffe had three probes on board suitable for the task of long-range survey missions. Upon inspection it was quickly discovered that only two of the probes were flight ready. One of the probes had been adversely affected by the thoron exposure a week earlier. Brian had the ship maneuver into a high polar orbit of Kea III while Licanat prepared the remaining two probes for use.

Long-range sensors returned more and more detailed information to Casso. Graviton interference around the twin suns at the centre of the System made it next to impossible for *Sheaffe* to get a clear picture of what was happening at the target point. Negative return scans also indicated that the intense graviton field they'd been following was not alone – an even more intense field of high energy readings flared on the console's monitors. Both fields seemed to originate (as suspected) from the twins.

"There's no doubt, they originate from the center of the system. Those other readings are neutrino clusters."

"Is it dead centre, Lieutenant? Right in middle of that sun?" Declan leaned back from the console.

"No, Commander. The Primary Star - Beta-TS 4645-002, is the centre of this System. C – DS 4645-002, the smaller companion star, orbits Beta. That appears to be the origin point for our gravitons."

Hanging above Kea III, Brian waited for the planet to transverse its own orbit until they were closest to the twins then launched the first probe towards the suns. He then turned the Bridge over to Declan. Even at Kea III's closest orbit it would take the probe five hours to reach the centre of the Kea System.

“What in the name of? Why didn’t we catch this during the diagnostics sweep back at Pi!?” Bradley swept his sensor rod over the burnt-out module for a third time while his junior engineer looked-on.

“I don’t know Mr. Bradley. I know it was registering correctly up until we vented the compartment. Is it possible that the techs missed the relay altogether because the whole place was still a cold wash?” Byd N’uc was on his first deep space assignment, hoping to earn his specialist classification as an engineer’s mate. He’d discovered the dead module while running a level two radiation sweep.

“Have you checked the starboard module then, N’uc?” Arthur put his tools away and pulled the dead module from the Port Coil Assembly Relay Board.

“I swept the Starboard Assembly earlier Mr. Bradley – all systems checked out.”

Arthur held the module which was responsible for governing the cooling system for the starboard warp field coils. Between the strain the system had come under diving on the asteroid and the bombardment of heavy thoron radiation, it wasn’t hard to understand how the module could have burned out. What was hard to swallow was the fact that not only had Licanat’s techs missed the damage – both he and his engineers had also failed to realize that *Sheaffe* had warped into the unknown with only

a partially functioning cooling system. Had they caught this while orbiting Pi they likely could have traded for a replacement module. As things were, there were no backups onboard and even assuming he could rebuild the unit using available resources, the task would take days.

“Get Charles down here to help. You’re going to splice the port module in through the back of the starboard panel...” Arthur put the module down and ran his hand down his chin. He looked over at the young engineer and was disturbed by the way N’uc was looking at him – like a bewildered child desperate for help. “We can maybe share the load between the two systems for a while. Get Charles down though, he’ll show you how to do it.”

“Yes, Mr. Bradley. I’ll signal him now.”

Arthur watched Byd half jog to the far bulkhead where the Comm panel was located. The boy was nearly 2.5 meters tall and had to duck and weave around the low hanging conduits and girders on deck thirteen. Bradley was angry. Not at the boy – who looked ridiculous in his oversized radiation suit. He was angry at Licanat’s techs for missing the damage. Angry at Declan for failing to provision spare modules during their layover. Angry at Harris for not taking the time to do a proper predeparture check. Angry at himself for being angry at all the rest for what was ultimately his failing. As Byd N’uc spoke to Specialist Charles D’Rossales, Bradley packed the burned-out module

and made a note on his pad to include details in his status report.

Brian stepped into the Conference Room on Deck four and found Declan and Ensign Stevens standing in front of the wall mounted display screen.

“Good morning, gentlemen.”

“Good morning, Captain. Thank you for meeting us here. Mr. St. Cyr has the Bridge – Mr. Stevens, please?” Declan gestured towards the input console at the end of the conference table.

Captain Harris nodded at the young Science Officer as he walked away from the display to take his seat. On the screen was a series of readouts, trajectory plot-points and a panel of static. Brian scanned everything quickly before turning to his Executive Officer. “Returns from our probe?”

“Yes, Captain. We lost contact an hour ago.” Declan signalled the Ensign.

“Lost contact? Why wasn’t I informed?”

“I didn’t see the point for the sake of an hour in waking you, sir. I’ve had the Ensign here collate everything of note the probe returned to us up to the point it went dark. Ensign?”

Brian watched as the main feed began playing back visuals from the Class III probe. In total, a nearly ten-minute loop played out. The feed from the probe showed a steady approach towards the system’s primary sun. At either side of the visual display panel were smaller panels

of streaming data. Distance from the star, relative speed of the probe, background radiation levels, gaseous detections... all the standard returns. As the visual progressed, the principal sun grew larger and brighter. Radiation levels spiked, as would be expected. Then, as the probe closed on Beta – C DS 4645-002, the companion star slowly entered the frame and the readings began to up-tick, the playback began to blur and erupt in static. Then... nothing.

“Did you catch it, Captain?” Concerned, Declan turned to face his Captain.

“Catch what, exactly?”

Declan motioned for the Ensign to reset the feed and told him to put the final minute and a half on a loop. He nodded back towards the viewer and stood silently as his Captain watched and watched again the key ninety seconds of footage.

Brian watched the video play out again – he tried but spotted nothing of note. On the second run through he thought he’d caught... something. By the fourth time he watched the loop, he was sure there was something there in the final seconds. Something dark, silhouetted against C DS 4645-002, mostly obscured by the Prime Star. Something... a shape... familiar somehow.

“What was that?”

“Mr. Stevens, time index 725.003.”

The Ensign loaded the still image. A blur, almost black. Standing in contrast to the blueish white light of the companion star and mostly blocked by the intense yellow white light of Beta-TS 4645-002.

Brian stepped closer to the image. “Can we enhance this?”

Half a second later and Stevens loaded the enhanced view he and Commander Declan had been working on for the last twenty minutes. The Captain traced the blurry image with the tip of his finger. It looked like a smudge on the screen, but the Captain seemed to recognize it.

“This looks like...” Brian traced the shape again with his finger. A dark “C” shaped blur – mostly obstructed.

“Looks like the bow of a Warbird, almost,” said Declan.

“Almost...”

“From the visuals we’ve captured, whatever it is looks to be about three times as tall as any *Keras*-class Warbird we have on record. The spacing between the dorsal and ventral edges as well, is considerable too.” Declan consulted a pad he’d had resting on the table. “Just from what we’ve been able to do in the last hour, Stevens and I extrapolate that if that *is* a vessel, she measures anywhere from 350 to 450 meters stem-to-stern. Twice our size.”

Brian turned away from the screen and faced his Exec. "What happened to our probe?"

"As you saw, it was on-course for Beta-TS 4645-002, it approached, it recorded increased levels of gravitons and neutrinos, lost guidance and onboard systems – then as far as we can tell it either collided with some debris or tumbled into the star's corona."

"No evidence of hostile actions?"

Ensign Stevens cleared his throat to get his Captain's attention. "No sir, whatever that image was there was no indication of any deliberate action leading to the probe's... end."

"Neutrinos again?"

"Yes, Captain. The moment the companion star came into range there was a remarkable uptake in neutrino emissions. The decay rate dates them at least a couple of decades old, but they're still intense. I've never seen anything like it."

"Be sure Lt. Casso has a complete report on all of this, please." Brian looked directly at the young Ensign as he spoke.

Stevens nodded and confirmed that he'd left open all pertinent files in the shared system between Science One and Science Two. Brian thanked him for his efforts and dismissed him.

Once Stevens had left the room, Brian took a seat at the table across from Declan. "I want Casso's take on these neutrino readings."

"Of course, sir."

"Then I want you to work with Kross on an approach trajectory. We've got to get close to whatever the hell is going on around that damned star." Brian could see the doubt on the other man's face and knew what the Lt. Commander was going to say even before he opened his mouth.

"Captain, surely we have enough data for the Fleet to pick apart, we have to turn back." Morris set his pad down gently and met Harris' gaze.

"Our mission is to determine the origin of the gravitons – we haven't yet done that."

"With respect, Captain... we got the samples we were ordered to collect, and I think it's safe to say we have done a fair job tracing the field back to its source."

"We have a duty to complete our mission as directed. That's what we're going to do."

"Captain, we're not equipped for... for whatever the hell this is. That thing the probe captured?! That very well could be Romulan..."

"Which is exactly why we will not back down now, Commander." Brian watched as Morris rose from his seat, face flushed, no longer attempting to mask his anger.

“We have protocols, sir. Strict rules of engagement when it comes to the Romulans. I will not allow you to endanger this ship and charge...” Morris stopped himself when he saw Harris motioned for him to sit down.

“Before either of us says something we’re going to regret, Morris... and this is very much off-the-record – have you ever heard of Deployment Resources?”

“I don’t see the harm in sending the other probe to gather more information.” Amber studied the data returned from their first ill-fated recon probe.

“A second probe may be detected, intercepted and destroyed before it can return anything useful – and that would give us away.” Brian gave his young Science Officer a stern look. He’d given his orders to the Bridge crew and expected them to be followed.

Amber sighed and began running the neutrino readings to try and make sense of the data. The Captain had wanted to know precisely what effect the detected neutrinos might have on the ship’s systems – the problem was, Amber couldn’t say for sure. She didn’t quite understand why the Captain was so reluctant to send the second probe along to augment their limited information before committing to take *Sheaffe* into the heart of the Kea System.

Stevens had done a marginal job interpreting the readings the original probe had returned up until it disappeared – but he’d completely overlooked the negative returns in the data that indicated gravitons. Casso concentrated on fleshing out the areas of high graviton concentration first. The neutrino question wasn’t one she was going to be able to answer based on what information she had. The effects of gravitons on the *Sheaffe* were

known to her though, and by charting the swaths of space where the gravitons appeared heaviest, she could at least caution the Captain where not to venture. At the Helm, Lt. Kross and Commander Declan (now three hours past his own duty shift) were working together plotting possible courses to approach the space between Beta-TS 4645-002 and her smaller companion star.

Casso downloaded a fresh set of calculations to a pad and handed it over to the Captain. From what Declan had shared, there may be Romulans lurking deeper within the system. The news had seemed to shake M'narr and Kross, but Amber didn't see it as particularly distressing. Why wouldn't the Romulans send a science vessel of their own to investigate the strange readings?

"This is accurate, Lieutenant?" Brian looked over the fields of graviton flux Casso had highlighted around Beta-TS 4645-002.

"As accurate as I can be using the negative return algorithm Dr. Lo adapted for us."

The Captain nodded, instructed her to get back to work on the neutrino question and walked over to Commander Declan to hand him the pad without saying another word. Amber watched as Captain Harris and Morris Declan conversed in hushed tones – it was the closest anyone had seen the two men get since Harris had taken command. She was in the process of calling up the library tapes on experimental particle physics when her

attention was pulled away from her screens to the turbolift doors.

“Updated status report from Engineering, Captain.” Bradley stepped out of the lift and crossed the Bridge without slowing, or even looking around. He was still dressed in his white radiation suit.

Brian took the extra-large pad from his engineer. He was waiting for Lt. Kross to plot the graviton wells into his latest approach plan when Art came barreling out of the lift. Declan stood upright and moved aside to make room.

“Thank you, Mr. Bradley.” Brian activated the pad and scrolled through the point-by-point list of items the Chief Engineer had flagged as important. At the top of the list was a detailed entry concerning the status of the warp field coil cooling system on deck thirteen.

Bradley watched as Captain Harris furled his brow. “The module in question is completely burnt out, sir. Best I can tell, it happened during our dive on the asteroid.”

“We’re just catching this now?” Brian stifled his anger and immediately realized he’d failed to run a pre-departure check – stupid. For a second, he felt like an imposter again.

“When we vented the compartment and went into decontamination mode... it was missed, by the techs and my staff, sir. I’m...”

“Can’t it be fixed?” Declan leaned along the top of Kross’s console.

“No, Mr. Declan. The thoron radiation fried everything – it’s scrap.”

“We don’t have a replacement on-board?” Brian handed the engineering pad across to Declan and suddenly wondered what else he’d failed to check before charging into action.

“Correct, Captain. I’ve patched the portside module into the starboard-side system though and it should do the job well enough until we put in.” Arthur looked from the Captain to Mo Declan. Neither man looked overly confident. Henrik Kross sat quietly in his seat – trapped in the middle of the conversation.

Brian sighed, looked over at Declan and then back towards Science One where the shipboard chronometer counted down the seconds. They were wasting time hanging in orbit above Kea III when they really needed to be getting Starfleet some firm intelligence on the mysterious and terrifyingly powerful graviton field. The fact that he barely knew these men, or this ship, came to the forefront of his mind and lingered there for a few painful seconds. He had no choice if he was going to fulfill his mission.

“I’m going on your word, Mr. Bradley. This coolant issue will not be a problem?”

“No sir, I’ll monitor it myself.”

The thought of having the ship’s Chief Engineer camped out like some junior specialist watching

temperature readings in a Jeffries tube would be a waste of expertise. “No, Mr. Bradley. You’ll assign your best man to that job. I’ll need you here at your post.”

“Sir.” Bradley turned and walked directly over to his engineering station and took up his post still wearing the radiation suit.

“Mr. Kross, Mr. Declan – what do you have?” Brian walked to his Command chair and took a seat to listen to what approach his Tactical and Helm Officers had come up with.

Declan straightened himself, held the engineering pad behind his back and nodded for Henrik to brief the Captain on the progress they’d made.

“Sir, a direct approach to the co-ordinates between Beta-TS 4645-002 and her companion star is relatively simple. At Impulse we can be there in a few hours...”

“However, as we’re operating under the assumption that there may be a Romulan presence already in the vicinity,” prompted Declan, who was still trying to process the information Harris had shared with him concerning Deployment Resources and the most recent highly classified revelations concerning the suspected Romulan ruse at the far end of Federation space. “...with a mind to making a stealth approach and avoid possible Romulan detection – we can only see two likely avenues of advancement.”

Harris nodded for Kross to continue.

Kross cleared his throat. "We could lay in a parabolic course to the co-ordinates trailing the edge of the graviton emissions that formed the field we've been following all along. This would likely obscure us from any conventional sensor detection and could place us at our desired co-ordinates inside of four days."

"Days?! No, no. We've wasted enough time on setbacks and hurdles. We must reach our objective as soon as possible. Hells, four days!?"

"I understand, sir. The graviton field would make travelling at warp impossible for us...at least without using the modified targeting beams to navigate again – which would almost certainly be detected by any possible Romulan vessels."

"The other option?" Brian shook his head, completely dismissing the first proposal.

"Our other option is to wait for the companion star to reach its maximum orbit opposite us, then run like hell towards Beta-TS 4645-002, hope we don't trigger any sensors... it'll leave us with an unprotected gap between the primary star and where we ultimately want to end up though... so..."

"So, our other option involves us waiting, what? Lt. Casso – time until the little star is at its maximum distance from us on the far side?" Brian leaned over and waited for Casso to make eye-contact.

"Uh, as of now... a little more than thirty hours, sir."

“Thirty hours – then a mad dash only to hang out exposed in space hoping we don’t come face-to-face with a Warbird the moment that little star comes whizzing ‘round the corner... no.”

“Sir?” Casso watched as the Captain began rubbing his temples.

“Yes, Lieutenant?”

“There’s a good chance that if there *is* a Romulan vessel at the co-ordinates you’re aiming for, they’re likely as blind as we were in the graviton field. Those negative returns paint nearly all of the space between Beta-TS 4645-002 and her companion as “dead zones”, sir.”

“Why the hells would the Romulans be purposefully operating in the middle of a...” Brian shook the thought from his head. He needed to focus. One thing at a time. “Mr. Declan, if we approached as the crow flies, given Ms. Casso’s information?”

“Good chance they wouldn’t see us coming – but if they’re intentionally in that “dead zone” it’s likely they’ve either got sensors far better than ours, or they’ve stationed some sort of remote sensor grid to warn them of possible visitors.”

Brian knew from his time working on Mars and with the Tactical Institute that the Romulan sensors were supposedly on par with Starfleet’s. Remote sensors were the more likely concern. Sensors that were meant to detect ships approaching at impulse as opposed to vessels

travelling past them at warp – a feature meant to prevent the devices from sounding false alarms.

“At warp one, how fast can we reach our target, Mr. Kross?” Beside him, Art Bradley nearly fell out of his chair.

“Two minutes thirty-eight seconds, sir...”

“Too slow. Warp two, then.” Nobody said a word. Brian stood up and nodded at Declan. “Gentlemen, we’re going for a hop. Everyone needs to be %110 on your game here.”

It took twenty minutes for the crew to prepare the ship. Phaser crews were on station. Bradley had three men posted to deck thirteen. Casso pre-programmed a full sensor sweep which would automatically engage the second *Sheaffe* dropped out of warp. Declan loaded a complete package of tactical commands into his targeting computer, while Lt. Kross similarly took the time to ensure his own console was preloaded with a selection of evasive maneuvering commands. M'narr configured the ship's transceiver array to augment Casso's sensors. Chief Licanat's repair teams were stationed at staging areas throughout the ship – ready to respond where and when necessary.

The focus of the sortie was to get in as quickly as possible without being noticed by any potential Romulan forces – scan and capture everything possible as quickly as possible, then warp-out again. Kross had set a window which would allow *Sheaffe* to hop from Kea III to the very edge of the graviton distortion they believed clustered in the space between the companion star and Beta-TS 4645-002. With tactical consideration given to possible Romulan vessels and remote sensors, Kross had also programmed a return hop from the system's centre back to Kea III – where the Captain and the Science Officer believed the planet's

heavily magnetic poles would obscure their presence from any long-range sensors.

“Captain, all stations report ready.” St. Cyr had been co-ordinating ship-wide preparations from his station at Ops.

“Good, thank you, Ops. Secure to General Quarters, please.”

St. Cyr confirmed the order and signalled ‘General Quarters’ to all decks, Yellow Alert. The deflector status panel illuminated over Declan’s head at Tactical – screens up. In Sickbay, Dr. Lo surveyed her triage preparations and confirmed her team was ready to respond to any calls for help which might arise.

“Mr. Kross – warp speed.”

The words had barely left his mouth – his stomach did its flip and *Sheaffe* jumped to warp two from a stand still. Seventy-three seconds later they screamed to a ripping stop – appearing as if by magic in the blackness between the Kea star and its blue/white companion.

On-board the amber Yellow Alert flashed on screens and from indicator lights throughout the ship. On Bradley’s Engineering console several alarms were ringing... Harris watched his Engineer begin to frantically check his feeds – then quickly chose to ignore Bradley’s activity and barked for Casso to commence her scans. Declan began calling out “all clear” readings from his own tactical sweeps. St. Cyr ran through a series of secondary short-range scans and

visual captures while Casso ran the long-range and specialized arrays from Science One. Bradley was talking to somebody in Engineering over the Comm. Harris made out a few words: “keep an eye on it...bypass secondary...”

“Captain! Intermittent contact 249 by 34.”

Harris turned away from Bradley, who was still in conversation with his engine room and looked over at Commander Declan at Tactical. “Report! Moving to intercept? Is it Romulan?”

“Not moving... I can’t really tell, sir. Fades in and out – but it’s definitely lurking within the graviton field.” Declan kept his eyes glued to his targeting scanner.

“Dial back your beams Mr. Declan, whatever it is we don’t want to draw its attention. Casso, status report.”

From her place at Science One, Amber looked up from her own status screen. “Finishing long-range scans now, Captain.”

Brian watched as St. Cyr gave a quick thumbs-up to indicate that his own scan cycle was complete. Whatever had been captured by the sensors and onboard computers could be reviewed once they were safely back in orbit over Kea III. Without needing to be prompted Kross called up his preprogrammed return trajectory and placed his actuating trigger on standby. Declan continued to monitor his tactical sensors.

“Mr. Bradley, we’re good to engage warp drive, I trust?” He looked to his left and could see the man was still working away at his station.

“Captain, we... there was a temperature spike dropping out of warp and breaking as hard as we did...”

“Sir, that contact is back, now 248 by 30.8 – slowly heading our way.”

Brian grunted his acknowledgment to his Tactical Officer. “We need warp speed Mr. Bradley. Do we have it?”

“Yes, Captain.” Arthur turned back to his Comm panel and sent word to prepare for immediate departure.

“Mr. Kross, get us underway now.”

Sheaffe fired her starboard impulse engines and banked sharply to port – as soon as her bow had come about one hundred and eighty degrees the gleaming white *Saladin* blurred and was gone.

A minute later the ship tumbled out of warp within sight of Kea III. Her warp field had partially collapsed 1.8 seconds earlier, knocking the inertial dampeners offline and pitching anyone not secured at a station against the bulkheads. She was sounding RED ALERT automatically and emergency hatches were sealing off each compartment to limit the damage from any possible hull breaches. The ship tumbled awkwardly through space trailing plasma.

Brian pulled himself back into his Command chair – he'd nearly been thrown across the Bridge but managed to grab hold of the chair long enough to allow himself to fall awkwardly across the instrument-heavy arms. The viewscreen was off. The sound of the Red Alert alarm came to him slowly... he'd hit his head on something. St. Cyr was on the deck but moving. Kross was still at his station but was slumped over his controls. Brian automatically began running his hand across his scalp to check for wounds and he couldn't help seeing the Bridge of the *Victory* at that instant...

"St...status? Status!?" croaked Declan.

Brian looked over to Tactical and saw Commander Declan struggling to free himself from the lap-belt he'd had the good sense to use prior to jumping to warp. His First Officer was apparently unaware of the deep gash running along his forehead. Fighting the sudden urge to vomit,

Brian turned and saw Bradley at his station, conscious and seemingly unharmed.

“Status report, Mr. Bradley?” He watched as the older man gazed absently into space for half a beat before he nodded his understanding and turned to face the readouts at his station.

“We’re adrift. Warp reactor was SCRAM’d after we lost warp field integrity.” Arthur paused for a second while Amber Casso scurried by him with a med-kit, on her way to attend to Mo Declan – a bloody mess at Tactical.

“Mr. Kross?” –cough, cough– “Henrik!? Can you hear me?” Brian took a shuddering breath. He wasn’t sure if he could stand and desperately hoped that...

“Sir... I’m here, sir.” Kross sat up in his seat just as St. Cyr climbed back into the Ops position.

“Location please... Ops, long-range scans, see if we’ve been followed...” Brian closed his eyes and took three painful and shallow breaths, almost losing control and spewing vomit. Kross confirmed that the warp drive was offline. They were more than 100, 000km short of Kea III and tumbling further and further out into open space.

From Tactical, Lt. Casso tried to call down to Sickbay to request assistance, but nobody answered. M’narr, who like Bradley, had been spared the worse of things, began collecting reports on the ship’s status deck-by-deck to try and get a better picture of things. Dr. Lo was located in Engineering where most of the crew on duty had suffered

serious injuries. Emergency medics were also attending Phaser Control and the labs on deck three. A formal casualty report would be furnished as soon as possible. Casso helped Declan from his post to a clear space on the deck just below the viewscreen where she'd spread out an emergency blanket – he'd slammed his head into the edge of the targeting scope.

“Impulse engines responding, sir... making for Kea III.”

“Good, thank you Mr. Kross...” –Wheeze– “...polar orbit. Get the dampeners back, Mr. Bradley. Anything on long-range?” Brian watched as Declan was laid down in the recovery position, head a mess, memories of Brooks creeping into his thoughts.

“I’m reading what looks like high-powered emissions from the system’s centre.”

“Hells, gravitons” –cough– “again?”

“No, sir. From these readings they are almost certainly artificial in origin. If I were to guess, I’d say they were some sort of sensor beam.”

Brian inhaled sharply and struggled to gulp the oxygen. “Kross...best speed, now.”

The damage report was grim.

The field coils had overheated – likely as a result of the rapid breaking maneuver *Sheaffe* had to perform when she dropped out of warp at Beta-TS 4645-002. The crewman assigned to monitor the jury-rigged cooling module on deck thirteen reported the issue and vented the nacelle while the ship hung motionless, scanning, probing and sweeping madly. What hadn't been factored into the planning around the rapid approach, fast recon and rapid departure, was how the power demands running all of *Sheaffe's* sensors keeping deflector screens up and having warp-drive on standby would tax every system to its extreme. Venting the chambers housing the field coils into space brought the immediate temperature down only marginally. Had they remained stationary for another ten minutes even, the coils would have been cooled to optimal conditions.

When the order to jump to warp had come down, the crewman was given only seconds to secure the nacelle in preparation for departure while the ship turned on its central axis to align herself for the jump. The outer venting ports had just magnetically sealed as the drive was engaged and the coils sparked to life – generating the field *Sheaffe* would ride away to safety. The crewman watched as his sensors recorded a steady temperature increase. The

module Engineer Bradley had rigged to control both the port and starboard coil assemblies red-lined – but things held at the extreme end of “nominal” – for a few seconds.

In Main Engineering the reactor faltered. They'd not shut down the feeds to the sensor arrays, screens and targeting ports before powering the deflector and rapid firing the warp engine. The Primary Alarm began sounding – on both the master panel in Engineering and on Bradley's Bridge station; the warning of a massive EPS overload illuminated in bright flashing amber. Bradley began shutting down secondary systems – attempting to reroute power back to the reactor while the Engineering crewmen frantically started shutting down hard feeds. The automated systems kicked in drawing power back from the coils to stabilize the reactor (an emergency measure a properly configured and functioning system could deal with by increasing the load on the twin coils).

The result was a destabilized warp field and a massive overload of the cooling assembly's EPS feed which killed crewman N'uc instantly. Loss of power to inertial dampeners and the creation of a dangerous feedback through the primary reactor chamber ensued. A young specialist assigned to reactor maintenance had had the wherewithal to manually SCRAM the warp core before *Sheaffe* tore herself apart.

Dr. Lo reported casualties across all decks. Sickbay was full to capacity. Broken bones – arms and legs mostly.

The Captain suffered three fractured ribs and a punctured lung when he'd been thrown across the Command chair. Most of the crew had been in their quarters when the ship had exploded out of warp; as a result their injuries had been largely mitigated. Commander Declan's head wound was serious – a fractured skull and brain trauma.

“Tactical situation, please.” Brian was seated gingerly at Command, holding court with his ship's doctor and the remaining Bridge crew.

“The contact we picked up definitely appears to be long-range sensor beams, sir.” St. Cyr had taken control of the tactical systems at Ops.

“When can we expect to be underway, Mr. Bradley?” Brian turned to look at his Engineer. The man was distraught at the loss of his young Crewman – blaming himself for the failure of the cooling module they'd all missed while preparing for their mission at Pi.

“We have no warp drive, Captain. We're still cleaning up the... deck thirteen is a mess. We'll be able to get a clear understanding of the condition of our field coils once things cool down, but we have no way to regulate them now.” Arthur grunted and swallowed a sob. He damned Declan in his mind for not knowing to requisition spare components, damned N'uc for being the kid unlucky enough to draw duty on deck thirteen, and hated himself for failing to prevent all of it.

“Captain?”

All eyes turned towards Lt. Casso. She was standing at Science One with her focus on her station's main readout. Her features bathed in a flickering blue light thrown up from her readouts.

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"Long-range ping on those sensor beams."

Brian sat silently for a moment. He knew the Romulans were suspected of possessing sensor capabilities roughly in line with the Fleet's – which meant at their maximum range they might be capable of reaching as far as the point where *Sheaffe* dropped back to sublight speed. They'd been venting drive plasma as a function of the emergency shutdown and had trailed a noticeable path of plasma along with them to Kea III. Bradley confirmed that while they had little to no hope of restoring warp drive, they were working to restart the main reactor to restore full power to the ship's other systems. Presently they were relying on the main energizer and the limited battery power available.

"Mr. M'narr, collect our sensor reports from the jump and copy them to a new file and encrypt with the key I uploaded to the ship's library a few days ago – you'll find it listed under DR – 001." Harris waited for his Communication's Officer to acknowledge his order before continuing... "Ms. Casso, let's see the visual record of what we captured on the viewer please."

Seconds later the entire Bridge sat in silence as they watched the images captured by the sensors, camera pods and targeting beams appear in sequence on the main viewscreen. When the feed was done playing, Brian croaked for Casso to replay it. He'd seen what they'd seen – and it shook him to his core.

“There; hold image. Look at that... I count seven of them.” Brian struggled to walk towards the screen and began pointing out the dark shapes standing like shadows backlit by the suns.

“I can enhance the image, sir.” Amber selected the closest of the shapes and magnified.

There before all of them was clearly a Romulan vessel. Massive. Brian called for Casso to extrapolate her dimensions and all of them were shocked to hear that the ship was four hundred meters long – easily exceeding the *Keras*-class Warbirds that were thought to represent the cutting edge of Romulan warships. Brian called for the image to be restored to its original aspects and bid Casso to continue the feed.

He'd heard rumblings of a suspected upgrade the Romulans were considering to their fleet while working on Mars. Fleet Intelligence was closely guarded, but his work had allowed him glimpses into confidential threat analysis reports. Sources inside the Star Empire – hells knew who or what they were, and hells help them if they were ever discovered – reported that the Romulans were working on

designing heavy cruisers to make maximum use of their developing technology around artificial singularity drives. So far only the Romulan flagship was known to possess an ASD. These new, seemingly theoretical monster ships were being designated as *Horo*-class Warbirds by Intelligence... this Brian knew but kept to himself. What troubled him more than the apparent appearance of no less than seven of these beasts, was the baffling structure he'd spotted in the footage.

"Hold image. What in all hells, is that?" –cough–
"Anyone?"

The screen was filled with a view of the companion star – C – DS 4645-002. A black speck in the upper right-hand corner of the view field denoted one of the Romulan vessels. What everyone was focussed on was the tangle of black branches stretching across a large blue island resting on the star's surface. Each dark branch twisted away from the main trunk and at four points, large glowing hexagons spread-out, one of which was a pool of light. Black specs drifted in the foreground above this pool. It was St. Cyr who realized that these specs were debris from at least two shattered vessels. Four of the hexagon's six sides seemed to be intact, but where the other two sides should have been was a mass of light grey metal cladding of some kind.

"Casso, Bradley?" Brian turned to his staff for insight and got nothing but stunned silence. They had

images, very good images – but no readings of any kind thanks to the graviton field density.

Amber consulted her own console and quickly aligned her sensor readings with the visual index held in place on the main viewer. “Captain, look.” She dropped the image and uploaded the dark sensor return she’d matched to the latticework they’d all been studying.

“What are we looking at here?”

“The negative returns on our primary sensor sweep... notice the decreasing values concentrated at that centre point?” She overlaid the ‘negative return values’ she and Dr. Lo had adapted to quantify the density of gravitons. “That patched... pool thing... that’s the source of the gravitons. Look at those readings. Before it was capped it was likely a fountain of gravitons and neutrinos and who-knows-what else?”

“How the hell did they build that thing on a sun?” Bradley was monitoring the reactor restart process underway in Engineering but couldn't help getting distracted by the confounding images the others were looking at.

Brian took a shuddering breath and made his way back to his seat. He asked Lt. Casso to tell the others about her discovery when examining the samples they’d snagged from the asteroid a week earlier. He’d asked her to keep her findings to herself at the time, not wanting to distract the crew from the second portion of their mission.

“The bigger question, Mr. Bradley – is what the hells” –cough– “...would they build on a sun?” Brian took his seat and checked his status indicators. Engineering was still red.

“We’re assuming that the Romulans built it at all.” St. Cyr had managed to overlay Casso’s data on the still image, but before he could continue his thought, his tactical monitor began trilling. Long distance scans had detected a vessel at the edge of their sensor range.

Brian knew it was only a matter of time before the Romulans concluded that the plasma readings they were doubtlessly investigating had a Federation signature. They had perhaps half an hour until they were confronted if the Romulans decided to stay at sublight speed for a cautious tactical approach. M’narr reported that he’d finished copying and encrypting the sensor logs they’d collected at the centre of the system. Brian asked his Communications Officer if there was any chance of getting a subspace message to Phanta II. He wasn’t surprised to hear M’narr report that the graviton field behind them would swallow any transmissions.

“Lt. Casso, use the encryption key Mr. M’narr just accessed and encrypt all of our findings relating to our mission. Download it to a file card” –cough– “...purge all traces of this data from our computers and library.” Brian cradled his right side gingerly. Dr. Lo had attended to him

personally, but under triage conditions – he still needed to have his ribs knit in a proper biobed.

Nams placed his spanner down on the work mat next to the tech he was assisting. With so many injured engineering members offline, the Master Chief's team of technicians were pulling double duty. The old Bolian cocked his head as he listened to his name being called for a second time over the ship's public address channel: "Master Chief Licanat, report to shuttle bay immediately. Master Chief Licanat, report to shuttle bay immediately."

Nams acknowledged the hail from the Comm panel on deck twelve, apologized to his specialist and hurried as quickly as he could to the turbolift. While riding the lift to deck eight, the indicator lamp inside the car began flashing amber – Yellow Alert.

Nams stepped out into a nearly empty, partially lit corridor. The ship was still on energizers and efforts were being made to conserve power. The Master Chief passed two of his techs who were finishing up reinforcing the deck's EPS junction – he nodded but didn't stop. Rounding the corner, he could see the doors to the shuttle bay were standing open.

A team of Crewmen in radiation suits were loading anti-matter containers into the back of *Sheaffe's* only remaining shuttle. The Captain, Dr. Lo and Art Bradley were all standing aside, apparently waiting for Nams.

"Captain, sir?" Nams stepped towards Captain Harris and Art. Dr. Lo said nothing, but immediately moved towards him, produced a hypo and injected him. Nams recoiled and brought his hands up in a defensive posture.

"Sorry Chief. It's to inoculate you against radiation... best of luck." Lo pocketed her hypo and quickly walked out of the shuttle bay.

"Chief, you're needed," –cough– "onboard. Mr. Bradley, please explain to the Master Chief what we've done..." Brian shuffled over to an antigrav skid and awkwardly took a seat. He didn't bother trying to hide his pain. Somehow things had gone very badly, and Brian wrestled with the notion that he'd somehow failed, yet his mission was clear and at all costs he'd see it through.

"She'll do warp two for a limited time, but you can coax 1.75 out of her until her reserves run dry." Arthur motioned towards the men loading the anti-matter. "That's why you're getting those. You can go through the secondary pump assembly and refill the cells from inside the shuttle when you have to. You know how."

"I'm no pilot Art! What..."

"M'narr's already aboard, Nams," –cough, cough. Brian wanted to sound confident, but a distinct wheeze nearly overpowered his voice. "Your technical expertise is needed...to keep this shuttle moving..." -wheeze- "...you're also the only other member of this crew who knows about

Deployment Resources...” -wheeze- “...Declan’s not likely to wake-up...” Brian waved at Bradley to continue.

“Here, look...” Art walked the Bolian around to the front of the shuttle and pointed to the Class III probe hanging from the shuttle’s belly. “We’ve attached it using the docking clamp. M’narr’s already programmed it with the target co-ordinates at Phanta II. Hopefully you won’t need to launch the cursed thing, but if you do just use the release for the clamp – I’ve tied a magnetic trigger to the probe through the coupling... she’ll spark up and fly all on her own.”

Nams looked at the fat grey pod hanging between the cargo shuttle’s nacelles. As he listened to Bradley, he became aware of M’narr moving around inside the shuttle. Behind him he heard the Captain activate a handheld communicator and begin talking with someone on the Bridge. Licanat walked around the shuttle and back towards the where the Captain was seated. The Crewmen in the radiation suits were disembarking, the antimatter secured.

Still wheezing, Brian continued: “Nams, we don’t have a lot of time. M’narr has his orders” ...wheeze... “he’s to get the intelligence to Phanta II...” –cough– “...anyway he can. Transmit it the second you’re in range and clear of that damned graviton field, download the intel or fire that” ...wheeze... “if you have to. Best case... what I’d want...” –cough, cough– “is to hand deliver it to that big blue one

eyed..." -wheeze- "...BASTARD...in person." Brian winced and doubled over.

Bradley ran to the Comm panel and called for Dr. Lo to return to the shuttle bay.

After a bloody coughing fit, Brian lifted his head and managed a smile. "Nams, you launch now. Hang in low orbit over the Southern Pole..." -cough, wheeze- "...until your scopes are clear and... Kea III is in line with the asteroid field. Don't start your run" ...wheeze... "until you're clear. Understood?" Through the open bay doors Brian caught sight of Br'ev making his way at a run, med-kit in hand.

"Understood, Captain."

"Go."

Nams nodded then turned and shook Art's hand before boarding the shuttle. M'narr had already fired up the engines. Seconds later Nams sat beside M'narr watching *Sheaffe* grow smaller and smaller.

From their vantage point below Kea III, Nams and M'narr watched as their ship moved at low impulse to intercept two massive contacts their shuttle's sensors had detected. The *Sheaffe* was still trailing plasma from her nacelle. She would try to lead the Warbirds on a short pursuit back towards the centre of the system, away from the shuttle. The last thing Nams saw was the fading red glow from the main impulse manifold. On sensors M'narr detected a third contact suddenly appear some three hundred kilometers off *Sheaffe's* stern.

Book 2: Aftermath

Rain pattering. Droning in a million tiny individual explosions. The sound of rain reminded him of his camping trips to the hills of Argus Prime with his father. The sound was always soothing, the cool winds and green scents always calming. Except there were no winds now. The sound of rain, but no cool breeze, no green scents or soothing atmosphere. It was dank, humid. The air around his face didn't move. The sound of rain; the tiny impacts of thousands, no hundreds... maybe just dozens of droplets...

Arthur drew a deep breath of stale humid air into his lungs and ached. He tried to force his eyes open but couldn't quite manage the feat. He was somewhere shy of being completely awake and the ephemeral dreamscape of the rainforests of Argus Prime were gone. He was aware of the sweat pooling and running down his brow but couldn't make his hand move to wipe the sweat from his face. There was water dripping all around him. Each drop echoed. Again, he tried to open his eyes and failed. It wasn't panic that gripped him – he didn't know where he was, but his mind was too thick and foggy for that fact to spur him to anything more than an odd sort of anxiety. He tried to remember how he came to be... wherever he was, but nothing came to him.

The echoing drops blended with a low hum Art couldn't place. His head felt full of fluid and his ears

pounded like drums. He could feel his mind sliding back towards dark sleep and struggled to focus on the drops to at least remain in his present state of semi-consciousness. Focussing on the sounds was difficult, but it helped. Each drop that registered cut a tiny hole in the thick blanket of white noise that seemed to surround him. He couldn't move. The realization was disturbing, but again his head was so thick with haze that panic didn't quite register. Wherever he was, it was warm and humid. The air didn't move, and the pull of black nothingness weighed heavily on his dozey mind – he was losing his bid to stay alert, and he knew it.

Just as he was about to surrender to the pull of exhaustion, his ears picked out a new sound. A sharp, gravelly growl. Like an animal of some kind. There was no native fauna on Argus Prime. The growl snapped and barked a few short bursts of low, guttural burps... and was answered in kind by a distinctly different snarling bark. The two growls snapped and chirped back and forth in a choppy sort of conversation and Art Bradley fell back in his mind to a coma-like state.

She watched as her workstation's screen flickered and displayed the 'working' icon. The office was tied to the Federation's Central Archives through an encrypted secured secondary relay system to ensure security. Directly accessing Federation records from these terminals usually involved a slight delay. The Admiral had close to a full staff back at work now that the 'Upgrade' was finally concluding. The recently promoted Junior Lieutenant was grateful to have the others back at work. As the terminal hummed quietly processing her request, she touched the Lieutenant pins newly affixed to her red tunic and looked out through the large window facing the Academy's landing platform.

A soft chirp announced the completion of the search. Lt. Bull pulled her attention from the bright sunny day outside and opened the files requested. The Admiral had tasked her with assembling some background information for the Special Council Session scheduled for week's end. The file she reviewed was a short two pages – a scant update on a field report submitted by an Arctic Survey team in 2153. The report was submitted to a Fleet Admiral by a Commander Williams – who limited himself to reporting only the most basic facts of a unique discovery the Survey team had made. A link to a data sheet was also noted in the report – which Jose isolated per the Admiral's instructions.

Beyond the nearly unnoticeable access port in the outer office's brilliant white bulkheads was a sleek independent bank of workstations which operated on the Contemporaneous Accessibility Division's (CAD) dedicated system. The archived files pulled from these data banks was a great deal more complete than the Fleet's official records of the 2153 incident. The young Lieutenant had spent an hour reviewing and summarizing the findings Admiral Forrest had painstakingly detailed for Section Operations at the time. The chemical breakdown of Arctic One's found "unidentifiable" alloy was provided in the secure files, as were numerous images from the alien crash-site. The medical records confiscated from the Fleet vessel sent to neutralize and retrieve the rogue alien element which had precipitated a minor emergency were also available.

Her task was simple. The Admiral would be attending the Special Session and would possibly be speaking to CAD's intelligence concerning developments in unclaimed space. It might be necessary to speak to the similarities between the most recent findings from the Kea System to those mentioned nearly two centuries earlier in the archives. The trick was not to put the Admiral in a position where she might have to reveal more than was absolutely necessary about the more detailed bank of knowledge CAD had possession of.

As the young woman worked silently at her station writing a brief synopsis for the Admiral, an amber indicator light began flashing – the stationed Security Officer in the hall beyond had spotted the Admiral's approaching 0930 appointment. The Lieutenant saved her file and collapsed her screen just as the door to the hall hushed open.

An old, terribly thin Bolian walked into the white room and stood for a few seconds blinking at the light and looking a little lost. He was dressed in a clean, red jumpsuit – his boots polished to a shine and the gold Fleet insignia on his chest gleamed. Stitched into the thick fabric pads crowning his shoulders were the markings that denoted the rank of Master Chief. She sat silently at her station watching him acclimate to the bright, sterile office.

Nams blinked twice and had to will himself not to rub at his eyes. The morning sunlight streamed through huge floor-to-ceiling windows and bounced off the brilliant white bulkheads causing him to go temporarily blind. The long eerily deserted hallway he'd navigated to get here had been dimly lit with the same artificial elements used aboard Starships and he'd not been at all prepared for the glaring, glorious brilliance of Earth's yellow sun. Slowly his vision adjusted, and he noticed a young officer sitting at an elevated workstation along the far wall of the white chamber.

Nams approached the Lieutenant dressed in a smart red tunic. She smiled at him. He smiled back and fumbled

for the data card he'd been provided with by Fleet Security. The red card was handed over and the Lieutenant dropped it into a reader molded into her station. Something populated one of her screens which she glanced at briefly before pulling the card and depositing it into a subtle receptacle.

"Master Chief, the Admiral will be ready for you momentarily. If you'd care to have a seat, it won't be long." She'd already known what to expect. The hard copy of the Chief's personnel file and orders was really just a formality meant to make him feel more at ease.

"Thank you, ma'am." Nams offered the Lieutenant a slight nod and turned to walk towards the small seating area by the huge window.

He eased into one of the two chairs positioned on either side of a potted tree and looked out towards the landing platforms behind the Academy. He'd spent weeks as a guest of Fleet Security, just off-campus. He'd wanted for nothing but was prevented from leaving or speaking to anyone for "security reasons". Today's meeting was supposed to be a debriefing and an end to all that. He activated the tiny screen built into the arm of his chair and noted the time. Distractedly, he wondered what the odd pin on the young woman's uniform meant – he'd never seen an officer with such a decoration. The long silver bar marked with three red slashes was... distinct.

With a sudden near-silent whoosh, a hatchway he'd not even noticed flew open in the wall to his left. As a reflex Nams was out of his chair and half ready to bolt.

"The Admiral will see you now, Master Chief."

From the observation port in the *Isadore's* Ready Room, Shohr could just make out the running lights on *Ogden*. They'd been patrolling the same spatial grids for thirteen weeks – detecting probable Romulan vessels criss-crossing the Neutral Zone and yet, had been permitted to do nothing about it. For Shohr, who'd had hopes of proving his valour in combat, it had been a grossly disappointing first assignment as Captain. He looked from the distant lights of *Ogden* to focus on his own translucent reflection on the surface of the transparent aluminum and questioned his decision to remain in Starfleet. The digital chime indicating someone was at his door broke him away from his thoughts.

“Enter!”

The door “hushed” open, and Commander Yeal stepped in, pad in hand. Shohr turned away from the view port and took two confident steps towards his First Officer.

“Captain, communications have received a coded message for you from Earth.”

“Priority?”

“Coded private and confidential, sir. Not urgent.” Yeal had grown used to his Andorian Captain's style of command, but still bristled at the man's unrelenting authoritarianism.

Shohr stepped to the workstation on his desk and opened a channel to the Communications Station just beyond the bulkhead on the Bridge. "P'nom. This is Shohr. Transfer that message to this station, comply."

"Aye, sir."

Shohr closed the channel and almost immediately noted the flashing indicator on his personal Comm panel indicating a waiting message. "Anything further, Yeal, or was Lt. P'nom simply incapable of contacting me directly with this?"

"Aye, sir. We've registered a subspace distortion 150,000 km off our starboard bow. The variations detected are in-line with the emissions we've come to identify with..."

"Romulans and their damn field generators."

"Yes..." Yeal could see the icy blue eyes of his Captain begin to bulge and knew what was about to come next. "As per your standing orders sir, navigation has charted three possible intercept courses and tactical has firing solutions for each."

"Very well. Log the event and be sure to include it in our next regular update. Anything else?" Shohr knew they could have the Romulan in a matter of moments – if only he were allowed to hunt the quarry he'd been sent to flush-out – but no, observe and report were his orders.

"Captain Evers has signalled that the *Wexford* is to cycle back to the Terran Sector for resupply and

redeployment. He's been ordered to make way tomorrow by 1500."

"Did Starfleet copy us on these orders?" *A ploy perhaps...a ruse by the Romulans to weaken the group and attack...*

"Yes, Captain, orders received and verified. We can expect the *USS Brandon* in three weeks..." Yeal handed his pad to his Captain.

"Three weeks?" Shohr turned back towards the view port. He couldn't readily make out the *Ogden* now.

"Yes, sir. Captain Evers apparently protested the orders but was shouted down. Shall I have P'nom raise Starfleet?"

"No. Why bother? We're nothing but a buffer on this side of the Zone anyway – Fleet Command knows that. We're fortunate they haven't simply recalled both our support vessels to give us some alone time to have afternoon tea with our Romulan friends." Shohr felt the blood rush to his head. The frustration was growing unbearable.

Yeal watched as his Captain's antennae flexed and stood ridged.

"Anything else, Commander?"

"No, sir."

"Dismissed."

"Thank you, sir."

The chamber beyond the bright, white outer area was vast. Stepping through the door and into what Nams assumed was the Admiral's office, he found himself standing in a short corridor leading to a wide, open space that seemed to be teeming with men and women dressed in black coveralls. He stepped onto a deep blue carpet that ran the length of the corridor into the chamber and directly to a large desk/workstation where he could see an older human woman dressed in reds.

"Master Chief Licanat, please come in. Come in and take seat."

Nams cleared his throat and tried to walk confidently down the blue carpet. He managed a smile, but his eyes darted around the massive room which was finished in polished black bulkheads and floors. He quickly counted a dozen humans dressed in black. There were workstations, screens and terminals throughout the room. He'd noticed transporter pads nestled in the short corridor he'd just passed through.

His eyes took a moment to adjust to the light. There were two narrow floor-to-ceiling windows in the chamber on either side of the towering wall of screens and panels that served as an ominous backdrop to the Admiral's desk. The narrow windows seemed to be the only source of light for the room. Nams navigated two subtle, curving steps

which led up to a pair of large chairs fronting the Admiral and stood rod straight until the older woman gave him permission to sit.

“Thank you for coming, Master Chief. I’m Admiral Maureen Bautlin.”

Nams smiled and tried to hide his unease. The light from the two windows didn’t illuminate the shadows gathered behind the black workstation. Nams could just make out the outline of the Admiral’s features, the clustered badge of rank resting on her tunic’s shoulder strap, the gold Starfleet insignia pinned to her chest and the silver bar with the 3 red hash marks resting just below it. Outside, Nams could see the famed Golden Gate Bridge bathed in glorious sunshine.

“Certainly, Admiral. Nams Licanat, ma’am. Please, call me Nams.” Though he couldn’t quite make out the Admiral’s face, Nams thought the woman was smiling.

“Very good then, Nams. I’ve reviewed your reports as well as all the data you and Lt. Commander M’narr salvaged from *USS Sheaffe*...”

“Lieutenant Commander?” Nams brought his left hand to his mouth quickly in some attempt to pull back the outburst.

“Yes, Mr. M’narr was here yesterday for debriefing. You are both to be formally commended for your actions and I’ve been authorized to allow both of you the freedom to select your next posting, if so desired.”

"I see...well, that's certainly something. M'narr, a Commander, my that's...that's something indeed..."

"He seemed quite happy with the promotion. I imagine he's preparing to ship out even now." Maureen activated her desktop terminal and rotated it around for the old Bolian to see.

"Epsilon VIII? Communications Director... well, if anyone's capable it's M'narr, certainly."

"Which brings me to you, Nams. You've had a full career. You've risen to the top of the command chain for non-commissioned officers. What will your next adventure be?"

"Oh my, Admiral! I, I just did my job. Captain Harris and the crew, they're the ones who are the heroes in all of this. When are you sending search and rescue? Depending on which ships you're using, I might be able to assist with the effort."

Maureen spun her terminal back to its normal position and turned off the display with M'narr's "orders". Both the Master Chief and Lt. M'narr had spent two weeks blindly traversing a graviton-heavy asteroid field, then another three weeks isolated in the automated facility on Phanta II before a ship reached them to ferry them back to Earth in near total isolation. Licanat had no idea what the status of *Sheaffe* was, and M'narr hadn't even bothered to ask.

“Master Chief, after reviewing the materials retrieved, going over your shuttle’s flight records and conducting a thorough sweep ourselves... I regret to inform you that the *Sheaffe* and all hands, save yourself and the Lt. Commander, have been declared lost.”

Nams swallowed hard – tried to speak, then stopped himself with a short cough.

“Your admiration for your shipmates has been noted, Nams... I’m sorry.”

“Romulan bastards...” Nams said this more into his chest than to the Admiral.

“We’re investigating the possible Romulan involvement you and Mr. M’narr had noted in your reports.” She watched as the old man wrestled to compose himself. She’d been committed to the course of action Section Command had worked out for handling the crew of the *Sheaffe*, but at that instant – watching the Master Chief struggle to hold back tears, an alternative occurred to her. “Are you familiar with the *USS Isadore*, Master Chief?”

Nams cleared his throat and sniffled slightly. “No, Ma’am.”

“She’s an *Excelsior*-class Cruiser, presently on assignment along the Neutral Zone. I know her captain quite well... he would value a crewman as dedicated and experienced as you.”

“The Romulan Neutral Zone?”

Maureen caught the glint in the old man's eye. "That's right. *Isadore* and two support ships are responsible for keeping an eye on things."

"I don't know."

"The *Brandon* is scheduled to join *Isadore*, she's to depart this evening as a matter of fact. One of *Isadore's* escorts is already on her way back for resupply, *Brandon* will be her replacement. I can arrange passage for you..." She stopped herself mid-sentence when she saw the Bolian raise his hand and shake his head.

"Ma'am...thank you, but no, no. I'm done. It's retirement for me."

Maureen had read all the reports. Nams Licanat had spoken numerous times about his plans to retire to the colony on Varga II. He'd completed his mandatory service with the Fleet and even put in additional tours after he was eligible for retirement. She looked past the old Bolian sitting in front of her – tears now streaking his face and caught sight of Moddax standing at the archive terminal across the room. Moddax didn't have to say a word for Maureen to know that he'd heard what she'd said to the Master Chief, and he did not approve.

"It's Varga II then, Nams?"

"Yes, ma'am... I'm sorry." Nams wiped his sleeve across his face in an effort to clear away his tears and shame.

“No, Mr. Licanat, I’m sorry. It’s never easy breaking this kind of news. I shouldn’t have tried to push you back out there. Do you need to make arrangements to head home, or contact family?” She knew the answer to these questions, but it was necessary to make what came next seem natural. She watched Moddax walk towards the transporter control terminal.

“No, ma’am. The *Sheaffe*’s been my home for more years than I care to admit. No family now that she’s gone” –sniff– “...I suppose I’ll collect my things at the barracks and see about transport to Varga.”

“I can help you there at least, Chief. Please. Use my transporter. Mr. Moddax will send you directly to the barracks and you can still make the afternoon pod if that’s what you wish.”

“Thank you, ma’am” –cough– “that’s very kind.”

Maureen rose from her seat and called over to Moddax, now stationed at the transporter control terminal. The thin, hard-looking man in the black coveralls nodded his understanding after the Admiral directed him to transport the Master Chief to the secure barracks on the other side of the compound. The Master Chief also rose slowly from his chair and thanked the Admiral once again before turning to descend the two steps to the black room’s polished floor. Before he started towards the transporter pad Maureen called to him...

“Again Chief, thank you for your service. You’ve sacrificed so much for the Federation – that sacrifice has not gone unnoticed.”

“Th... thank you, ma’am...” Nams sniffed again and offered the Admiral a slight bow before walking on unsteady legs towards the alcove where Moddax had powered up one of the transport pads.

Forty-five seconds later, Maureen gave Moddax the command to energize and the Master Chief of the late *USS Sheaffe* was engulfed in a dazzling energy beam of light and gently sparkled and glowed and dematerialized.

Maureen watched as the Bolian disappeared. She’d had a meeting with M’narr the day before and had offered him the use of her transporter to beam over to the deployment platform to make arrangements to report to Epsilon VIII. With M’narr, she’d had no interest in watching his final seconds, but Licanat had been different. He’d been a likeable old man. Moddax made a slight adjustment to his transport controls and then powered down the unit.

“Operation complete, Admiral.”

“Confirm, Mr. Moddax, please.”

“The material was washed through the pattern buffer and scattered out over the Bay, Admiral.”

“Very well. Have Security scrub their data from this morning. No records of Master Chief Licanat coming here are to exist.”

“Of course, Admiral...though, I’m curious why you’d even bother to mention the *Isadore* to Mr. Licanat.”

“Last I checked Moddax, I was the head of CAD, not you.”

“Of course, Admiral.”

“Mr. Yeal make our course for grid 247, warp three. Comm, contact Ogden and instruct her to maintain position here until we return.” Shohr walked directly from his Ready Room to the Command seat without stopping.

“Grid 247, Captain?” Commander Yeal had just been preparing tactical response drills for the on-coming shift.

“Is there a problem, Commander?” Shohr sat back in his seat and looked directly at his First Officer standing slack-jawed beside the Ops console. From behind him, Shohr could hear P’nom transmitting Ogden her orders.

“Grid 247, aye, sir. Helm, lay in a course and engage at warp three.” The Commander waited for confirmation of his order from the Lieutenant manning the Helm before taking his own seat to the Captain’s right.

Isadore came about in a graceful arc and slipped into warp seamlessly. At warp three it only took the ship twelve minutes to reach the coordinates specified.

“Commander, we’ve arrived at grid 247, sir.” The helmsman sat poised for whatever command might come next. Behind him he listened as Commander Yeal repeated the information to Captain Ch’ornithon.

“Helm, take up standard sweep protocol gamma-2, two-thirds impulse. Ops, begin subspace scans and monitor for targeted variances.” Shohr barked his orders

directly, no bothering with his usual practice of having his Executive Officer relay commands in the Andorian fashion.

Yeal stiffened and silently watched as the young officers proceeded to execute their orders. Aside from operational chatter their short voyage had been a silent one. After nearly eight months working under Captain Ch'ornithon, Yeal instinctively signaled for Tactical to charge the primary array and have photons on standby. The instant he keyed his authorization into the console mounted beside his own seat, the *Isadore's* computer triggered a ship-wide Yellow Alert. Today the Tactical station was being manned by a young, but confident Ensign who somewhat over-zealously reported phasers ready and photons standing by.

Quietly, Yeal copied the ship's status into his official log noting the exact time the Captain had ordered their sudden departure from the assigned grid they'd left *Ogden* to patrol on her own. He then rose from his station and approached the Captain – to his relief Shohr allowed him to close without protest and quietly waited to hear what his First Officer had to say.

“Sir, it was my understanding that grids 243 through 248 were being patrolled by the Klingons, from their side of the Neutral Zone.” Yeal kept his voice low and was conscious not to drop his eyes from those of his Captain.

“That's correct, Commander. I had a feeling this particular grid might require some added attention this

afternoon, though.” Shohr acknowledged his First Officer’s concern.

“May I ask, sir... was there something in that last message that indicated we needed to be here?” Yeal kept his voice just above a whisper. He didn’t want to give any indication that he wasn’t completely in-step with the Captain as the Bridge crew went about the business of searching for errant Romulans. He handed the Captain another pad he’d scooped from his Bridge station.

Shohr looked over the details listed on the pad. Ship’s status report, engine efficiency numbers, navigational coordinates... a copy of their operational orders – specifically relating to the four spatial grids *Isadore* and her group were supposed to be patrolling. As he buried his desire to laugh at the human’s ham-fisted attempt at subtlety, Shohr considered the Commander’s question.

“Yes, Commander Yeal. As a matter of fact, that last message had a great deal to do with this decision... as do the outdated proximity sensors the Federation has not yet replaced in this grid.”

From the Tactical console Ensign Ayr reported a faint subspace echo from off the *Isadore*’s starboard bow. Ops confirmed the contact and put the variance at less than 80,000km away. Navigation reported two possible intercept points had been plotted and Ensign Ayr was already in the process of plotting firing solutions.

Less than two minutes later *Isadore* was at Red Alert chasing down a subspace distortion.

“Are we ready?”

Lt. Jose Bull gripped the carry-all she was holding a little tighter. “Yes, ma’am. Everything should be in order.”

“Let’s hope so, Lieutenant.”

The young officer watched as the Admiral stepped out from behind her desk and descended from her perch. Together they walked to the dual transporter pads nestled in the alcoves along the corridor that led out into the Reception area Jose usually manned. Seconds later and they rematerialized on the pads below the main Assembly Hall of the Federation Council Chambers in Paris.

Jose had never been to the Chambers before. Admiral U’ Chtuklli had always attended such meetings on his own. Now a Lieutenant and officially registered as Commanding Admiral CAD’s executive assistant, Jose had access to an entirely new world. Bautlin almost immediately got pulled into a conversation with a Commander Jose didn’t know. The man was apparently attached to the Head of Starfleet Security, but Admiral Bautlin knew him from her time commanding the *Victory*. The two shared a few quiet chuckles – remembering “old times”, Jose assumed. Then the Chamber doors opened and the various Admirals, Ambassadors and their small collection of assistants made their way into the Hall.

“Assembled Council members, ladies, gentlemen, this Special meeting of the Select Small Council is now called to order. Please, take your seats. This meeting is classified. In accordance with the General Council’s directives nothing outside of this Small Council’s pre-approved mandate will be entertained and no policy shall be made which does not specifically fall within our legal purview. We are all clear on this, correct?” Admiral Knot, Fleet Operations, looked from face-to-face for understanding.

Jose sat silently as the Admirals and the handful of Ambassadors acknowledged their understanding while they settled in at their separate seats on either side of the Hall. Admiral Bautlin was seated next to Admiral T’Chou, head of Fleet Security. All eyes turned to the Commander-in-Chief, Fleet Admiral Henry Wallace.

“Admiral Knot, sir. The day’s big question: where are we with this Upgrade?”

The Chief of Operations proceeded to report that the upgrade program had wrapped up on time and without unforeseen complications. The Vulcan Ambassador, Sestrick, newly appointed in the wake of the previous Ambassador’s reassignment – wanted an audit of the resources exhausted during the project. She also requested an account of all equipment removed, repurposed or recycled and a disposition of any volatile substances, devices or mechanisms removed from their originally intended purposes. Head of Starfleet Corps of

Engineers, Vice Admiral Sellers agreed to furnish the Ambassador with detailed inventories directly.

Admiral Bautlin sat silently for nearly an hour before discussion came around to CAD's 'Upgrade' project which Admiral Knot boldly referred to as the "Jupiter Installation".

Admiral Henry Wallace cleared his throat. "Admiral Bautlin, good to see Deployment Resources is represented."

"Admiral Wallace, there is no Deployment Resources. As you know I head the Contemporaneous Accessibility Division. As for the Jupiter Yard – the redeployment of eight of Earth's old orbital defense platforms has successfully been completed, per approved specifications."

During the 'Upgrade' project several defensive platforms had been relocated to the Jupiter scrapyard along with an obsolete "K" class substation from Pluto which had been used to link the platforms together on a secure network. The scrapyard had been used to store the mothballed relics from the 2250's and 60's. More recent cast-offs from various refit projects were added to the decaying fleet and Section Command successfully made a pitch to secure the site and move the entire operation into a low polar orbit below the gas giant.

Admiral Sellers confirmed there were presently fifty-three vessels registered at Jupiter. Most of these were heavy

cruisers and capitol ships in various states of disarmament and disrepair. An inventory was requested by the Vulcan Ambassador. Admiral Knot refrained from pushing his own misgivings about what he considered a rather dubious expenditure of assets and resources for a very large installation. There had been rumors of course, but nobody had any real notion of what was actually going on beneath Jupiter.

Spacedock 17 had only recently been relocated to Jupiter from Earth. Officially it was to be broken down and scrapped – but 17 was presently tending to the needs of the last operational *Nimrod*-class Cruiser Section Command had. The last three remaining *Hou-Yi* medium scout vessels regularly patrolled the interior confines of the new scrap field. They were old, but in pristine condition and completely mission ready. The last remaining elements of the “dark fleet”.

“Thank you, Admiral Sellers. If anyone here has concerns regarding the Jupiter Yard, I’d be happy to furnish the details of how our largest scrapyard has been secured at a fraction of the costs associated with much larger projects – such as the expansion at Utopia Planitia.” Planitia, Bautlin knew, was a far more interesting point of contention than her scrapyard.

A stir of murmurs and hushed conversations rippled through the Hall. The two largest orbital exo-docks had been moved from Earth to Mars, where they had been

upgraded. The existing research facilities had been expanded to include three independent Starship design and development facilities. These new shipyards were to replace the long-standing facilities at San Francisco – a cause for some fierce debate both on the floor of the General Council and among the Heads of Starfleet.

A brief recess was called.

The dogs were growling and snapping at one and other somewhere out of sight. They sounded big and mean... growling and snarling, but not really barking at one and other. Art imagined there must be at least 3 of them somewhere close, carrying on in an odd back-and-forth. It was so warm. Where had the rain gone?

Slowly Art realized there were no dogs. The growling wasn't dogs. He tried to roll over but couldn't move. The snarling snapping and yipping that had been the banter between huge dogs in his sleep were close. He was sure he was awake, but the growling from his nightmare continued. He tried to lift his head and couldn't. The dogs fell silent then. Art lay helpless and felt eyes on him. He struggled to flutter his right eyelid, fought with all the strength he could muster to force the skin to retract and allow him a glimpse of the world.

He could feel the warm air on his naked eyeball, but everything was black. There was a sharp sting and the eyelid crashed closed. A bark rang out, like someone had told a Doberman a particularly funny joke and the monster had laughed in the only way it could. Art drew in a painful breath of stale, moldy air and forced his eye to open and close two more times. The pain was tremendous – though the sting was less and less. On the third try at opening his eye, the blackness grew smoky and bright – a tear rolled

down his face towards his right ear. Then all at once vision came back to him.

At first, he just lay looking straight up at a craggy black and gray tangle of rock interlaced with fine dark purple fissures. He realized he was in a cave, or underground somewhere. He had no idea how he'd come to be... wherever. The last thing he remembered was being in the turbolift. Then the growling and yipping resumed. Art willed himself to look off to the side, towards the sounds from his nightmare.

What he saw was a fleeting glimpse of a monster from his earliest childhood. Before losing consciousness, he saw three hulking forms huddled close together deeper in the darkness. They were all bald and the closest one stepped into a shaft of muted light to reveal a demonic creature Art knew only existed on an ancient film reel from centuries ago...

The last thing his exhausted mind took in was the sight of the monster's milky-white translucent eyes and gray/green skin. Its eyes were framed by two devilish ears which came to sharp points on either side of its massive bald head. As it looked at him, a snarling growl snapped out from behind a mouthful of narrow pointed rat-like teeth.

Nosferatu.

The word appeared in Art's mind suddenly. He couldn't place what it meant, but it was

terrifying. *Nosferatu*. It came from some long-forgotten memory. Bradley whimpered and his eye shut.

Isadore closed on the subspace distortion. The technique was far from perfected, but in the recent months all Fleet vessels patrolling the Neutral Zone had honed their ability to weed out subspace variances to possibly identify cloaked vessels in their close to mid sensor ranges. Shohr had ordered his tactical systems to the ready and had switched the main viewer over to full tactical display. His First Officer sat to his right, calmly directing the helmsman to maintain their pursuit.

“Sir, confirmation of subspace distortion now 30,000km off our starboard bow. I’m not detecting variance readings consistent with previous Romulan intercepts.”

Tactical confirmed three firing solutions plotted and ready. Commander Yeal ordered the helmsman to maintain present distance from target. Shohr countermanded his Exec and ordered increased speed to position *Isadore* above and behind the unidentified signal.

“Sir, we don’t know if this is a Romulan craft...”

“Thank you, Mr. Yeal, but you’re wrong. I do know this isn’t a Romulan. It’s Klingon. Helm, you heard my order, now place us between those dogs and the Zone.”

“Aye, sir.” *Isadore* increased to full impulse and quickly closed the 30,000km gap between themselves and the distortion.

"Captain, if it's Klingon then how did they get past our sensors?" Yeal had his eyes fixed on the tactical display. They couldn't be completely certain where the presumed cloaked ship was, but by positioning *Isadore* aft and above the general distortion, Captain Ch'ornithon had given them an optimal firing advantage.

"Reading an energy surge, sir. Vessel decloaking 1200km port bow!"

"Ensign Ayr, ready phasers." Shohr sat back in his seat and scowled. He ordered Ops to switch the viewer back to the standard configuration.

At first there was nothing, then suddenly a noticeable distortion rippled and marred the black starfield and a dull, grey Klingon battle cruiser appeared. Her aft was directed towards *Isadore*, but she hung too low for her rear torpedo tube to be of any threat. Time on the Bridge seemed to slow to a crawl. Shohr focused on the image – scanning every detail of the D-7. Ayr was calling out weapons ready, Ops was receiving a priority transmission, Yeal was ordering Science One to scan the Klingon ship for hostile intent and status. Shohr's eyes were picking out every detail of the ragged hole ripped in the Klingon's upper hull just to the right of their secondary stabilizers.

"Put them on-screen, Ops." Shohr barked.

"Captain, they report their communications system has been compromised. Audio only." Without having to

ask, the sound of the Klingon commander's voice was channeled over the Bridge speakers.

It took the universal translator a second to tie into the audio transmission. Yeal and the rest of the Bridge crew sat in silence as the snarling guttural snaps of Klingon echoed off their bulkheads before the raspy hostile voice was replaced with a virtual doppelganger which spoke fluent Standard.

"...are the Imperial Cruiser *Amtak-Rah*. We are patrolling this space for Romulan intruders how dare you interfere with our mission!"

Shohr rose to his feet and wet his lips. He turned to P'nom and nodded for an open channel. The Klingon's voice was suddenly shut off.

"I am Captain Ch' ornithon of the *USS Isadore*. YOU are in violation of Treaty, sir. You have been caught on the wrong side of the Zone, operating without permission and under cloak." Shohr walked around to Ensign Ayr and indicated the firing solution the young man was to use when ordered.

".... Captain Ch' ornithon...we struck a Romulan mine some 18 hours ago. We're still making repairs. It appears our navigation systems were compromised resulting in our, unintended intrusion into your space..."

"I see. Well, you can come about and follow heading 323 mark 45 at impulse speed. You'll find your way

back to Klingon space quick enough – and you'll do so with your cloak down."

A heavy silence filtered through the open Comm channel. Ayr had noted that the D-7's offensive systems had gone active the moment they'd dropped their cloak. Yeal could feel the sweat running down the back of his neck. Shohr walked deliberately back around to his Command chair, his cheeks flush and antennae erect – an angry grin on his lips.

".... thank you for your assistance, *Isadore*. We will not require anything further at this time. Cha-veh!"

“...ken.....human....”

Sounds were echoing distantly. Dogs again? Arthur managed a shuddering breath. He'd been unconscious. There was a gap. A blackness between the dogs and the... monsters, and now. No dreams, or thoughts filling the void between. There were sounds now – echoing somewhere high above him.

“...human... AWAKEN!”

Another shuddering breath – slowly Art was able to open both his eyes. He could feel nothing below his jaw, but his head seemed clearer than the last time he tried to rejoin the waking world.

“Very good. You have responded. I was concerned our minders had mistakenly administered too very much medicine.”

Art blinked a few times and waited for the dark ceiling to come into focus. Whoever was speaking to him had an odd accent he couldn't place. The rocks were unchanged and maybe that was good, Art thought absently – or perhaps not? He tried to raise his head, but he couldn't even feel the strain of his muscles and his view remained unchanged.

“Gor-lov-ka Bak Snat-ack!”

Art's eyes widened at the savage sound. He recognized the noise from his nightmare visions the last time he managed to look around. The dogs were here. The hounds were close.

"Tsk! Llilla'hu, ehwiyhwe'lmniuhfi'hwhueiurr'at 'hh emaehe iut hveolhaonn."

Bradley managed another deep breath and tried to keep his mind calm. He had no idea what was going on. The dog, the growling monster – had been quieted by the other voice. Nothing of what'd been said had made any sense to him. He listened intently for any sound that might give him a sense of what was happening, or where he was, or what might be coming next. He thought he could hear breathing and the slow shuffling of feet... then a face appeared above him.

"Hello. I am Tikot Ketor. I would much like to speak with you, if you will allow it – Chief Engineer Artoor Bradley."

Arthur blinked fiercely and tried again to raise his head to no avail. The man standing over him was a Romulan. He was being held by Romulans. His mind raced – frantically he tried to recall his last moments aboard the *Sheaffe*...

"Artoor... am I pronouncing that correctly?" The Romulan looked down on the human with a sense of apathy. From what he was given to understand the man was old for his Race, and apparently frail.

“Wh...? Are you trying to say my name?” Arthur looked up at the Romulan and was able to keep his eyes fixed on him as he backed away and took up a relaxed stance off to Art’s left-hand side.

“Yes, your name. I spoke with one of the lesser crew members recovered from your vessel a few days ago. She shared a good deal, but as she expired her pronunciations were...iebhe fviafvev, erm... hard to follow. I will apologize, I don’t often have the opportunity to speak your language and I fear I may be out of context... no, practice.”

Art could see the man from his mid-section up. He didn’t appear to be wearing any kind of uniform. Neither did he appear to be armed. As the Romulan stood waiting for a response, Bradley noted that the man’s brow was furrowed – he was clearly unsure if he was being understood. Then it occurred to Arthur that he’d been able to turn his head to the left. Keeping his eyes fixed on the Romulan – with his mind preoccupied with the unseen monster he’d heard only a moment ago, Arthur tried to roll himself over... and failed.

Ketor watched as the old human strained and failed to move on the restraining table. This was the third survivor he’d had the opportunity to speak with from the shattered Federation vessel. If the update Mivik had just delivered was true, this would be the last human Ketor would likely be speaking with for the foreseeable future.

“You... you attacked us!” Arthur wanted to sound strong – but he was weak, and his voice was hollow and weary. The Romulan just stood quietly, looking at him.

“No. You violated our space and were dealt with accordingly.” Ketor cocked his head to the side and watched the old human begin to perspire.

“We were in unclaimed space... bastard.” Bradley gasped.

“I am sorry, Chief Engineer – your curses do not offend me. Though I speak your language, many of the subtleties escape me, sadly.” Ketor looked over to where Mivik stood silently and nodded.

Arthur tried to swallow but couldn't. He slowly turned his head to try and see who, or what the Romulan was gesturing to. Before he could manage the full turn from left to right another face appeared above him. An embarrassing squeak escaped him as the monster suddenly came into his field of view. A cold rough hand wrapped itself around his jaw and the creature began pouring warm water down his throat. Bradley choked and felt the water running out of his mouth and nostrils. Then just as suddenly as the creature had appeared – it withdrew to the shadows.

Ketor watched the human cough and spittle water all over itself. He wished he could simply release the creature from the restraining field, but that was not an option presently. The human wheezed and coughed some

more before settling. The look of fear was firmly fixed on the old human's face. Ketor reached behind him and pulled a stool into position then took a seat. The humans' huge saucer-shaped eyes were firmly fixed on him.

"Better, yes?"

–Cough– "Wh...WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT!?"

–Cough, cough–

"Just to talk, Artoor. I will be leaving the day after next. I have duties that are being neglected because of your intrusion that must be attended to. This is my only opportunity to speak with you. Certainly, your only opportunity to speak to anyone." He allowed himself a slight smile.

"Where's my ship?"

"You know the unfortunate answer to that question, Chief Engineer." He was pleased to see the old human coming around to reason so much quicker than the younger survivors of the Earth ship had.

Bradley coughed again. "What was that thing?" To his shame he could now feel tears rolling down his face.

"*Thing?*... ah, yes. No, I don't suppose you have ever seen a Reman before. That, Artoor, is our host – Mivik." Ketor looked past the pathetic human and caught sight of Mivik's translucent eyes – eerily lit in the half light of the cavern.

Chimes sounded to signal an end to the recess period.

“You have the pad, Lieutenant?”

Lt. Bull quickly pulled the carryall she’d slung over her shoulder from her hip into her hands. “Right here, Admiral.”

Maureen looked at the junior officer and nodded. Before she could say anything further, she was joined by the Head of Starfleet Security, and Jose was left to make her way back into the Hall on her own.

“Thank you all, I call this session of the Select Small Council back to order. I remind all in attendance of our mandate and the provision that everything discussed today is to be considered classified.” Knot nodded to Admiral Wallace and then consulted his own itinerary.

Jose sat silently. Admiral Bautlin had positioned the pad on the countertop in front of her. Bull looked casually down the row of Admirals and Ambassadors sitting on her side of the Chamber – they all had pads. Across the Hall on the other side of the Chamber, the Vulcan and Tellarite Ambassadors had several assistive devices at the ready as well.

“Madam Ambassador, did the clerk of record enter the audits you requested during our first session?”

Sestrick, the Vulcan Ambassador, consulted with her attendant briefly in a hushed exchange before calmly confirming that her various requests had been noted and entered into the record.

“Very good then. If there are no objections, let’s move on to the more salient issues facing this Council. The ‘Upgrade’ initiative appears to have been completed successfully – where do we stand on the belligerence and origin of the graviton disturbance that prompted all this in the first place? Admiral T’Chou?”

The Head of Starfleet Security rose and made his way to the floor. His assistant, a sharp-eyed middle-aged Commander, waited for the Admiral to reach the floor of the Chamber before activating the Hall’s projection system. Skylights high above automatically shuttered themselves and a sharp, blue light sparked from hidden emitters. A three-dimensional representation of the Typhon Sector filled the floor stretching from the fringes of the Federation’s borders out towards the Kea System and beyond.

“As we know, more than two years ago a Federation starship on routine patrol encountered a graviton field of immense strength. The vessel was overwhelmed by the field – her sensors and navigational systems completely overloaded. The data collected was analyzed by the best minds here on Earth at Daystrom, as well as at the Vulcan Science Academy. The results were extremely unsettling...

you've all been furnished with the latest assessments of those readings."

On both sides of the Hall, Ambassadors and Admirals consulted their pads. The readings the *USS Sheaffe* had recorded had been refined and they confirmed unprecedented highly focused graviton radiation emanating from somewhere beyond Federation space.

"The same vessel on a follow-up patrol more than a year later encountered a graviton heavy asteroid just beyond the Typhon Expanse. You will note that the Captain and ship's Science Officer attempted to retrieve samples from this asteroid and were lost. You'll find this listed as report number 4674.3 in the supplemental file attached to the Daystrom data." Admiral T'Chou walked through the projection on the floor to indicate where the asteroid in question was encountered.

Another murmur rippled through the Hall as the dignitaries consulted the provided reports to verify what they were being told.

"It was determined relatively quickly that the scope and concentration of this graviton field was not likely a natural phenomenon. To that end speculation ran to possible culprits, the most likely being our friends in the Romulan Star Empire."

Upon review of the initial readings the Federation Council authorized a massive acceleration of ship construction, increased recruitment and fast-tracked

numerous infrastructure projects to be prepared for a wide range of contingencies. The effort quickly became referred to as “the Upgrade”. The evidence they were working from was taken to signal a serious threat to the stability of the Federation. In the wake of the Khitomer Accords and the delicate balance between a still-wounded Klingon Empire and a somewhat depleted Fleet – the prospect of a new Romulan crisis was terrifying.

“Admiral T’Chou, it is illogical to assign culpability in the absence of fact.”

“Thank you, Ambassador Sestrick, but didn’t we all do just that when we fast-tracked the ‘Upgrade’? At this time, I would like to share some new facts then. Starfleet Security has gleaned from various sources that Romulan activity deep within the Kea System is confirmed to be at the origin point of this graviton blast.” Admiral T’Chou stood triumphantly for a moment, illuminated by the artificial starfield around him.

Seemingly unaffected by the claim, Ambassador Sestrick dispassionately joined a new line of inquiry. “From what sources have you determined this?”

“Several deep-space probes have returned evidence of a small Romulan fleet operating in solar orbit between the large star at the heart of the Kea System, Beta TS-4645-002 and its smaller companion star. Files are still being compiled and will be made available to this Select Council by day’s end, I’m told.”

Admiral Wallace Starfleet Commander in Chief interjected: "Admiral T'Chou, we all agreed to the 'Upgrade' out of concern that this blast may well have signaled some new Romulan threat. Have the Romulans, as originally feared, developed some new kind of weapon?"

The murmuring grew louder. Lt. Bull watched as pads were picked up, notes made, and fevered instructions were dictated to assistants all around her. Admiral Bautlin remained passive. She sat perfectly still, watching Admiral T'Chou dramatically move through his presentation and make use of the data CAD had quietly provided Starfleet Security only a week earlier.

"To be fair, we don't know if this is a result of a weapons discharge. We've had reports for some time that the Romulans are experimenting with new forms of power to propel their ambitions to modernize their fleet. This blast was massive in scope – easily capable of crippling any vessel, fleet or possibly even orbital platform or station it might be directed towards. If it was produced by a weapon – it would follow that the weapon in question must itself be intended perhaps even for planetary use. Conceivably, the Romulans could render entire worlds defenseless and open to conventional invasion. If this graviton expulsion had something to do with their research into a new power source, perhaps their intent is less sinister, but equally unsettling."

“Do we have evidence either way, Admiral? Weapon or research? If the Romulans are responsible for this event, what do you believe is their purpose?”

On the view screen the D-7 came about and slowly moved off on the recommended heading. Tactical reported that the Klingons had disengaged their offensive systems.

“Yellow Alert. Ensign, maintain a close watch on that ship. Helm, hold position until the *Amtak-Rah* is back on her own side of the Neutral Zone.” Shohr wanted to spit, he was so angry. He’d “won”, but what he’d really hoped for was a fight.

Commander Yeal watched as the Captain walked off the Bridge back to his Ready Room. Before the door closed behind him, Captain Ch’ ornithon called-back for Yeal to join him. The tension on the Bridge was heavy.

The door hushed closed behind the First Officer. “Sir, how did you know the Klingons...”

“You will listen to me very closely, Commander. If you ever hesitate to carry out one of my commands like that again or think to question my authority, I will have you thrown in the brig and drummed-out of the Fleet. Do you understand?” Shohr stood perfectly still behind his desk, looking out of the view port. Yeal’s faint reflection was perfectly captured on the transparent aluminum.

“I... Captain, I meant no disrespect...”

“What you say does not align with your actions, mister. The Klingons have been getting past our sensor

drones easily for quite some time. Now they know that we know. Unless they want a war, and I don't mind sharing that I hope they find their courage and choose just that... they won't be so cavalier in the future. You'll report this to Fleet Command presently. They will be in touch with the High Council."

"Of course, sir... I apologize. I meant no offense."
Yeal's mind was reeling.

"Brian Harris."

"Sir?"

"An old friend from my Academy days. He and I served our first tour aboard my Uncle's Raider during a secondment to the Andorian Imperial Guard. He discovered the flaw in standard Fleet sensor drone nets. I got word today that he died."

"I'm sorry to hear that sir. My condolences."

"He died in service. There's nothing to be sorry about. Get that dispatch to Command ASAP, Mr. Yeal. Once that Klingon mongrel is back on his side of the Zone, get us back to *Ogden*. She's ill-equipped to deal with matters on her own. Dismissed."

Ketor sat quietly on his stool, watching Mivik administer another litre of water to the human. The fear with which the old man regarded the Reman was almost amusing, but laughter at his subject's expense would not speed things along. Ketor simply watched the procedure with the kind of detachment a Vulcan would be proud of. As the human gulped and sputtered loudly, Ketor wondered how much water was actually finding its way down the old man's throat. Mivik was a formidable warrior – as nurse, he left a great deal to be desired. When the procedure was over, he waited for the human to compose himself before continuing with their conversation.

Long moments passed. Arthur lay as quietly as he could, looking at the craggy ceiling. The Romulan had just finished explaining how the rest of the crew were dead. According to the man – to “Ketor” as he wished to be called, only five survivors were retrieved. They'd found him in the turbolift which had apparently plummeted to the bottom of its shaft during the *Sheaffe's* engagement with the Warbirds. Two crewmen never regained consciousness and “expired” en route to the facility. A tech from Licanat's crew... Ketor didn't have the boy's name readily available, tried to run and was cut down by one of the Remans. Only Yeoman Lantz had survived the voyage from the *Sheaffe* to this place. She'd been the source of much of Ketor's

information. Art didn't know the young woman personally, but he could see her face in his mind as clear as a bell. She'd died of internal injuries three days earlier.

"Arthur, my name is Arthur... we were in unclaimed space..." Art hadn't meant to whisper, but he didn't have the strength for much more.

"No... Arthur. You were in Romulan space. The fact that your Federation is apparently unaware of our claim to this system doesn't negate the simple reality of the situation."

"So, we're still in the Kea System, then?" Arthur felt he'd won a minor point.

"Arthur, you'll never leave the Kea System. Now, I would like to hear about the readings your vessel collected, why you came here in the first place and... why were all your computer files deleted?"

The Earth vessel had been easily over-powered and boarded by Mivik and his warriors following a brief firefight. The fact that the inferior vessel had rendered the *Volto* badly crippled was something of an embarrassment, but overall, the humans were quickly crushed. It took the Reman crews nearly five cycles to gain access to the main computer on what was left of the vessel's Bridge. When they did, none of the data banks had any readable information available. Technicians were working with the few components and processor cores retrieved from the

shattered ship, but much of the data had been completely scrubbed.

“...you’re violating the accords...let me off this table...”

“Arthur, I am afraid Mivik will not allow that. Besides, it is not likely you’d be able to stand anyway. Your legs were shattered from what I understand... as well as your, hip and... Ilillevek? Pelvis? Is that the word?”

Bradley strained to roll off the table in defiance of the Romulan, but aside from a weak grunt that escaped him, nothing changed. He could feel nothing below his neck.

Ketor sighed and stifled another urge to laugh at this old human. “When the Remans boarded your vessel they brought back various items of interest. Mivik and his Elite were tasked with securing your computer files. Imagine how disappointed they were to discover their efforts had yielded nothing? The others claimed what they could from your medical section. They had quite a time putting you back together and learning how your devices functioned – though I rather think their inexperience shows in the work.”

Arthur lay in silence. They’d killed his crew, boarded and pillaged his ship, let the few survivors die in indifference... and used him like a lab rat. Rage wasn’t an emotion Bradley had experienced a great deal in his sixty some years, but at that moment he’d happily murder the

Romulan, the Reman and anyone or anything else he could get his hands on...

“...you work for Mivik, then?” Arthur was grateful his face was still soaked in warm water – the tears that were streaming from his eyes might be less noticeable.

Ketor sighed again. The tremble in the human’s voice was simply pathetic. “Arthur... I do not answer to Mivik, but this facility is a Reman installation. As for the Accords I am afraid they only apply to Romulan and Federation matters. You and I are guests of the Remans here. Now, I would like to know what it is your vessel was doing here and what data you erased from your computers.”

Arthur shook his head feebly and tried again to move an arm, or leg. From somewhere he could hear the sound of unseen Remans snapping and growling a conversation at one and other. Almost from the moment he opened his eyes and saw Ketor standing above him, Arthur knew he was never leaving the cavern – but he still racked his brain for some strategy or some sign that there might be hope. He could see none. All he had was his rage.

“What” –cough- “what kind of man are you? To do this? I heard you Romulan Security agents were devils...”

Ketor snorted his derision. “Arthur, I am not Tal Shiar, if that is what you mean. Neither am I with the Military. Believe it or not, my purpose here is hopefully to benefit all life in this universe.”

Admiral T'Chou nodded towards the Commander he'd brought with him. The stern-faced man keyed a new sequence into his pad. The Typhon Expanse and the dark starfield that had occupied most of the hall disappeared and a glowing star appeared. Just beneath and behind the star, a second, smaller star came into view. The Admiral stepped through the projection, turned and pointed to the area between the two glowing bodies and the projections expanded outward as the area indicated was revealed.

The Hall was silent for a moment. Silhouetted against the smaller star were three distinct shapes. They looked undoubtedly Romulan in design, but their dimensions dwarfed those of the standard *Keras*-class Warbird. As the recorded images played, several asteroids passed through the space between the smaller star and one of the huge Romulan vessels. The light cast by the larger star glinted off a hundred points scattered across the asteroid's tumbling surface.

Maureen picked up her pad and waited. She didn't know for sure, but she'd felt it wise to prepare for the observations and questions this image might provoke.

"What are we seeing on these asteroids Admiral T'Chou?" Ambassador Sestrack asked in a clear even tone.

"From our analysis it appears several asteroids orbiting TS-4645-002 are peppered with trillithium

fragments. Our probe returned the following breakdown of the metallic contacts.” T’Chou turned towards the projection and reached up towards a window of readings. With a somewhat exaggerated flourish he framed the window, then swept his hands apart – causing the view to expand and clearly reveal the trilithium readings.

Trilithium, which up until that very instant had only ever existed as a theoretical possibility. A supremely strong alloy conventional science had yet to make a reality.

In her seat Ambassador Sestrick sat silently studying the readings. T’Chou rejoined his presentation and began explaining the unsettling dimensions of the Romulan vessels captured by the mysterious probe Fleet Security had somehow positioned deep in unclaimed space. The Ambassador quietly spoke with her aide and reviewed some information from the pad provided by the younger Vulcan.

“I believe, Admiral T’Chou – I have seen these readings before.” The metallic readings – the trilithium returns, were highlighted in bold on the Ambassador’s own pad.

The Admiral stopped speaking and turned to face the Vulcan Ambassador. She was focused on a pad and was clearly trying to call up some information she wanted to share. The Chamber was silent for a moment as Ambassador Sestrick worked quickly at her tablet.

Admiral Bautlin turned to face her young Lieutenant. "Ms. Bull, please quietly return to the office and inform Mr. Moddax to implement Order Five. He'll need your assistance."

In the murmuring silence of the Hall, Jose nodded her understanding and quietly rose and made her way to the exit. As the majority in attendance were focussed on Sestrick working away in her seat, nobody seemed to notice the young Lieutenant leave the room.

“Now Arthur, my time is short. Tell me what your ship was doing so far from Federation boundaries?” Ketor moved his seat closer to the table and spoke in an even and quiet tone.

Bradley lolled his head towards the Romulan and drew a shuddering breath. “Are you going to let me go?” Arthur knew the answer but couldn’t help asking.

“The Praetor has granted dominion over this facility to the Remans. It is they, not I, who hold you.”

“Why should I tell you anything, then?”

Ketor drew a long, measured breath. “The Remans do not speak your language. My own skills are long out of practice. I do not believe I will have leave to speak with a human again – my work here is urgent.”

“What work?”

“Questions. You are not in the position to ask questions – however, tell me what I wish to know, then perhaps I may answer some questions of yours... yes?”

From the darkness a sharp savage chortle rang out. Arthur lay quietly looking up at the Romulan, ignoring the nightmare Remans looking on from some unseen recess.

“I know, Arthur... From speaking with the female from your vessel – you were investigating the graviton field. I know your Commander sent at least one probe to spy on

our work and likely even approached our fleet using the graviton field as cover, then there was some failure?"

Bradley lay silently, hopelessly listening to Ketor's even tone and oddly accented but fluent Standard. He wasn't leaving this cave. That was obvious. The choice he had was to remain silent and likely watch the Romulan grow impatient and simply leave to attend to whatever his urgent work was – which would mean he'd be alone with the Remans, or speak and risk...

"Your vessel is smashed. Your crew dead. Mivik's boarding party had to use... Ilevia bollv... hmm, pressurized environment suits, yes? They required suits, you see? Either you or your Commander had depressurized nearly your entire vessel." Ketor kept his expression blank, but he was growing tired of this exercise.

"What?" Then the final moments in the lift came back... he'd been desperate to get to the Bridge, to stop...

The human couldn't hide his emotions. Tikot allowed himself a smile. "I'm telling you truth, Arthur. From your reaction I surmise your Commander was responsible then. You and the handful of survivors to be brought back here, were discovered in independently pressurized chambers. In your case a transport lift." Ketor nodded to Mivik, who was standing out of sight and waited for the Reman to hand him a data tablet.

"It's not possible..." Art closed his eyes. Even before Ketor offered him a glimpse of the visual record the

Remans had apparently collected during their incursion aboard, Arthur realized that Captain Harris had depressurized the ship. His Captain had done it. Deliberately.

“Here, look... look.” Tikot held the tablet steady for the human to see the state of his ship when the first Reman troops boarded the vessel. For a moment the old human refused to open his eyes, but once he did, he was captivated.

The footage appeared to have been taken from a helmet-mounted recorder. Bradley watched silently as several Reman troops outfitted in black and purple environment suits, all wearing black helmets with reflective purple visors – shuffled in military precision around the Bridge of the *Sheaffe*. He watched in horror as the Remans began probing at the various consoles. The Bridge was dark, nothing seemed to be powered. The only light came from the shoulder-mounted beacons on the Remans’ black suits. Several of them carried what looked like disruptor rifles with barrel-mounted spotlights as well. There was a pile of bodies at the doors to the turbolift. Arthur couldn’t make out just exactly who was who – the Reman cameraman was apparently more interested in capturing shots of the consoles than lingering on the dead humans.

“...what work?”

Ketor withdrew the tablet. “Excuse me, Arthur?”

“Your work here, is urgent. You said that. What work.”

“Shall I tell you, Arthur?” Tikot returned the tablet to Mivik. The human was broken.

Tears began rolling down his cheeks again, but Art made no effort to hide them. He pieced together what had happened. All of them heaped together at the lift. Blown from their posts towards the turbolift shaft... He might not have the why, but he knew the how. Before he died, he needed to know it had all been for something. “Yes, tell me.”

“I will, Arthur. My word on this. First you must tell me, what specifically was your Commander after? What did you find and what did you do with this information? Unburden yourself Arthur. Tell me what I want to know, and I will give you insight to perhaps ease your mind.”

The Imperial Raider *Shryth* dropped out of warp and smoothly came about to bring her main batteries to bear on the disabled freighter which had been detected drifting just outside of the approved trading corridor running along the Andorian border. The Raider loomed above the crippled hulk – her graceful form poised like a dagger ready to strike.

“Initiate contact.” Shis Ch’ Ornithon, the Captain of the *Shryth* sat forward in his Command chair studying the freighter on his viewer.

“No response, Captain.”

“Shohr, raise screens and initiate tactical scans.” Shis kept his eyes fixed on their target trusting his nephew, freshly graduated from the Earthers’ Academy, to follow his order.

“Scans confirm minimal power readings, no offensive systems detected.” Shohr’s chest swelled, and he couldn’t help his antennae from standing erect – he was on the bridge of an Imperial Raider, exactly where he’d always wanted to be.

“Human, standby on tractor emitter. Hold for my direction.” Shis had less confidence in the pink human his nephew had brought along from Earth.

Brian snapped-out a crisp, “Aye, Captain.”

The opportunity to serve aboard an Imperial Guard Raider was beyond unique. While Andoria was a founding member of the Federation, they'd always maintained their own fleet and Command Structure. Officer exchanges had been few and far between over the century plus since the Charter was signed and Ensign Brian Harris knew he couldn't let the opportunity pass him by.

He and Shohr had been at first reluctant roommates at the Academy but grew into solid friends after their years of instruction. It was Shohr who arranged their first posting through his uncle – the gruff Captain of the *Shryth*. Over the years Shohr had instructed Brian in how to address, interact with, and ultimately get along with Andorians. All those lessons were being put the test now. Captain Shis made no secret of his disdain for humans. The Captain was loyal to the Federation – but had little use for puny humans playing soldier amongst warriors. To win the Captain over, Brian knew he had to execute, endure and ultimately show the same resolve as any Andorian junior officer.

As the Captain, Shohr and the rest of the Bridge crew prepared to take the unidentified freighter in tow. Ensign Harris stood by on the tractor controls awaiting his command to engage the Raider's beam. Not unlike Starfleet designs, the *Shryth* used focused tractor emitters which relied on targeting beams to acquire and guide them to whatever object they were to seize. Unlike Starfleet designs though, the Imperial Raider utilized the secondary

tactical targeting beams to perform this function as opposed to having a completely independent system.

Captain Shis was pointing out to his crew the correct way to approach a disabled craft. While *Shryth* was in active service to the Imperial Guard – she was largely crewed by young and inexperienced trainees. Shis was a hard taskmaster and took every opportunity to impart whatever knowledge he could to his young crew, stressing that at any moment they may well be called upon to defend the Andorian Empire and her allies.

Brian listened as his Captain lectured the crew on taking nothing for granted – his short-range targeting console pinged once, then fell silent. Harris looked over to Shohr at Weapons to see if his friend had noticed anything. Shohr sat calmly at his post, listening to his uncle – his console appeared dormant. Captain Shis was now barking at the Science and Engines officer to prepare a specialized scan to determine if there were any life-signs aboard the unidentified freighter before deciding to take the hulk in tow, or to dispatch the *Shryth's* armed boarding unit. Brian's short-range console pinged again... still nothing at Weapons.

"Captain, I have a contact! 117 by 65.2!" Brian kept his eyes on the small screen in front of him at tractor control. Again, a single ping... "Now 117 by 66, range 22us!"

“Shohr!” Shis stood up and very nearly charged the Weapons station. If the human was playing some game, he’d find himself floating back to Earth in a pod.

Shohr frantically worked at his own console. Nothing registered. There was nothing there... until he engaged the wide-range sweep and suddenly every alarm at Weapons lit and the *Shryth* automatically sounded battle-stations, ALERT ONE.

“Shields! Engines to power! What is it?” Shis turned to take his seat, not bothering to hide his disgust and anger.

“Target is an Orion Raptor, Captain... running with a high-energy dispersion field. That’s why we...”

“Target main battery and fire!” Shis watched his nephew lock on and discharge the forward phaser cannons. Out of the four volleys released, two managed to strike the lurking Orion.

The pirates’ dispersion field collapsed and for a scant two seconds the vicious looking Raptor, roughly half the size of the Imperial Raider, was completely visible on screen. Before Shis could order another attack, the Orions jumped to warp and were gone. The freighter had been bait. The human had somehow detected the Raptor with a tractor beam and his nephew, with a Raider’s Weapons system at his hand – had failed.

The door's chime caused Shohr to open his eyes and sit up. He'd been resting on the hard-padded bench beneath the framed painting of *Isadore*, the tragic beauty from Classical Earth history. The chime sounded a second time. Shohr rose and smoothed out his tunic before walking back to his desk.

"Enter."

The Ready Room's door hushed open, and Yeoman Danelle Tracy walked in carrying a tray. Shohr took his seat and waited for the door to close before speaking.

"Yes, Yeoman, what is it?"

He looked tired, thought Danny. "Captain, you missed the meal service. I brought you a plate."

The young woman rested the tray on his desk and without permission, took a seat opposite him. Shohr lifted the cover from the plate to inspect his meal – then covered it when the scent failed to stir any pangs of hunger. "This was kind of you, Danelle – but I'm afraid I'm not hungry. I have a report to file on that Klingon D-7 we intercepted so..."

"P'nom said he encoded and transmitted that report an hour and a half ago." She smiled when his antennae drooped, and the left side of his lip curled in the embarrassed smirk he would never show anyone other

than her. "Commander Yeal said a friend of yours died. Are you all right, Shohr?"

Shohr sighed and leaned back in his chair. "We weren't friends. More comrades in the end." He cleared his throat and composed himself a little. He loved Danny – he shocked himself realizing that it was in fact, love. They'd been secretly seeing one and other for over two months, but he wasn't going to appear weak in front of her. Harris's death had upset him far more than he could ever have thought.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I couldn't if I did."

"Commander Yeal said whoever this was, was your friend. I just..."

"We were friends when we were young. Yeal speaks out of place." Shohr spotted the cup of tea resting on the tray and leaned forward to retrieve it.

"He thinks very highly of you. I think he's concerned."

"You Earthers are a caring lot, aren't you?" He sipped his tea. Rested the cup on his desk and then realized he'd left his tunic open.

"I just want you to know, if you need to talk, I'm here for you." She watched him fasten his tunic. They'd been more than discreet in their relations. She'd never been involved with a non-human before and understanding how Andorians were in social situations had taken some

getting used to. She knew better than to push Shohr on personal matters and she didn't want to linger too long in the Ready Room, less someone suspect...

"... the man cost me my one chance to join the Imperial Guard. He humiliated me in front of my uncle – saved our ship and condemned me to service in the wrong fleet." Shohr took hold of the cup again and swallowed hard. Danny was about to leave, but his outburst had delayed that.

"Captain of the *Isadore*. Respected by your crew? Loved by a beautiful woman? You poor soul, how utterly terrible for you."

"I didn't mean it that way. You know I'm ineligible to join the Imperial Guard..."

"Because your family name is Ch' ornithon and not Ch' Ornithon? Still makes no sense to me, Shohr." She watched him put his tea down again and was relieved to see him smile.

"My family was not of rank. I've told you my uncle, Shis – married a general's daughter and so overcame this familial handicap. After I graduated the Academy, he arranged for an exchange, if I performed well then maybe..."

"Maybe you could have transferred into the Guard?"

"Things didn't work out that way. I failed in my duties – missed an obvious Orion plot to entrap passing

trade vessels and was made a fool by Bri... by my fallen comrade.” He pushed back from the table and stood cordially. Danny took the hint and also rose to leave.

“Will I see you tonight, Shohr?” For just a second a shamed look lit his face, and it made her heart sink.

“I think tonight I will be alone. Please take the tray but leave the tea if you would.” He saw the concern written all over her face – and didn’t find it a weakness. She stooped to lift the tray of food and was turning to leave... “Danny, perhaps tomorrow evening?”

She turned and walked to the door which hushed open onto the Bridge. “Aye, Captain. Understood.”

The door hushed closed behind her.

“Then it is resolved: It is the recommendation of this Select Council that Fleet operations along the Federation/Romulan border continue at present levels until the true intent of the Romulan fleet can be determined. It is further resolved that our present assets be tasked with an additional objective to monitor the activities of our Klingon allies and work where necessary to preserve the integrity of Federation borders with the Klingon Empire. So say you all?”

Admiral Knot looked up from his pad and waited for all in attendance to indicate their consent by calling out either ‘Yay’ or ‘Nay’. The Select Small Council had limited authority. The recommendations, if adopted, would be carried forward to the General Council for action. A unanimous “Yay” echoed throughout the chamber. Knot cleared his throat and continued.

“It is resolved: By order of this Select Council, Fleet operations will make full use of the assets now in place, after a successful Upgrade and begin designing logistical modules to refit our existing assets presently engaged. So say you all?”

The Select Small Council did have full authority to operate within the parameters of the Upgrade program. Then followed another unanimous, if unenthusiastic, “Yay”.

“It is resolved: By order of this Select Council, work will immediately commence on the development of the next generation of tactical systems and defensive measures designed at the Moscow Tactical Institute, and practical prototype systems are to be fabricated at Utopia Planitia and turned out for real world trials in short order. So say you all?”

From her seat on the opposite side of the Hall from the Vulcan Ambassador, Admiral Bautlin watched with steely conviction as Sestrick quietly voiced her consent to each of the Select Small Council’s five resolutions. She’d successfully out maneuvered the Vulcans – Sestrick’s final “yay” of the afternoon closed the book on the ‘Upgrade’.

CAD had achieved its goals. The Council was by-and-large oblivious to the gains made and, most importantly, the Federation was taking meaningful steps to ward off not only the potential Romulan, but the Klingon threat as well. Demby had done well with the archives – Ambassador Sestrick looked positively shaken.

“All resolutions being unanimously approved; I officially adjourn this meeting of the Select Small Council of the United Federation of Planets. Thank you all.”

Ambassadors, Admirals, aides and attendants all began packing various pads and tablets. The Hall’s doors were opened. Maureen watched quietly from her seat, took a moment to bid Admiral T’Chou farewell and then erased the data core on the pad Lt. Bull had left her with.

Admiral Wallace sat silently adjacent to Knot, watching Bautlin, who was watching everyone else.

After keying in her Section Command Authorization Codes and submitting to a retina scan, Jose sat back in her chair behind the gleaming white workstation she'd manned for nearly two years. "SECTION ORDER FIVE". The first screen appeared in muted tones of blue/purple script. The door leading to the outside world automatically engaged its magnetic locking system – Jose heard the mags engage and looked over to the hatch in time to see the red "RESTRICTED" indicator illuminate on the status panel above the reinforced door. Lt. Bull read and then re-read the opening paragraphs to ensure she was comprehending what was expected of her.

A timer appeared at the bottom of her screen along with a list of tasks she was to attend to. Overall, Section Order Five had to be carried out within four hours. The timer was at 3:58:47. The first task Lt. Bell was to attend to concerned the Denobulan Medical Archives. Demby had listed several files from 2153 which needed to be wiped clean.

Once she'd deleted the Denobulan files, her route menu for Order Five required her to activate the dormant 'scrub programs' she'd consented to having uploaded to all of her personal civilian accounts. She exited the secure uplink to the Denobulan Archives and accessed the main Federation server. A disclaimer on the screen reminded

her that her personal digital assets were being monitored and failure to fully comply with Order Five would result in the scrub being implemented from another workstation and charges brought against her.

Jose accessed the next screen and found a page with tie-ins to her civilian domicile, consumer, health and social accounts. She entered various personal identification codes and scanned her left thumb print for two of her replotat accounts, then selected the "COMMIT" command. The timer was at 3:56:21 when the screen went completely blank for two seconds.

"ACCOUNTS DELETED, PROCEED?"

She knew how the scrub program worked and did not need to bother checking anything – knowing that there was now no digital trace of her civilian existence anywhere on the planet. Bull forwarded to the next set of instructions.

Jose had expected the next step to involve her Fleet records, but instead found a detailed list of step-by-step instructions on how to clear out all CAD materials from the primary servers. The timer continued to run. From what she could see it would take approximately two to three hours to completely "OFF-LOAD" – she read that again, "OFF-LOAD" the data and materials from the various servers and dedicated computer cores. Her instructions included complex lines of codes and detailed technical instructions. Absently she guessed that Moddax, or

somebody else in the main chamber would be taking care of her Fleet records as she proceeded to implement the orders before her.

“Admiral Bautlin, a moment?”

Maureen turned the dark pad over in her arms and held its screen to her abdomen as she half-spun around to face the Fleet’s Commander-in-Chief. She’d lingered as long as she could, watching the others file out of the Hall – particularly enjoying the befuddled look Ambassador Sestrick couldn’t seem to wipe from her face as her aides packed up their tools in preparation for transport back to the Vulcan Embassy. She had also watched with amused interest as Admiral Knot, Chief of Operations, had what looked like an angry grumbling conversation with Henry Wallace before exiting the Hall himself.

“Certainly, Admiral Wallace. What can I do for you?” She offered the man a pleasant smile and noted that he had left the two Commanders who’d been attending him far behind.

“Can we walk, Maureen?”

They made their way along the upper gallery and exited the Hall through one of the upper causeway entrances. For security reasons, the causeway which circumnavigated the Council Chambers and linked the Hall with the elevated gardens and meeting venues beyond was closed to all civilians and none but approved Federation delegates. Once outside and out of earshot of the Security Officers guarding the Chamber entrances, Bautlin made her

way to the railing overlooking the Avenue des Champs-Elysees.

“Well, Henry, you got me alone in the city of love – would you like to propose?”

“Ha...uh, no Maureen, sorry. I would like to speak candidly about some... troubling facts, though. Do you think we can do that, you and I? Forget the uniforms for a few minutes?” He ran his hand through his thinning hair and leaned back against the railing, keeping Maureen Bautlin in his peripheral vision.

“What’s troubling you, Henry?” Wallace had been Chief of Operations when she was assigned the *Victory*. While Maureen had never enjoyed an overly personal relationship with him, she held him in high regard and regretted what was to follow.

“Admiral Knot is more than skeptical of...”

“With respect, Admiral, I asked what was troubling you. Whatever bug is up Knot’s rear end is no concern of mine.” She knew Knot was livid with her rapid ascension from Captain to full Admiral. Knot’s interest in her involvement with CAD, and CAD’s subsequent activities during the ‘Upgrade’ aside – Maureen knew what Wallace was going to ask about.

“The information T’Chou presented today from Kea... that didn’t come from any probe.”

“No?” She wasn’t going to give him anything. She watched as a group of sparrows swooped and rolled in lazy formations above the bustling boulevard below.

“I’ve personally spoken with the Commander on Archer IV. She’s confirmed that the *Sheaffe*, which was officially under temporary command of a Lt. Commander Morris Declan – broke orbit and warped out towards the Typhon Expanse. Supposedly under orders.” He turned to face the woman he had been directed to promote without question by the office of the President with no explanation. She continued gazing out over the streets beyond.

“I’m not hearing a question yet, Henry.”

“Why did Archer IV think the *Sheaffe* was assigned a new Captain?”

Maureen turned then, just slightly. The C-in-C was leaning against the guard rail, trying to appear relaxed and failing badly at it. “That would be a question for Admiral Knot, wouldn’t it?” She smiled.

“Damn it, Maureen! You know perfectly well Knot had nothing to do with it. Brian Harris. Commander Brian Harris – your Tactical Officer from *Victory*.” He ran his hand over his scalp again and tried to calm himself. The Security Officer standing at the far end of the causeway stirred at the sound of Wallace’s raised voice.

“I don’t know what you’re driving at, Admiral. Brian Harris was off my ship long ago. His last posting, I believe...

was to the Mars Research Institute.” She turned slowly from her view of the city beyond the Hall and leaned against the rail closer to Henry.

“Knot’s looking into it, Maureen. I’ve given him free reign on this...”

“You should partner him up with Admiral T’Chou as well.”

Henry pulled himself off the railing and turned to face Bautlin. He was aware that the Security Officer was now becoming very interested in their conversation. “I’ve been told to give you and CAD a wide berth, Maureen... So, I have. If you know something about that ship though... or the two men T’Chou had been debriefing...”

“Who?” She’d been sure to redact any of the debriefing materials Licanat and M’narr had submitted during their stay as guests of Fleet Security which might have raised alarm bells. As far as Admiral T’Chou, or anyone else knew – the men were Doral and Vinnick, Special Techs from Phanta II.

“We’re supposed to be on the same side, Admiral Bautlin. Between you and I – where is the *Sheaffe* and what was Harris doing on that ship to begin with? Was he ordered to, what? Investigate? Is it that simple? If so, why the cloak and dagger routine?”

Maureen smiled again and shook her head. She handed Wallace her pad and set off to walk away. Henry turned the pad over in his hands – desperately hopeful that

she had passed him some secret note, or clue as to what CAD was up to and perhaps what had happened to *Sheaffe*. The device was powered off. He selected the actuator and waited half a beat for the screen to illuminate – nothing. The pad was blank.

“Admiral Bautlin!” He tried to keep the anger out of his voice and was satisfied that he had managed to do so, for the most part.

Maureen was equal distance from the Admiral and the now very attentive Security Officer. She stopped and turned. Wallace wouldn’t likely risk letting anything too sensitive fly knowing that the large, helmeted Security Guard was now within earshot. “Yes, sir?”

Wallace began pacing towards Admiral Bautlin – it was clear she wasn’t interested in anymore quiet *tête-a-têtes*. “Did you notice Ambassador Sestrack seemed somewhat out-of-sorts today?”

Maureen stood in place and waited for Wallace to catch up to her. For appearances, they were both friends... at least in front of the Security Officer. “I did now that you mention it. Odd that she’d misremember facts from the Science Academy, isn’t it?”

Henry cleared his throat and offered Bautlin his best fake smile. “Uh, yes – especially given her near perfect memory.”

“Ah well, chemical breakdowns of strange metals encountered a century ago are one of the reasons both we and the Vulcans bother to keep records.”

They re-entered the Hall together. There were now a dozen attendants cleaning and attending to the meeting space. Sestrick had been quite sure the security scans T'Chou had presented showed evidence of metallic debris, trilitium, identical to debris discovered in 2153 – before the Federation's existence – in Earth's polar region. T'Chou had refuted that. Sestrick had to check and re-check the Vulcan Science Academy's database (T'Chou did the same with Starfleet's records) and much to the Ambassador's distress, the findings were not identical whatsoever.

“Dinner tonight, Admiral?” Henry was seething – he'd been out maneuvered.

“Wish I could, I do love Paris. Lots to do though. Another time, perhaps?”

“Perhaps...” He watched her walk down to the main entrance and out towards the VIP transporters a level below. Once she was out of sight, Admiral Wallace called for Commander Evengii to contact Admiral Knot.

The echoes of metal grinding away on metal echoed off the rock walls and filled the cavern with a horrible sound. Arthur closed his eyes as his stomach lurched and nausea began washing over him. He was still pinned to the table – but as Mivik cranked away at an unseen handle somewhere by the foot of the table Bradley could feel his torso rising to a supported sitting position. Doing his best not to vomit, he kept his eyes shut as he jerked higher and higher. The sound was horrendous – the realization that the first thing he would see when he opened his eyes would be the Reman, was even worse.

The lifting came to a jerking stop. Art was aware that Ketor was saying something to the Reman, but his ears were ringing so badly he couldn't make out the words. Ketor would be speaking Romulan at any rate, and Arthur didn't understand their tongue.

“Arthur, open your eyes. We are ready.”

Art did as he was asked. For the first time since waking in this nightmare, Bradley got a good look at the dark cavern. It was very dark. He sensed more than saw the far wall of the chamber. Bradley noted the four dark monsters stirring in the shadows and tried not to fixate on them. He could see numerous components from Dr. Lo's Sickbay scattered around the cave. Most were lifeless, their power supply ports gaping and empty. He could just

make out a pile of triage kits towards the darker end of the oblong shaped chamber and a table of tricorders and regenerator units.

Ketor stepped out from somewhere behind him and walked to the foot of the table. A small black sphere had been set up beside the Romulan on the spider-like legs of a tall tripod. Ketor held up a small control trigger and theatrically pressed an unseen button. The sphere emitted a harsh white light, which blinded Bradley for a moment.

"I am Tikot Ketor, the following statement is being delivered by Starfleet Chief Engineer, Arthur Bradley." Ketor took his time to be sure every word was pronounced clearly and correctly. He could see the human had adjusted to the light and nodded at his subject.

"I... I should just speak?"

"Yes, Arthur. As discussed, you answer my questions, and I will answer yours."

"I guess... you know we were investigating the gravitons... I should start with the last thing I remember aboard..."

The shuttle had just cleared the bay when *Sheaffe* began moving off to meet the Warbirds under impulse power. Arthur had secured the bay doors and rushed towards the turbolift to join the Captain on the Bridge. Arriving on the Bridge, the first thing Bradley saw was Br'ev administering a hypo directly into Harris'

chest. St. Cyr was calling out readings on the two visible Warbirds that were closing and Casso had taken the Helm. Kross had moved to Tactical to replace Declan.

“Ops, open a channel to both Warbirds and inform them... we are on a scientific...” –wheeze– “...mission...”

Bradley took up his station and quickly began checking the engine status panels. The reactor was still offline, the energizer was struggling to maintain impulse speed and keep the shields up.

“Captain, I’ve immobilized the lung for now, but the micro-sutures have torn. Once this wears off your lung will completely collapse.”

Harris waved off Br’ev.

“No response, Captain. Both Warbirds are almost within range – their weapons are hot.”

Wheeze... “Kross standby on phasers, load torpedoes.”

Henrik confirmed the order and signaled the phaser crews to stand ready. As the forward and starboard phaser banks came online, Bradley watched the impulse energizer dim alarmingly on his panels.

“Captain, we can’t keep up this speed with shields and phasers pulling power from the energizers and forget torpedoes...”

Wheeze “...Bradley...” –wheeze– “...we need power, now... Get the core up and running... we have to buy time for Nams...” –wheeze– “...and M’narr...”

“Captain! New reading astern!” St. Cyr frantically repeated standard friendship messages on all channels from his interface at Ops.

“Confirmed. Energy surge astern, it’s another Warbird!” Casso looked at her navigational display and could see that another enormous Warbird had appeared less than 1200 meters behind them.

“Bradley, GO!” As Captain Harris shouted his order a trickle of scarlet frothing blood ran down his chin.

In a sparkling humming cascade of energy, the rich oak paneled walls and ornate marble carvings of the Council Chambers' Grand Transporter Concourse shimmered away and were replaced with the uninspiring dark corridor which housed CAD's twin transport pads. As soon as she was able, Maureen vaulted off the pad and turned sharply to her right. She wasn't quite running but still moving with a quick agility even Moddax had to be impressed by.

"You're in a hurry." Moddax allowed himself a smile.

"Stow it. Where are we with Order Five?" She realized her entrance was perhaps a touch dramatic. Around her a dozen operatives were working at various consoles. The enormous windows were all shuttered.

"2:35:25 on the clock."

"Lt. Bull?"

"At her station, configuring the first offload and purge." Moddax powered down the transporter unit and carried a pad with the running countdown displayed over to the Admiral.

"Good, good. Has the Denobulan data been deleted? She's had no issues then?" Maureen took the pad and made her way to her workstation with Moddax in tow.

“None. She’s quite adept with computers.” A pair of operatives were powering down the Library Interface.

Maureen took her seat and rested the pad atop her glossy black desktop. With the blast shutters closed the entire office might as well have been in deep space – not a hint of natural light found its way into the little hive of furious activity. She watched her people work at their tasks methodically – they were up against more than one clock. Maureen was about to give Moddax his next objective when she spotted Demby turning away from the now dark Library Interface.

“Operative Demby...” The woman turned to face her. “Excellent work today. Excellent.” Maureen could see Sestricks’s face – slack, bewildered, defeated. Between Bull’s competent mining of Fleet archives and Demby’s incredible ability to live-drop false records – the Vulcan Ambassador was thrown completely off her game. The victory had been satisfying.

“Mr. Moddax, contact 93. We’ll need an extraction in just over two hours.”

“Yes, Admiral.” Moddax turned and smartly made his way to the communications station.

"This shuttle, Arthur. Tell me about this shuttle." He had some time to allow the old human a few moments of drama, but the *Vejul* would be making her way back to collect him in a few scant hours. His work was suffering.

"Now you..." Bradley swallowed hard. The light cast by the Romulan's recorder was as intense as the away beacons his junior crewmen were responsible for maintaining.

Mivik growled and advanced from the shadows with two of his Reman soldiers on his heels. Ketor raised his hand and Mivik stopped, barked a sharp command to his comrades and slowly slunk back to the shadows. Ketor knew the Romans would do as commanded without hesitation... the human though, perhaps he wasn't as broken as Ketor had judged.

"Arthur, the shuttle. We have an agreement."

"I shared with you, now you... you share a little with me. It's only fair..." This interrogation had gone on for two days – he came to this realization suddenly. He'd been listening to the Romulan for two days now.

Arthur was tired, so tired. Everyone was dead. Those kids who used to polish the beacons, scrub the manifolds... gripe like spoilt children... they were dead. Harris had killed them. There was no doubt in

Bradley's mind who'd done it – the Captain was the only one who could have done it. He needed to understand why. Beyond the mission. Aside from the rotting shuttle and the scans and sweeps... Why had this all happened? What were the Romulans up to out here? Even if he could never share the answers, he needed to know why his ship had to die.

Tikot brought his hands together thoughtfully just below his belt. The humans played many games with cards and markers. Romulans played games as well. Who he was, was Tikot's "master card" with this old creature – this shuttle was clearly the human's. A quid pro quo then...

Ketor wet his lips slightly and slowly walked around the recorder, being careful to remain in Arthur's field of vision and came to a relaxed stance at the human's side.

"You are a guest of the Reman Subcommander Mivik, here on what was the second planetoid of the Kea System. This is his facility. They call this rock AK-hyi. The planetoid once closest the star AK-gva, was destroyed nearly two decades ago... but your ship surely determined the origin of the asteroid band littering this system, yes?"

Bradley cleared his throat and nodded. Lt. Casso had speculated that somehow the missing Kea I had been smashed – leaving the remains scattered throughout the graviton heavy fields. He almost asked if the Romulans had been testing a weapon, but stopped himself from giving away anything too dear, just yet.

“You see, Arthur... The Remans exist to serve us. It has been this way since the founding of the Empire. They live on a dark planet – forever in Romulus’ shadow. It is a horrid place. Barren, misshapen – its orbit is such that one side always faces Eison, our shared sun. As a result, the baking deserts of Remus are uninhabitable nearly molten wastelands. The Remans therefore live on the dark side of Remus, where the surface temperatures can freeze flesh in a few moments. Underground, you understand? The Remans must live in the bowls of their half-world.”

Ketor raised his right hand and without looking, beckoned Mivik to join him. From the shadows this time without backup, the creature emerged. The Reman took up a lumbering stance a few paces behind Ketor’s left shoulder. Just on the edge of the light projected by the black recorder where its luminescent eyes glowed a dead milky white and its grey/green skin shone, as if moist. As terrifying as he found the... *Nosferatu*... Reman, Art kept his gaze fixed on the monster.

“They mine. They mine ore, crystal, minerals. Whatever they can. It is their way. The Empire was built on the mountains of ore mined by the hands of Remans like Mivik here.” Ketor turned slightly to acknowledge the nightmare standing just above his shoulder.

“...worked out really good for them, huh?”

“Arthur, in the beginning Romulus and Remus struck a balance. Romulus needed raw materials to thrive,

and Remus needed Romulus not to snuff it out of existence.”

“...sounds friendly...” Arthur watched as Mivik sneered and snapped a handful of *words* into Ketor’s pointed ear before turning and disappearing again into the black.

“Over the centuries the strongest and most intelligent Remans came to serve the Empire as more than just labour. They proved to be capable soldiers. They are fearless in battle. They have a very different view of hvi, er...death. This makes them formidable.”

“Cannon fodder.”

“Apt. The most dedicated, like Mivik and his people – once their military service is done, have the right to leave Remus and relocate to Reman-run facilities, like this one. It is the Praetor’s way of rewarding Reman loyalty. Now the shuttle, Arthur. Tell me about this shuttle.”

The communicator on Commander Eldredge's wrist chirped. The Commander looked over to his partner, Lt. Commander U'brun... "Keep an eye on the Admiral, I've got to take this."

"No problem." U'brun turned back towards the glass-walled office where the Council Hall's Security Commander sat speaking with Admiral Knot, the Chief of Starfleet Operations. Eldredge ducked into an empty workstation.

"Eldredge, go." As attaches to the Senior Fleet Admiralty, Eldredge and U'brun were issued specialized communicators which operated on a closed subspace channel – effectively linking them with their compatriots on a secure wide-ranging network.

A moment later, and Commander Eldredge was standing at the Security Office door. "Excuse me, gentlemen. Admiral Knot, sir?"

"Yes, James?" Thom Knot was waiting to hear back from Moscow on what he hoped would be a somewhat discreet enquiry on the location of Rear Admiral Cahill.

"Admiral Wallace's detail just got in touch with me, sir. The Chief wants to meet with you ASAP."

"Well, so much for our trip to Moscow." Knot rose from his seat and Commander Chen rose in time.

Thom smoothed out his tunic and offered a forced smile at Commander Chen. Knot was close to retirement, well into his fifties and had found much of the calm, cool composure he used to pride himself on had withered with age. He worked hard to keep any glints of anxiety or anger out of his big brown eyes.

“Sir, Admiral Wallace is on his way over now. He was just in the Council Chamber – they should be here in a few moments.”

Thom thought it strange that Henry had not returned to his office in San Francisco as soon as the meeting wrapped but kept it to himself. Just as he was asking Commander Chen if he might use the Security Office for a brief meeting with the Commander in Chief – Wallace appeared at the door.

“Admiral Knot, I’m glad to see you’re still in Paris.”

“Admiral Wallace – what can I do for you, sir?” Thom could see that Henry was upset about something. Commander Chen excused himself and surrendered his office.

Henry thanked the Security Commander and waited until the door hushed close behind Chen before turning to Thom. “We need to talk – now.”

Through the windows none of the Commanders waiting outside of the office could make out what was being said between the two Admirals.

93 had been on patrol at the far end of the scrap field. She maneuvered between the dead hulks of transports, medical frigates and the massive stardrive sections of two of the Fleet's failed *Atlas*-class heavy cruisers. The entire yard consisted of three layers of stacked and orderly wrecks, all held in neat formation by stationary tractor emitters. 93 and her sister ships 37 and 74 had established a fixed patrol route through the three-dimensional maze of relics since the yard took form only a few months earlier. 37 was at the center of the yard keeping watch over the station and the work that had just gotten underway at the relocated Space Dock 17. 74 was off-duty, docked at K-3.

On board 93, Xillion stood at the Command panel consulting the update received from Earth. He had ordered "All Stop" when the priority transmission lit his status screen and the operative handling the helm had complied swiftly and without comment. The simplicity of the *Hou-Yi* design was truly marvelous. 93 could be crewed by as few as four operatives without sacrificing performance or reliability. As it was, Xillion had aboard five subordinates, two of whom were training. As the small sleek Scout hung in space, a tiny, black speck against the screaming orange, white and brown backdrop of Jupiter, Xillion reread his orders before directing his small crew into action.

“Helm, plot a course for Earth high orbit, San Francisco. Extraction for fourteen, no equipment.”

“Helm, Aye.” The operative standing just to Command’s left began making simple navigational calculations.

“Weapons, status subspace relay link?” Xillion turned to his right to watch the operative and her Trainee at the Tactical/Communications panel set to work.

As part of the ‘Upgrade’ the sensor net responsible for monitoring the entire Terran Sector had been swapped out for state-of-the-art hardware meant to provide complete and reliable coverage. The new net could detect objects as small as two meters traversing Terran space – the sophistication of the system was rapidly becoming the envy of every other Sector in the Federation. Vulcan and Andoria were the next planets in line to receive the new nets – with an ambitious plan to eventually deploy the sensors throughout the entire Federation. Because Daystrom, Starfleet Security (with the Moscow Tactical Institute) and the Corps of Engineers had made use of the labour organized by the logistical branch of Deployment Resources – 93, her *Hou-Yi* sisters and when operational, the *Nimrod* Cruiser in Dock 17, all had total access to the net’s secure frequencies. 93 could travel anywhere in the Sector as a complete ghost.

“Weapons, subspace link is nominal. All shielded channels ready to be brought online once clear of the radiation field.”

The Jupiter Yard was ringed with several of Earth’s old orbital defense platforms, which in turn were networked through the near century old K-3 station that had been relocated from Pluto. The old platforms were obsolete in lieu of the new sensor net but provided K-3 with formidable protection.

Jupiter generated its own natural radiation field which extended far out into space from the gas giant. That natural field was just as effective at detecting unwelcomed vessels and debris as any sensor anywhere in the Galaxy. The radiation was also a deadly natural barrier which had stymied space vessels and structures for centuries. By linking the orbital platforms with K-3 at their center – the entire Jupiter Yard and its well-concealed Space Dock, could be encapsulated in a protective shield. During the ‘Upgrade’, an ingenious technique was devised whereby the very radiation generated by Jupiter itself was collected and channeled through centralized dynamos which powered the various platform shield generators – creating a limitless and fail-safe power source for the shield grid.

When the time came, 93 would pass through the Yard shield and be exposed to the radiation bands – at which point her own standard shields would provide

enough protection until she cleared the field altogether. The ship's subspace link could then be activated and after a brief window of time provided the link was synced correctly with the sensor net – 93 would acquire the Sector's operating frequency and match it. 93 would then effectively vanish from the net completely and be free to travel anywhere without risking detection.

There was always the chance that 93 would come across a Starship, or some other vessel and be detected by their independent sensors, but there were tried and true contingencies to deal with such situations.

"Helm, we are to arrive in orbit in exactly... 2:20:00, mark." Xillion tapped his panel gently and a timer appeared on the screens above both the Helm and Weapons stations... 2:19:59.

The helmsman made her calculations. They could easily make the window without using the warp drive. At Weapons, the operative who had calibrated the new subspace link relay was talking through the process with her trainee.

"Command, I make our departure time in – eighteen minutes, mark." This time it was the Helm Operative who tapped his panel. The central viewer – which projected pertinent information on a screen concealed between massive sheets of transparent aluminum which allowed the crew a panoramic view out into space, populated a countdown commencing at 17:59.

“Very well, all hands make ready for extraction.” Xillion keyed a confirmation code into his Comm node.

On Earth, Mr. Moddax received confirmation on his request.

Arthur watched in stunned silence as the captain wiped the bright pink frothy blood from his chin and awkwardly pushed himself back into a proper sitting posture in the Command chair. Everything seemed to lapse into a slow-motion nightmare – Captain Harris was glaring at him. The captain's eyes were filled with rage.

Arthur willed himself to push away from his Bridge station and found his feet. The Captain was barking commands at Kross now – satisfied that Art was going to do as he'd been ordered. Bradley transferred command function to Main Engineering and left his station with the authorization screen up. Casso was reporting the first two Warbirds were now in weapons range, St. Cyr continued broadcasting unanswered pleas to discuss the matter with the Romulans.

Bradley pivoted from his station and took the two steps to the turbolift doors in a daze. The deck shuddered beneath him.

“We're being probed by the lead Warbird!”

St. Cyr sounded scared. As the lift doors closed on the Bridge, Arthur marveled at the sound of St. Cyr's voice – he had never heard the man sound so afraid. Captain Harris was calling out something, but as the lift engaged Arthur plummeted away from the Bridge and found himself alone with the Red Alert claxon blaring. The ship lurched

noticeably – the inertia dampeners were failing. Then just before the lift doors opened on Main Engineering, Art was thrown to the floor.

The lift doors hushed open, and he was helped to his feet by one of Licanat's specialists. "What the hell was that?!"

"We took a hit portside, sir! EPS mains are overloading!"

The specialist was little more than a boy. Bradley patted him on the shoulder to thank him for the help. "Get the secondary routing conduits online and shunt all non-essential systems, go!" The specialist nodded and ran off towards the portside access junction where several other techs were mustering.

Between the damage control teams and the engineering staff, the Engine Room was chaotic. Brian rushed to join Parsons and Singh – his senior Engineers, at the main intermix console. The floor suddenly dropped out from beneath them all. A Crewman who'd been trying to stabilize the power feeds from the main battery fell from the second tier where he was working and slammed into the lower deck with a sickening 'thud'.

As the alarms continued to scream and the smell of ozone began to grow heavy all around – men and women in red jumpsuits, white radiation suits and standard uniforms scrambled to get back to their feet. Art hoisted himself off the floor and helped Parsons up as well.

“Get Sukraj some help, NOW!... Lock down that manifold!” Art watched as his staff struggled. The status board on the bulkhead beside the intermix console indicated the shield generators on the starboard dorsal saucer were offline.

“What the hell are we doing?!” Singh had tears rolling down his face.

“Energizer’s out – batteries are dying, we have to get the reactor back online now.” As he said it, Arthur wondered himself how they were going to do that with a scrambled warp Core in just a matter of minutes.

“Fzzz... ENGINE ROOM! BRIDGE. All power to shields and phasers... all power to...”

The ship shuddered violently, but Arthur and his men managed to keep their feet.

“Singh... kill everything non-essential. Let’s get to work...”

“How are we going to restart cold? NoboDY CANNnnn...!?” In a sudden and violent gust of atmosphere and a deafening roar, Parsons was blown backwards in a surreal, stumbling, soundless spiral.

The secondary coolant lines ruptured. The status board indicated explosive decompression in the torpedo bay. Bradley and Singh stood huddled together – speechless. The emergency bulkhead had slammed shut as it was meant to do the instant decompression was

registered. Somewhere behind the bulkhead, Parsons was dead.

The lights dimmed and the air recycling unit cut-off. Arthur realized he could smell an electrical fire somewhere. There were bodies everywhere...most were groaning and moving sluggishly. Bradley forced himself to move towards the intermix controls, but they were dead.

"It's been done... once. I read about it at the Academy..." Dani Singh was slouched over the secondary input port, the left side of his head smashed.

"Sit down, Dani. Sit down... My God..."

"Fzzz... ENGINEERING, BRIDGE! Prepare to jettison the core -wheeze- on my mark!"

Arthur looked at the controls in front of him – all dead. The status panel was dark. The Engine Room had only minimal emergency lighting. He fingered the Comm panel to try and respond to Harris, but nothing worked.

"Fzzz... Engineering!? ...EVASIVE" –cough!– "hard-to port!..."

The ship rocked violently. The emergency lights went out. Arthur fell to the deck again and the moans and screams of the others in the darkness terrified him. The smell of acrid smoke was growing...

Bradley groped for the edge of the console table to pull himself up. "Dani?... Anyone?"

Then a shaft of smoke-filled light spilled across the debris strewn deck. Two of the junior mates had forced the

lower starboard bulkhead doors open. Arthur watched as his crew helped one another out into the light. He pulled himself to a half sitting position, his left leg screamed in pain. It dawned on him that the only way the others could have forced the emergency doors open would be if the magnetic locks had failed...

Bradley hauled himself up to face the dark status panel again and popped the maintenance cover loose from the side of the panel's input console. Crossing the gains as quickly as he could he tripped the analogue diagnostic panel to light up. A few lines of code and a simple warning icon confirmed what he feared – magnetic containment was offline. St. Cyr must have seen it, that was why they needed to dump the core. Even cold and scrambled there was enough residual matter and antimatter in the core to cause a catastrophic detonation.

The light beyond the bulkhead was beginning to fade. The ship's batteries were dying. The only way to dump the core now was to use the actuator at the Bridge station. Arthur pulled himself along the wall to the turbolift – the ship suddenly plunged straight down a hundred feet. The light to starboard went dark. Bradley barely managed to keep from collapsing. When *Sheaffe* felt like she had levelled off, Arthur ripped the summon panel from the turbolift frame and crossed the emergency EPS feed with the actuator, thinking it hopeless – but it worked somehow, and the lift responded.

The doors hushed open, and Arthur fell into the lift like a ragdoll. The lighting was dim, but the shaft still had power. He propped himself up on his good knee and selected deck one. If there had been a general failure severe enough to shutdown containment – the lift shouldn't be working, which meant someone had intentionally...

The horror of what had been done hit him full force. Terror, rage and disbelief washed over him. The lift began to climb – he would have to reroute power back to the emergency pressure doors before triggering the core release actuator and he had to do it fast. Once containment completely failed it would be a matter of seconds before *Sheaffe* incinerated herself...

“...that was, harrowing Arthur; however, I want to hear about the shuttle.”

“Of course, I can get a shuttle down here, but why the blazes would I want to?”

Henry took a breath before continuing. Thomas had been suspicious of Maureen Bautlin from the outset. Even before her sudden rise in the ranks from Captain to full Admiral, the Chief of Fleet Operations had kept a keen eye on Bautlin and her political maneuvering. The last thing Henry wanted right now was a Thom Knot “I told you so!” lecture. The fact that they were having this conversation in a fishbowl under close watch by no less than four Commanders didn’t help.

“I want to make a... an unannounced inspection of CAD.” Henry watched as Admiral Knot’s face illuminated with sudden understanding.

“What did she tell you? I was right about her, wasn’t I? I knew it... I knew it. You get in touch with the Judge Advocate General, I’ll get a hold of T’Chou – he’s still in Paris...”

“Belay that, Thom.” Henry focused on keeping his voice low and his tone measured. Thom had become very animated and though Henry sat with his back to the collection of Commanders waiting just outside the small Security Office – he could feel them growing anxious at Admiral Knot’s sudden burst of energy.

Henry subtly motioned to Knot with his left hand to “keep it down” and held eye contact until he was sure Thom caught on to the need for restraint. Henry didn’t want Xao T’Chou, the head of Fleet Security brought in on this. The presentation T’Chou had made that afternoon in the Small Council had not come from any probe. After the brief uncomfortable and frankly aggravating conversation he’d had with Admiral Bautlin only twenty minutes earlier – Henry was certain T’Chou’s data had come from her, somehow.

Thom listened to the Commander in Chief’s words and tried not to instinctively react. He swallowed hard as the C-in-C told him they couldn’t trust Xao T’Chou. Admiral Knot slowly ran his right hand down his face from his brow to his chin and took a deep breath. The attending Commanders just outside the glass office suddenly made him very self-conscious.

“Can we grant that lot shore leave, or send them for coffee?” Thom wanted the comment to be humorous to break the tension – and it didn’t.

“I could promote them all to Captain.” Wallace regarded his old friend with a grim expression.

“That’d show them all right. Henry, I’m not sure what you’re saying to me. Xao Chen and I were Ensigns together thirty years ago aboard *Yorktown*. He was the best man at my wedding. When he was a Commander on

Urquhart and got held up on Andoria, I was with his wife when she birthed their daughter...”

“Thom, I’m not saying Xao has done anything... nefarious. I just don’t want him, or Fleet Security, involved in this just now. I’d like to surprise Bautlin at CAD. An unannounced inspection – have her database checked out and maybe get a more complete understanding of what her division has been up to.” Even as he spoke the words, Henry realized how ridiculously paranoid he sounded.

Thom was quiet for a moment, thinking. Neither he as Chief of Ops, nor Henry as C in C, could discreetly travel anywhere on the planet; as the two highest ranking members of the Admiralty, their whereabouts were constantly tracked. Every planetary transporter was coded to record their identification certificates and upload their comings and goings in real time to the Central Operations Network – even the collection of dedicated Commanders they travelled with were under Charter Directive to keep track of their activities at all times. What Henry was proposing was not a simple undertaking. To simply appear at Bautlin’s door with a handful of computer experts and bulked-up security would be akin to magically appearing out-of-nowhere in a puff of smoke.

“What’s in orbit, right now?” Wallace was now speaking in a very low voice. He watched Thom close his eyes and think for a moment.

“Spacedock is servicing *Constellation*, her dual warp Core tests are a never-ending exercise in failure... The *Palikir* is docked there too, she’s awaiting a new captain. There’s the *Suva*, she’s in the berth next to *Palikir* – crew rotation and resupply...” As Chief of Ops, Thom was keenly aware of where his unassigned Capital assets were at any given time. He was about to list the remaining three *Miranda*-class vessels currently in Spacedock when Henry began shaking his head.

“To get a ship to send one of its shuttles out from inside Spacedock would raise all kinds of eyebrows. The energy expended in opening the Space Doors for one shuttle might as well be a Planet-Wide Red Alert: it would be ridiculous. Do we have anything in orbit, or on approach?”

There was a Vulcan Science Cruiser due the following day – Daystrom was hosting a symposium and *Manitoba*, a smaller Federation Research ship would be arriving at about the same time ferrying the finest minds from Varga Prime. Admiral Wallace wanted a Starship though, with Fleet trained personnel and a “closed” Security force to augment this unannounced inspection. If Thom could only consult with his office, he was sure he’d find something, but Henry forbade him.

“Has to be something there now. Something we can contract directly if this is going to have any chance of working. Anything, Thom?”

Admiral Knot shook his head slowly. Flashes of timetables, operational orders, status updates, shake-down schedules all ran through his mind. Then through the fog, an unlikely name suddenly came to him... “There’s maybe one ship we can get.”

Just as the lift was pulling its way up the shaft past deck two, *Sheaffe* rolled hard to starboard. The lighting failed. Dampeners failed. One instant Arthur had been holding himself up in the lift waiting for the doors to hush open to the Bridge – psychologically preparing himself to charge out of the lift directly to the Engineering station; the next instant Arthur was slamming into the lift's ceiling in total darkness. The last thing he remembered was falling back to the floor, landing on his right side – then, in searing pain, being flung back to the ceiling as the lift fell back towards the bottom of the shaft.

“...and I, I thought I was in a rainstorm... Then I woke up here.” Bradley blinked several times and tried to focus on the silhouette of the Romulan standing perfectly still in front of him. The light from the recorder had grown steadily more intense.

Tikot stood motionless. Silently studying his subject. Time was running short... “Ehwiyhwe’Imnniuhfi’hwhueiurrr’at ‘hh yours ru imminently kha ru hveolhaonn get etreimnai culaina aeek’h’i hveolhaonn hnaifv, taortuu i’ adaibhaolh nah’lai aehjaeih i’ rhehdi. Ehdhihss miin ‘hh yours.”

“What?” Bradley tried to focus on Ketor, but the light was too bright and all he could see was the Romulan’s

shape. The sounds of the Remans shuffling around in the black beyond the recorder grew louder.

"I was speaking to Mivik, Arthur...my apologies. You have illuminated much of what transpired, from your vessel's viewpoint. Yet, I asked about this shuttle that launched prior to the final engagement." Ketor stepped forward slowly.

Bradley could see right away that the passive, calm face Ketor had maintained throughout their interactions had changed. The Romulan was no longer docile. Ketor had a stern look now – determined, almost fierce. "You...you haven't told me a whole lot..."

"You describe bhaohh... violent, rocking aboard. Initially we tried to simply take hold of a distressed vessel with a tractor nniet...hmm, I am growing frustrated, Arthur. I am afraid my language is suffering." Ketor moved closer to the helpless human. Behind him he could hear Mivik and his guards fixing their U'ras to the muzzles of their disruptor riffles. The human was distressed. It knew its time was growing short.

"You didn't answer our hails..." The Romulan was now so close that Art could smell him.

"I speak your language because we do not use translation devices. Synthetic intelligence is an abomination. Tractors... we wanted only to steady your vessel. In return, your Commander unleashed fire upon two of our ships. Even in response, we were measured.

Disabling your defensive screens and rendering your torpedo bay... inert."

"Why didn't you answer then? You speak..."

"I am not a soldier. I told you. I have command of... had command of ten of the most advanced Warbirds ever to be constructed. They are fearsome machines. Our contact may have been bhaohh, yet our intention was not hostile. Your Commander's response was disproportionate. Your vessel was dying. The *Volto!* was ordered to come along side of your craft when we detected failures in your reactor chamber. Then you rolled and ejected your unstable core directly into the *Volto!*..."

The Romulan's breath was sickly sweet. The odd accent that had given his voice an almost soothing tone had disappeared. It wasn't quite rage Arthur now heard, but there was an unmistakable hostility. The sound of something scrapping along the floor caused Bradley to wince. Ketor dropped down suddenly and took a seat – his head now haloed by the recorder's blinding light.

"Mivik's clansmen were aboard *Volto!*. Warbirds are crewed by Romulans, but we carry Reman soldiers. They formed a formidable boarding force. Twice I have personally witnessed them gut Orion pirates who, like you, wandered into our space uninvited. Remans are visceral, if nothing else, in combat."

"What... what are you, then? You're not a soldier... you're not Tal Shiar..."

“You were in an urgent race to the bridge of your ship because your Command... your Captain...”

“...must have intentionally shut down the magnetic containment field for the warp Core.” Bradley stopped himself. Saying it out loud was shocking. Harris had to have shut down the field from the Bridge. Purposely triggering a core breach. Only the Chief Engineer, the First Officer and the Captain had access to the bridge Engineering systems and Declan hadn't been there.

“Yes, your Captain condemned you all. Tell me about the shuttle. I'll fill in the rest and at least we can together make sense of this... tragedy.”

Maureen had presumably returned to her office in San Francisco almost an hour ago they guessed. Henry felt the only way to truly surprise her was to move quickly. To do that he needed the services of a Starship and a small contingent of ship-based Security Officers. The ship Admiral Knot had just suggested left him quietly studying the expression on Thom's face, wondering if he was making a joke.

"You're serious?"

"They're holding position at the inner-most marker. High orbit – just awaiting final clearance before they make their way to Utopia Planitia." Knot didn't bother hiding a self-satisfied smile. It was poetic. It was Karmic.

"You suggest we contact *USS Victory*, Maureen Bautlin's ship for nearly twelve years, and have them send a shuttle and a compliment of Security..."

"Henry, they're running on a skeleton crew. *Victory* is due to receive one of the first modular upgrades Planitia has produced – they're crewed with first-tour academy graduates."

"You can't tell me that *Victory* isn't crawling with..."

"Admiral, if you want to do this now, *Victory* is our only option. Since you promoted Bautlin – which you still haven't explained yet, by the way – *Victory* has had a complete sweep of her senior staff."

Admiral Knot pointed out that shortly before Maureen Bautlin accepted promotion, her long-serving First Officer had been identified for promotion and had been made Captain of the *Isadore*. Thom also took a moment to point out that Captain Ch'ornithon's specific assignment had been determined by Deployment Resources – not Fleet Command. *Victory* had spent her last six months during the 'Upgrade' as a practical training ship and from the Third Officer down, every position had been held by short-term novices who were then rotated out throughout the fleet. The chances of Maureen having anyone onboard who would raise the alarm were next to none.

"...if you're certain we won't be flagged right off and there's no other options." Henry rubbed his chin with back of his left hand.

"She's our only option if you seriously want to do this now. I'll get the Security Commander to give us access to Comms from here. Our credentials will light up the grid."

"How long until we can get underway?"

"Off the top of my head, I believe she carries two *Galileo*-type shuttles. From high-orbit, without making a spectacle of themselves – say sixty or seventy minutes. If we're leaving directly from here and travelling sub-orbital, thirty or thirty-five minutes to San Francisco."

Henry nodded and motioned for the Security Commander to re-enter the office. There was little

discussion about the Commander opening a secure channel on his credentials and then leaving again to allow the C in C and Chief of Ops to conduct their business. Admiral Knot raised *Victory* on her priority channel and after sufficiently terrifying the Ensign manning the ship's Communications station, was linked to the ship's Captain. For training purposes *Victory's* acting-captain was a young Commander who'd just transferred back from one of the Neutral Zone Support Groups. The young man – fast-tracking through his career – was noticeably excited to have been contacted directly by the Chief of Operations. When Admiral Knot told him to stand-by for the C-in-C, the colour drained from the young man's face.

"Commander Dae, I'm afraid I don't have the latitude to go into too much detail. I require you to dispatch your fastest shuttle to my coordinates immediately. Send along a qualified pilot and three armed and prepared Security Officers. You are under orders not to log or report these actions until 0900 EST tomorrow, do you understand?" Henry watched the young officer squirm for a moment and then was satisfied when Dae confirmed the shuttle would be underway in fifteen minutes.

"You, me... a pilot, three goons. It'll be tight aboard that shuttle Henry." Knot had just signed off and powered down the communications network.

"Eldredge has a background in computer sciences, doesn't he?" Henry turned in his seat to look at the group

of Commanders he and Thom had grown accustomed to as a kind of entourage.

“He does. U’brun’s background is in Engineering...”

“No. Commander Evgenii from my detail was the Science Officer aboard the *Naidu* for five years. One of each and we can call our little inspection party capped at seven. The pilot will remain aboard the shuttle just in case.”

Henry nodded at Osip Evgenii to signal that he needed to get ready to move. Then he turned back to Thom, who’d just motioned to Eldredge in a similar manner. The two Commanders slowly made their way into the office and received their briefings in short order.

1:39:55

"Where are we, Mr. Moddax?"

Moddax consulted his pad and then turned to face Admiral Bautlin seated behind her huge, black desk. The operatives in the room worked in silence, each man and woman at a console working in the dinge. As the minutes ticked away, a few of the screens went dark, then a few more. Each operative had very specific responsibilities under Section Order Five. Some scrubbed medical files from Fleet and civilian databases, others worked to delete security footage of daily comings and goings for the last sixty months. Still others corrupted transporter records and scrambled transit records. Every open door needed to be shut. Every window closed. No loose ends.

"We're ahead of schedule for now, Admiral. 93's ETA is, 1 hour 19 minutes." More of the screens went black and more of their operatives quietly stepped away from the dead consoles to quietly congregate around the center of the dark room.

"Status on the Off-Load?"

Moddax turned back to his console and keyed in the required access codes. He tried not to grunt when he saw that the jittery young Lieutenant was already finishing up the second Off-Load nearly forty minutes early. "Lt. Bull, appears to be on schedule."

“How far ahead of schedule is she, Moddax?”
Maureen asked with a smile.

“She’s projected to complete Off-Load two... in thirty-eight minutes.”

Maureen sighed. The room was growing darker and darker every minute as her operatives completed their tasks and the number of active panels throwing light shut down one-by-one. Eight of the eleven operatives who’d been working in the dark room had completed their tasks. Maureen’s own workstation was dark. She had little to do now but watch the operatives mill about in silence, waiting for the arrival of 93.

In the white Reception area beyond the sealed door, Lt. Bull was quickly progressing through her encrypted orders. The work was intricate. Back doors, hidden access points and silent uplinks had been littered throughout the various data cores, servers and networks her workstation had access too. Each line of code had to be perfect. Every step followed exactly.

Tikot Ketor was a dark shade on the white/red light Arthur could see behind his eyelids. The recorder's light was now blindingly intense. Sweat was rolling down his face. Somewhere, the Remans were gathering. He didn't know how long he had been speaking, time had been difficult to measure in this cave somewhere beneath the surface of Kea II. Ketor had prompted him for information on the shuttle a few times but by-and-large, the Romulan had patiently listened to the last moments of the *USS Sheaffe* as Arthur had experienced them, and then he'd opened up about M'narr's shuttle mission. A queer sense of relief rushed over him as he finally finished relating what Ketor had wanted to hear. He'd had to do it all with his eyes firmly closed against the light.

Ketor sat silently watching the old human perspire. The recorder's beacon was now at its maximum setting and the temperature in the cavern had risen sharply. Mivik had sidled up behind him, disruptor in hand. The Reman didn't have to say a word for Tikot to know what it sought. The other Remans had taken positions on either side of the cavern – waiting for permission.

An Earther shuttle was out there somewhere with two Starfleet members aboard along with data collected from within the operational zone. The intruder had

penetrated to the very heart of Ketor's operation and very nearly escaped without detection. Tikot studied the old human sitting before him, bathed in white-hot light. Mivik growled a low inquiry, but Tikot held up his hand and shook his head. The human had kept its word. Tikot would keep his.

Ketor waved Mivik off and the other Remans followed suit. Their time would come, but first Ketor would give the human what had been promised. He powered down the recorder and the white, hot beacon faded and died.

Arthur felt the light go out and then a blessed wave of cool stale air washed over him. He opened his eyes and blinked, but the cavern appeared completely black to him. "I... I can't see anything... Ketor?"

"I'm still here, Arthur." Tikot rose from the stool he'd been rigidly sitting on while the human related his vessel's adventure into the heart of the operational zone. The Federation now had images and readings. Treasures for some human scientist to tear apart to be sure.

"I told you the Remans ran a mining colony here. They pulled ih'hedaes from Kea I, which lined the reactor chambers of two generations of Warbirds. It was a nearly unlimited supply..."

Ketor stepped back to the foot of the table Arthur was propped up on and slowly lowered the old human back

to the flat of his back. The human wasn't perspiring any longer, but he was pale and tired looking. Once the table had fully reclined, Ketor reactivated the full restraint field.

"Almost two decades ago, a massive mining vessel, the *Nubur*... a civilian run ship some four-hundred-and-fifty-meters-long, arrived in orbit around what you called Kea I. You see, we let the Remans run their mining colonies as they see fit. Remans, though, are not permitted to build or operate space-going vessels. So, when time comes for collection, the Civilian Mining Authority make their rounds."

Bradley stifled a cough. His vision had not returned.

"*Nubur* was an immense craft. Fully loaded I am told she was likely the largest and heaviest hauler the CMA operated. You understand, we generally do not enjoy mixing with Remans when not completely necessary – most Remans feel the same way about us. The mine on Kea I, 'AK-gva' you will recall? AK-gva could mine and even semi-refine an enormous amount of ih'hedaes, then safely store it for years. Vessels like the *Nubur* were sent every decade to collect all the ih'hedaes AK-gva had stock-piled to haul back to Romulus."

Slowly, the black nothing of the cavern gave way to a light grey haze. Arthur couldn't move his head any longer – opening and closing his eyes was the extent of his ability to exercise control over his body. He could hear a cart or a

buggy wheeling towards the cavern from somewhere far away.

"Nubur was massive, but hardly advanced. While loading she relied upon several... er, observation modules, I think are the words. Small craft tethered to *Nubur* by heavy umbilical cables. She had four such modules, each manned by a Romulan pilot, each responsible for monitoring the loading process from orbit... yes?"

Arthur coughed once, he tried to nod his head but failed.

"That day as *Nubur* was loading and her modules were deployed above Ak-gva... AK-gva transversed the space between the Prime Star and the smaller Secondary Star. A dance within a dance. Just as AK-gva, *Nubur* and that small star all aligned a massive surge of neutrinos flooded the heavens and suddenly..."

CLAP!

Ketor brought his hands together just above Arthur's face in a booming crash. Bradley would have winced if the restraining field had allowed him.

"The Eisei lattice appeared! *Nubur* and her crew had no idea what was happening and then almost immediately after the installation on the small sun appeared, a twenty-seven cubic meter mass blasted forth at more than nine times light speed! Can you imagine? The *Nubur* was vaporized! The object continued into AK-gva and the entire planetoid shattered!"

Had there still been a live EPS feed functioning in the office of the Contemporaneous Accessibility Division the countdown timer Mr. Moddax had set would still have 00:03:27 remaining when Shuttle Two from *USS Victory* touched down on the pad atop the Archives Wing of Fleet Headquarters. A team of three security officers poured down the shuttle's rear ramp. Immediately behind them followed Commanders Eldredge and Evgenii toting tricorders, phasers and communicators. Admirals Knot and Wallace emerged once Eldredge had called "All Clear!" when he was satisfied the C-in-C's safety was not in jeopardy.

The inspection team moved swiftly into the Archives Wing and down an auxiliary lift to the uppermost floor on the back end of the Archives tower, where CAD was located. On approach, the shuttle had met and bypassed every security challenge with Admiral Knot's personal Command Codes. Each point of contact was immediately ordered to clear the way for the Admiral's shuttle and then to "go dark" on all further discussion/transmission concerning the sortie until debriefed by Operations. It didn't guarantee that someone along the way wouldn't raise an alarm to Bautlin, but Knot felt it very unlikely. Knot's codes were similarly used to gain access to the building itself and override the lift controls and security

passages along the way to CAD. This was somewhat more likely to raise potential alarms, but nothing could help it.

The Security Officers loped swiftly along the bland curving hallway and held up short of the unimpressive door which was still labeled “Deployment Resources”. The two Commanders and the Admirals they were tasked with protecting followed the Security detail at a brisk pace. The entire floor of the Archives tower appeared to be deserted.

“Well, let’s do this by the numbers. Specialist, proceed.” Wallace gave the young leader of *Victory’s* Security Team a nod and watched from behind Commander Eldredge as the woman attempted to open the door from the control panel mounted in its frame.

“No joy, Admiral. It doesn’t even look like the mechanism has any power flowing to it.” Specialist Sarah Reid stepped back from the door and let her left hand drop to the magnetic ram plate holstered on her upper thigh.

Henry bristled, but it was Admiral Knot who gave the order to force the door. If any of their communications on the way into HQ airspace or more likely, the use of his Command Codes to override the roof pad access points and lift had raised any alarms – time was of the essence.

Reid positioned the ram plate on the door and powered the unit. The pad locked onto the door with a heavy ‘thud’ and two hand grips extended out from the back of the plate where they had been flush-mounted. Specialist Reid gestured to her subordinate – a

burly young Tellarite, to take hold of the plate and waited for her order. As the Tellarite dug in on the plate, Reid and her other security officer drew hand phasers and prepared to breach the office beyond. On her signal the young Tellarite peeled the door back and Reid and Specialist Johnson stormed into the darkness beyond.

The Security team activated their armor shoulder-mounted beacons one at a time before fanning out to sweep and clear the dark Reception area. It took them two and a half minutes to make their way from the door they'd just had to manually force open to the dark workstation and simple waiting area.

“Clear!”

Commander Eldredge activated his own beacon he'd affixed to his belt before leaving the shuttle and led the Admirals into the dark chamber. The Security Officers were spread out throughout the room checking the dark status panels and trying to get readings with their small handheld tactical tricorders. Reid had found the nearly imperceptible door hidden in the white bulkhead which separated the Reception area from another chamber beyond.

Admiral Knot was asking Commander Evgenii to restore power to the office, or at least find a way to drop the heavy shutters from the room's floor to ceiling windows. He'd known for years where Deployment

Resources had established their offices, but he'd never actually visited the site until now.

"Specialist Reid, can you get that hatch open please? The main office is through there." Henry Wallace had been to Deployment Resources a few times over the years.

Another ram-plate was deployed, but after three attempts, Specialist Reid reported that the door could not be budged. Evgenii had deployed his specialized diagnostic gear at the workstation Jose Bull had called her own a little more than an hour before. Nothing was operational in the office. The entire power grid appeared to have been isolated and shutdown. Nothing Osip did had any effect on restoring power to the office. The shutters remained in place and the screens remained dark.

For a few moments Henry found himself hoping the door to Admiral Bautlin's inner chamber was somehow locked – at least that would indicate something was functioning. That hope was dashed when the Tellarite Specialist determined the hatch was simply jammed. It appeared as though the door had been allowed to crash down into its frame in an uncontrolled manner. Instead of engaging in speculation, Admiral Wallace ordered Specialist Reid to cut through the door with phasers. The element of surprise he had hoped to achieve was clearly a non-factor now.

It tumbled through space, cut free from its one-hundred-and-fifty-meter tether when the object passed through the *Nubur* many times faster than the speed of light – incinerating the massive mining vessel in a fraction of a fraction of a second. Sent hurtling through the void on the leading edge of the shockwave generated by the explosion of AK-gva. Coupaer Uasharr Mniohr theihfv – or Remote Observation Loading Pod Three, defied all odds and somehow survived the calamity. It rolled and drifted among the debris of AK-gva. It collided with some of the larger asteroids awash in graviton radiation. The pod's operator, a pilot from the Civilian Mining Authority was long dead – killed the millisecond the *Nubur* went up in an instantaneous explosive decompression.

The pod was discovered six weeks later by a Dewan Scrapper whose crew recognized the battered, burnt and cracked Coupaer as a Romulan wreck. While the Dewans were not officially aligned with the Star Empire, they took every opportunity they could to ingratiate themselves to the Romulans. The Coupaer was turned over to Jahaerenen Ojam Lilail of Karush. The Jahaerenen (Governor) authorized his delegates to offer the Dewanians five hundred Talons and a barrel of Ale for the return of the pod.

For a full month the Coupaer lay forgotten in a secure storage facility on the moon of Karush VII. Then Jahaerenen Lilail's office received a general notice from Raenasa (Central Command) advising all Imperial assets along the border to be on the watch for the missing CMA vessel, *Nubur*. A particularly astute Centurion realized that the debris they had taken from the Dewanians could possibly be associated with the *Nubur*. The Coupaer wreck was clearly not a military asset, but the Centurion in question recognized the burnt-out observation pod for what it was.

The Civilian Mining Authority at the time did not hold to hard and fast timelines. Each craft was crewed by a dedicated collection of Romulan citizens who signed on to a specific ship for terms no less than five years. Each CMA Commander was given free reign to run their ship and crew as they saw fit – taking on a measure of personal accountability for CMA equipment and property. A crew was often paid based on the quantity of ore they returned to the CMA from the plethora of mines scattered across the Empire. Larger vessels meant a greater load capacity, which meant fewer trips to make greater recompense. The *Nubur* was the CMA's largest vessel and represented the Authority's greatest single investment in the field. To ensure safe and profitable sorties, *Nubur* was regularly allotted four to six weeks to complete its run out to AK-gva.

Only after months had passed did the CMA flag the ship as missing.

The wreckage was retrieved and almost immediately the ambient graviton radiation the hulk emitted caused serious concern. A local military unit was summoned to help analyze the Coupaer and once the radiation issue was mitigated, a forensic examination of the crumpled sphere confirmed it was one of the *Nubur's* four pods. Given the condition of the pod, the CMA registered the *Nubur* as officially lost.

The military scientists examining the pod called in more specialized experts to study the graviton phenomenon and then extracted the pod's rudimentary recorder unit. Its function was basic as befit the vessel it once was tethered to - visual data, radiological readings and ship-to-shore communications monitoring. A forensic review of the unit commenced and, much to the delight of the Sub-Lieutenant in charge of data retrieval, the heavy deuterium casing around the recorder unit had somehow managed to preserve the device in near-pristine condition.

While the CMA was satisfied to write off *Nubur* as lost in some cataclysm, the military dispatched a *Keras*-class Warbird to AK-gva to investigate. The *Nubur's* last communication reported that the massive vessel had arrived in orbit above the Reman mining Installation and was preparing to commence loading. The evidence of the CMA mining vessel's apparent destruction gave rise to

questions which needed to be answered. Though unlikely, it was not impossible that the Remans of AK-gva were somehow responsible for the loss of *Nubur* and insurrection of any kind amongst the Remans could not be tolerated.

The Warbird *Vurama* warped into the Kea System intending to take up a strategic high orbit within weapons range of the main facility on AK-gva. Before arriving at the preset coordinates, *Vurama* had to drop to sublight speed when they were unable to maintain their warp field. Undaunted, the commander of the Warbird ordered his crew to push on – having concluded that the ambient graviton field which had zapped their warp bubble was somehow a defensive move on the part of the Remans. A short time later, and within sight of a massive asteroid field littering the space where the first planetoid of the Kea System, AK-gva, should have been, *Vurama* found herself adrift. The graviton field was so intense that the Warbird was crippled.

It took the crew of the *Vurama* – using payload assist pods and the networked reactors of their two onboard scout shuttles, ten hours to retreat far enough out of the graviton field to broadcast a distress call. A few hours later, two other Warbirds, *Vallaul* and *Vruvel* arrived with the science vessel *Soliuna* a few hours behind. Taking *Vurama* in tow – her systems only having partially recovered, the other Warbirds took up orbit around what

had been the second planetoid in the Kea System. From their orbit they watched in awe as the debris of what had been one of the Empire's most valuable sources of ih'hedaes crumbled and spread itself in a long, arching stream of craggy asteroids, all of it awash in gravitons.

The *Soliuna* was the first of many science vessels to arrive. She set down on the second planet and set about confirming that this new rock was as rich in ih'hedaes as AK-gva had been. Military vessels began scanning the remains of AK-gva in a search for answers while plans began to fall into place to establish a new mine to replace what had been lost and AK-hvi began in the shadow of death.

The sound of an equipment trolley rolling and scrapping along the solid rocky floor of the cavern passed by the foot of Arthur's table. Ketor continued his diatribe on the fate of Kea I without acknowledging the rumbling echoes of the passing load. The Romulan was seated on Arthur's right. The soft tones and empathetic quality of Tikot's voice had vanished. He spoke his nearly perfect and curiously accented Federation Standard in cold and dispassionate tones. Struggling to keep the names of ships and the sequence of events straight, Bradley couldn't help thinking that this was like listening to an Academy lecture.

After relating how the facility on Kea II had sprung out of necessity and the *Soliuna's* rapid and thoroughly remarkable example of Romulan perfection and problem solving, Ketor rose without saying a word and backed out of Bradley's field of vision. Arthur lay helplessly staring up at the craggy ceiling. He thought he heard murmuring. Then, appearing suddenly on his left, Mivik. The Reman looked down on him with unblinking milky-white eyes and sneered. Before Bradley could react to the monster, he felt himself being flung upward and forward. A second later he found himself upright – still unable to move but facing Ketor eye-to-eye.

"...So, the...the graviton field isn't a Romulan weapon?" Art swallowed a mouthful of saliva and tried not

to let the nausea induced by his sudden swing up from his back cause him to vomit.

“No, Arthur. For three years our best technicians and scientists poured over the sliver of data recorded the instant the Eisen Lattice appeared and AK-gva was destroyed.” Tikot remained motionless – taking full measure of the old human.

Arthur continued to battle his roiling stomach. He didn’t know how long he’d been on the flat of his back but being propped suddenly upright like a ragdoll tied to a board had sent more than his stomach at odds. He could feel the blood rushing from his head and though he couldn’t look down to see them, he could feel his knotted and twisted legs awaken with pins and needles. He wondered if there would be pain, or if Ketor had kept him medicated... then he spotted the maintenance trolley behind Tikot.

“Oh, don’t mind this. It’s for later. Do you realize that the readings we were able to study from the infinitesimal millisecond the *Nubur’s*, erm... “pod” detected the surging neutrinos from the small star, unlocked the final pieces of what was the greatest engineering quest ever undertaken by the Empire?” Ketor kept still, mindfully blocking the cart behind him.

He wished he could just move his head a few degrees to get a peek behind the Romulan at whatever it

was that was on the trolley... "Engineering quest? I don't...wait, you mean those giant Warbirds?"

"Hmm? Well...in a very narrow way, yes. You see our reliance on standard warp reactor technology was a hindrance to our goals. Many engineers far, far more knowledgeable than I could ever hope to be, struggled to perfect a new kind of propulsion. Oh, there were several theories, but the one the Science Directorate felt was most practical..."

"A singularity drive..."

"Ah, just so. See, you engineers are all so remarkable. I can't explain exactly what issues the neutrinos, the flaring gravitons and the sliver of infinitesimally fast readings captured by that battered little pod solved, but progress suddenly exploded like AK-gva itself. First, they built the *Tomed* using what they already had and then applied what they learned after AK-gva to perfect the drive system. The Eison lattice you see, arrived through an inverted, artificially created singularity to appear on that small star. It gave our engineers the final piece of the puzzle they required to perfect the Forced Singularity Drive. That drive system is at the heart of each of the *Horo*-class ships you and your unfortunate vessel came across." Ketor allowed himself a slight grin.

"So... you're some kind of... what? Government inspector, evaluating this new design?" Arthur had heard

rumors that the Romulans were experimenting with ways to improve their designs.

“No, Arthur Bradley. Had the pod’s readings only contained those few shards of scientific wonder – I would not be here. You see, the pod was responsible for monitoring radiation levels and basic spatial data to ensure the safe loading of ore from the planet’s surface to the transport in orbit. It also monitored communications between the hauler and the ground...” Tikot cleared his throat and without revealing anything, nodded to Mivik. The Reman had been standing behind the human, out of sight since repositioning the exam table to its upright and locked setting.

Mivik turned and moved silently to a table by the chamber’s entrance. A few discarded tricorders and a broken Type II phaser lay on the table’s flat black surface along with a green/grey box Ketor had brought with him from the *Vejul*. The box was smooth and had a small speaker imbedded in its face and three bulging actuators aligned along its base. Without having to be told to do so, Mivik pushed the first actuator...

“PHWEEZZZ!” The sound was brief and very loud. It echoed off the walls and ceiling and stone floor.

Arthur wanted to turn to see where the noise had come from, but the restraining field was not budging. The pins and needles in his legs were dying off and a searing pain was slowly rising up his right ankle towards the knee

and radiating down his femur and into his gut from his left hip. “Uh ah, wh...what was that?”

“That is what the pod recorded just as the Lattice appeared and the object emerged. It is incredible. That sound is the entire audio transmission the pod picked up before it was smashed and sent spinning into space. I wouldn’t have believed it possible, but that sound is a transmission slowed down tens of thousands of times by our recovery technicians. I don’t know which is more remarkable, the Romulan technicians who recovered and slowed the transmission, or the Romulan engineers who perfected equipment capable of capturing a broadcast sent at many times the speed of light...”

The pain which had settled into his right knee was nearly unbearable. Arthur had spent the two days, had it been two days? He couldn’t remember how long he’d been with Ketor. Two days didn’t seem long enough... He’d spent too many hours crying in pain, crying in fear and then being force fed warm water gruel by the *Nosferatu* Mivik – where did he know that word from? The pain was burning, he felt his body ripping itself apart, but he fought the tears that were marshalling. He wouldn’t show Ketor any more tears.

Ketor sighed and studied the human for a second more. It would be crying again soon. Tikot allowed himself to survey the old man’s mangled limbs and mishappen pelvis and imagined the agony the pathetic creature must

be in now that the inhibitor field had been turned off. He locked eyes with Bradley just as fat salty tears began spilling down and nodded again to Mivik in the darkness.

“PHWEeeeezzzz....Weeeee.....Phzzzzz.....arrrrrr.....
zzzzz.....YOUR BIOLOGICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL
DISTINCTIVENESS SHALL BE ADDED TO OUR
OOOOOOWWWNNNNN.....FFFFZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ”

The sound of hundreds of mechanical voices blended together in a synchronized single voice echoed and faded in the cavern. Ketor stood emotionlessly glaring at Arthur. Mivik moved silently around the periphery of the room to rejoin his men. For a moment the only sound was the human’s sobbing.

“That is why I am here, human. Do you know what that was?”

Arthur sputtered a broken hiccup. The pain was now washing over his entire body. He could see Mivik and the other Remans marshalled along the back wall of the chamber – all of them were holding disruptors with what looked like long ragged swords attached to their muzzles. The mechanical voices that he’d just heard were terrifying. He wept and sobbed uncontrollably.

“Do you know what that was, Arthur?”

“Well, what was it anyway?”

“Admiral?” Thom turned his attention away from Eldridge and the pilot who’d been ordered to fetch the rescue power pack from the *Victory*’s shuttle. They were trying to tap into CAD’s EPS grid in an effort to get things running.

“The reason you stayed back in Paris after the Council meeting and were set up in the Security Office.” Henry watched as Osip Evgenii tried to jump the office’s core processor and distribution main to no effect.

“I was going to try and track down Rear Admiral Cahill at the Moscow Tactical Institute.” Knot unfastened his shoulder strap and allowed the bib of his tunic to fall open. Their impromptu ‘inspection’ had failed miserably.

“That wouldn’t have been difficult, Thom. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking...”

From the Reception area they’d first forced their way into came a sudden blast of late evening light through the ragged hole Specialist Reid’s team had cut in the inner-chamber’s door. Wallace cocked his head towards the short hallway leading out of Maureen Bautlin’s abandoned office and walked back into the light. Admiral Knot followed. Both men were careful stepping through the hole, which was still hot at the edges from the phasers.

“Well done, Reid! Well done. Have you managed to restore power to the grid?” Henry walked directly towards the Specialist and her Tellarite partner who were scanning the windows in the Reception area with their hand-held tricorders.

“Sorry sir, no. We cut through the locking pins and the uh, the shutters retracted on their own.” Reid consulted her tricorder. “They look to be rigged to a simple spring mechanism.”

“Very well...at least we have some light. Will you head into the main office and see if you can work the same feat with the shutters in there?”

As the two Security Officers ducked through the doorway into the darkness of the CAD operations center, Wallace proceeded to take a seat in one of the two chairs facing out towards the Academy’s landing pad. He allowed himself a deep sigh and signaled for Knot to join him. “You were thinking what, Thom?”

“I was thinking to get a hold of Cahill on the ‘QT’ and have a face-to-face off the record about this Commander Harris...”

After nearly a year since receiving official Federation Council approval and laying the keel for the spaceframe, the first Andorian Battle Cruiser constructed in eighty years was preparing for its official launch. The *Shrar* bristled with worker bees and inspection pods. Her blue/silver skin reflected the brilliant work beacons mounted around her in the cavernous orbital construction dock hanging high above Fesoan. Not a square meter of the ship lay in shadow as the crews methodically performed their inspections from stem to stern.

From his office in the Commander's Staging Room U' Chtuklli watched the activity within the dock from behind a narrow view port. His one blue eye firmly focused on two small bees traversing the space between the *Shrar's* hull and the dock's massive beacon array. He'd overseen the primary construction of *Shrar* and had been present for the start of construction of her sister Battle Cruiser, *Syre*. *Syre*, still three months away from completion, was cocooned in orbit on the other side of the planet in an identical dock. Provided *Shrar's* primary systems performed as expected, the General intended to increase the manpower devoted to *Syre* and force her launch date up at least four weeks.

Beyond the Staging Room's hatchway, a full crew of technicians and engineers were fitting out the *Shrar's*

Bridge. The crew were already selected, and most were training on simulators deep within the Imperial Command College on Fesoan. Only the Engineering Department was properly manned at the moment. General U' Chtuklli had made his residence aboard the ship as soon as the vessel was complete enough to allow full time life support. He'd had a special team of technicians install a standalone communications and uplink workstation in the Staging Room.

When the Comm panel alerted with an incoming coded subspace transmission the General was not surprised. He'd received a Section Command dispatch an hour earlier advising him of what had transpired on Earth. He turned from the window and took a seat behind his desk, then opened the channel.

"Admiral Bautlin, report."

"Admiral U' Chtuklli, it's good to see you." Maureen had just settled into her own office which had been reengineered on the auxiliary control deck of K-3.

"While I'm back with the Imperial Guard Admiral, it's General. Please, proceed."

"I've executed Section Order Five. Our operations on Earth have come to an end."

"I see. You were sure to clean everything? You off loaded everything?" The update he'd just seen from Section Command indicated that no loose ends had been left, but he needed to hear it from Maureen for himself.

“Nothing’s been left behind. We’ve established a secure processing core here.”

“What about the couriers from the *Sheaffe*?”

“Debriefed and handled, General.” Maureen leaned back in her chair. U’ Chtuklli wouldn’t have asked about the Master Chief and the Communications Officer unless he had a reason – and Moddax had likely given the old warrior reason one way or another.

“It was odd having them report to your office when you could have simply had them vanish from the secure compound.”

“Those men were heroes – whether they knew it or not. As such, I owed it to them to look them in the eye and thank them for all that they ultimately sacrificed.”

“They could have been seen, Admiral.”

“They weren’t seen. All digital tracking information was altered to reflect their cover identities as Techs from Phanta II, or otherwise deleted. Don’t let Mr. Moddax’s paranoia shake your confidence in me.”

The General grunted and considered sending out feelers to confirm that the true identities of the Phanta II team had not been compromised, but he had a fleet to mobilize. “It appears that your faith in Commander Harris wasn’t misplaced after all, Maureen.”

She’d have a serious talk with Moddax about his penchant for over-sharing later. “I told you, Brian was just what we needed. Given a mission and a weapon that man’s

singular determination was unstoppable. I'm just disappointed it cost us a ship and crew."

"We knew this would be the likely outcome – the preferred outcome. Section Command now has a better picture of what the Romulans have been dealing with. Now we need to prepare ourselves for the next steps."

"You have a revitalized Imperial Fleet, four new Raiders and two Battle Cruisers and all of it enthusiastically and unanimously endorsed by the Council, including the Vulcans. I'm reconfiguring our core, what's next?"

For the first time since before the Charter, CAD was completely off-world. The Fleet was engaged with keeping the Klingons at bay under the guise of working towards protecting both the Federation and Klingon Empire from Romulans – which in turn freed the Star Empire to combat an unspeakable threat Section Command had laboured for close to two centuries to keep secret. Maureen reflected on the historically significant strides she and U' Chtuklli had taken in defense of the Federation and the long hard work that still lay ahead.

"Be sure Jupiter Yard has our fleet up and ready. I'll get the *Shrar* on the line to safeguard the Federation from the Cardassians while Starfleet calms our shared borders. We need to establish some practical agents now. What word from *Isadore*?"

After three hours the team Admirals Wallace and Knot had assembled to conduct the inspection of CAD's offices had still not restored power. It was obvious that Admiral Bautlin and her people were not returning to the Archives tower. Henry Wallace, still cautious about directly involving the Executive levels of Fleet Security for fear of a possible link between Bautlin and C'hou, gave site command to Specialist Reid from *Victory*. As Chief of Fleet Operations, Thom Knot requested Security backup from the garrison stationed at Headquarters but made clear that Specialist Reid was in charge and the sole point of contact for anything related to the site. Once backup personnel arrived along with a supply of field generators and diagnostic equipment, the C-in-C and Chief of Ops took their leave and headed for Admiral's Knot's office on the other side of the campus.

"Do you think they'll recover anything once they restore power to the systems?" Henry paced across his dim office to the cabinet he kept a select few bottles of largely contraband alcohol.

Thom fell back into a plush overstuffed chair. They'd discussed possibly retiring for the few hours remaining until daybreak but decided it'd be a waste of time. As Henry measured out two glasses of Romulan ale, Thom made himself comfortable. Some how they'd missed

their opportunity and Maureen Bautlin had managed to stay at least one step ahead of them.

“Given the way that office was scuttled, I doubt we’ll find much of anything useful if we even can restore power... thank you.” Thom took the glass offered then took a hard swallow. He caught sight of Henry taking a seat himself, and for a second thought how old and tired his friend looked.

Henry opened the front of his tunic and lowered himself into the chair facing Admiral Knot. He watched Thom gulp down half his ale in a single go. He couldn’t speak for the younger man, but Henry felt exhausted. “So, you didn’t explain to me why you felt it necessary to get in touch with Cahill on the quiet.”

“Once we got word from Archer IV about this Commander Harris showing up and making off with our ship, apparently with official orders – it made sense to get in touch with his last commander.” Thom finished his drink in another big gulp.

“Hmmm, and you thought quietly reaching out was the way to go about it because...”

Henry hadn’t yet touched his drink. He sat poised, cradling the glass in his hands, leaning slightly forward – pressing Thom for more information. Admiral Knot placed his empty glass on the low table between their two chairs and quietly cleared his throat. Henry marvelled at how old they’d both grown, but watching Thom, he could still see

glimpses of the tall, fit young scrapper he'd first met all those years ago aboard *Yorktown*.

"...because I wasn't completely sure what I was dealing with or who might be paying attention, alright? I'm the Chief of Operations Henry, I know how it would look if I started rambling on about conspiracy theories and insane nonsense."

"What's so insane about investigating how a Commander manages to show up out-of-the-blue and assume control of a starship and disappear?"

"Because I don't think it was out-of-the-blue. I think he was sent there intentionally, and I think once we speak with Cahill, we'll find that as far as Moscow is concerned this Harris was reassigned on official orders."

"You think Maureen Bautlin is behind all of it?" Henry took a small sip of ale. There was anger behind Thom's flinty eyes.

"Bautlin possibly, I'm inclined to think Deployment Resources."

"Alright... off the record then Thom, what do you know about Deployment Resources?"

Knot sat in silence for a moment, quietly trying to organize his thoughts and sort between fact and rumor. As Chief of Ops, one would have thought to be briefed on every aspect of Starfleet, but when it came to the now defunct Deployment Resources, he'd been left blind. Once Thom shared the few facts he had about Deployment

Resources, along with some of the less paranoid rumors he'd heard – Henry remained stoic for a few minutes longer before speaking again.

“Maureen Bautlin was promoted because Admiral U' Chtuklli, the former head of Deployment Resources for the last decade, was reassigned to the Andorian Imperial Fleet to oversee their ‘Upgrade’ preparations. As you know, with our resources spread along the Romulan and Klingon borders, the need to safeguard our backdoor became a tactical necessity. You’ve seen the reports concerning the military buildup within the Cardassian Union...”

“Yes, yes... even the Vulcans consented to allowing the Imperial Fleet to commission two new Battle Cruisers – first heavy cruisers they’ve built since the Federation was formed. So?”

“So, aside from the fact that U' Chtuklli and Bautlin have a history and are, I guess, friends? There’s no clear reason why a Starfleet Captain should be jumped up to full Admiral and placed in charge of a nearly autonomous division.”

“That’s exactly my point! Has been all along. My God, Henry, why would you promote...” Thom stifled himself when he saw Admiral Wallace begin to shake his head and motion him to stop.

Struggling to breathe against the searing pain washing up and over him in waves, Arthur couldn't find the strength to respond to Ketor. Mivik and the other Remans remained huddled together along the back of the chamber, waiting.

"Well, Starfleet? Do you know? No? Well, allow me to enlighten you." Tikot stepped towards the specimen table where the old human was held quivering in agony. He could see the Earther was unable to respond, but he'd given his word to illuminate this pathetic creature's understanding of what had befallen it.

Arthur tried to speak, but the pain was too intense. A tortured squeal escaped his lips. Ketor just smiled, then turned and walked back around to the trolley he'd been blocking. Through waves of agony and the sting of tears he could make out what the Romulan had been hiding. Atop a load dolly – not unlike the ones Bradley used aboard *Sheaffe* for transporting antimatter canisters or probe fuel cores – lay an assortment of dermal regenerator units, knitters and triage equipment which had once been in Dr. Lo's Sickbay.

He could feel the weight of his own body bearing down on his twisted legs and at that second all Arthur wanted was to die, so the pain would stop. He could feel himself sliding towards the blackness – how he hadn't

already passed out from the agony, he didn't know. Perhaps if the restraining field hadn't held him upright, he would have simply crumpled to an unconscious heap the minute the pain had begun. As it was, he struggled to remain focused on all that Ketor was telling him.

"A century ago, on your world – a discovery was made. Scientists found wreckage strewn about the polar region and in the debris, they recovered remains..."

The Romulans had gained access to the Vulcan Science Academy's archives. They'd learned of some alien wreckage recovered in the Arctic along with two necrotic cybernetic "abominations".

Mivik snapped a guttural demand for Tikot to hurry – he and his men were eager to put an end to the pathetic creature and see for themselves how their new collection of wound-mending devices worked. Ketor silenced the Reman with a sharp word and motioned for the trio of warriors to hold off until he was done.

"These remains... well, the records obtained for us by the Tal Shiar are vague on the details. The Vulcans' usual painstakingly descriptive practice of recording every piece of minutia seems to have been intentionally relaxed in these matters. What we know is that somehow an Earth science vessel was commandeered and used to transmit a message before one of your own Starfleet ships intercepted and destroyed it."

According to the records obtained by the Romulans, the starship sent to destroy the science vessel recorded the amplitude, carrier wave frequency and mathematical symmetry of the transmission these undead aliens had managed to send. Arthur listened in pained fascination as Ketor insisted that the broadcast frequency of that transmission a century ago was practically identical to the transmission they had just listened to from the *Nubur's* recovered pod.

"You asked if I was Tal Shiar, or Military and I told I was not. I am a member of a far more important order. I am Zhat Vash."

Ketor had been dispatched to investigate the situation. Originally, he'd been given charge of two Imperial vessels, an old Warbird and a science frigate. The frigate had succumbed to the graviton field and was lost with all hands after it was rendered immobile and fell into a gravity eddy. The Warbird was able to navigate out of the graviton field and return to Central Command some rudimentary scans of the Eison lattice. That had been eighteen years ago.

Ketor returned a year after his first deployment with a small fleet of Warbirds and support vessels to assist with the development of AK-hy and to establish a task force to study and if possible, mitigate the threat posed by the lattice. For nearly a decade the gravitons made close observation of the lattice impossible. Eventually the data

yielded from the *Nubur's* pod assisted in the development of the artificial singularity drive and prototype Warbirds were slowly dispatched to augment the efforts of the Zhat Vash to safeguard the Empire against the threat posed by the lattice.

“So, you see human, what you thought was a Romulan weapon is in fact something far deadlier. A remarkable gateway to a hell none of us dare imagine. Where machines and artificial life reign and seek to corrupt life wherever their tentacles may reach.” Ketor could see the human fading, but its placid eyes were fixed with rapt attention on Tikot's own.

Arthur moaned – trying to speak but failing in his depleted condition and numbing pain.

“If anything, this is your doing – your Starfleet. Wasn't it only a generation ago human, when your entire space force was reliant on a synthetic intelligence? ‘Control’ you euphemistically called it. When that unnatural disgrace broke free and nearly eliminated you all, Romulus should have struck. Zhat Vash certainly was advocating for the eradication of your abomination and your very race itself...”

Ketor stopped himself. The human was still alert but breathing heavy – dying slowly. It had no idea how it and its kind were despised. How their willingness to embrace and ultimately surrender to the synthetic sickened and enraged...

“It’s ironic in the end, human. Your Captain sacrificed his crew and vessel for a glimpse at something none of you could ever hope to understand. Even now, I can see a part of you thinks I am the enemy. No. You and your weak race are the traitors, to life itself.”

Isadore is on-station, patrolling the Zone exactly as she should be, General.” Maureen looked around her new office and mourned the massive windows she’d taken for granted on Earth.

“I see. Should he be offered a formal position with us and be required to provide distractions; what is your assessment of Captain Ch’ornithon?”

“Shohr is already chaffing at the bit as far as I know. It wouldn’t take much to persuade him to take liberties.”

“Section Command advised me that Captain Ch’ornithon has indeed already ‘taken liberties’. Twelve hours ago, he ordered *Isadore* to intercept a Klingon D-7 on our side of the line. He refrained from destroying the craft but sent them back into Klingon space with their tails between their legs.” U’ Chtuklli smiled at the thought of Klingon warriors sent scurrying from a fight.

“Well, you asked for my recommendations for reliable people. I’m gratified that I’m apparently two for two.”

“Apparently. I plan on recruiting Captain Ch’ornithon. I need you to reach out to our asset aboard the *Tomed* – you’ll find the necessary files in the offload package.”

Bautlin knew that her new position had freed the General to prepare to take a seat at Section Command and assumed that once the Andorian Fleet was up and running, he'd retire to Command and leave field-Ops to her. She'd reviewed the contingency plans for their current operation and knew the General was referring to the former Romulan Ambassador's Adjunct Nompel – who, after leaving Ambassador Nanclus' service, was assigned as Chief Political Officer aboard the Romulan flagship, *Tomed*.

"It's not a Romulan weapon, Maureen." He watched the woman's brow relax slightly, then added: "It's possibly something far worse. We need to start planning around how to let the Romulans alone with their work. You're sure you altered both the Vulcan and Starfleet archives from 2153?"

"Yes, General. Completely wiped clean along with the Denobulan Medical Archives."

"Good. The Klingons are the concern now. We must convince them to back off the Neutral Zone. Be delicate with Nompel. We'll need a treaty of some kind and there will be blood on both sides Maureen."

Admiral Wallace called for the presentation screen and from a recessed alcove mounted along the wall fronting the two overstuffed chairs both he and Admiral Knot were reclining in, descended a large viewing panel. Thom had refilled his glass and took a small sip of Romulan ale as Henry then called for a packet of visual captures to be displayed. The screen came alive and against a translucent UFP screen-backer, a collection of thumbnail icons populated – each with a corresponding identification number.

“What’s this?” Thom rested his glass on the table and rubbed his eyes. It was coming up on 0430 hours and neither of them had slept.

“Rear Admiral Donaldson’s attendance at the launch of *Isadore* a few months back. Donaldson was there to swear in her new captain... computer, display IS-103.”

One of the thumbnails highlighted and then expanded to fill the entire screen. Standing at a generic podium stood Jack Donaldson. He was captured giving a lean, hard looking Andorian a hearty handshake with the glowing hull of the *USS Isadore* as a backdrop. Admiral Knot knew full well who Jack was swearing in as captain... Shohr Ch’ ornithon.

“Alright, so?”

“You commented earlier that you’d taken exception to Deployment Resources assigning Captain Ch’ orithron to *Isadore...*” Before Thom could reply, Henry cleared his throat and called up image IS-107.

The first image collapsed, and a second thumbnail highlighted and expanded. This image was much darker than the first. Henry explained that Admiral Donaldson had brought along a young Lieutenant to make a visual record of the event – Jack was obsessive about recording official functions at which he felt he was the “star”. This second image, though, didn’t have the Admiral anywhere in sight. In fact, with the exception of an elbow off to the left, there were no officers at all in the shot. Instead, what was pictured was a low buffet table nicely laid out with Altair water and refreshments.

“Henry, I’m sorry, but am I supposed to be seeing something here?”

“Take a good look, Thom.”

Knot drew a long breath and retrieved his glass for a second sip of ale. There was the elbow – which on its own likely ruined the composition and disqualified this particular shot from any of Jack’s scrapbooks. The buffet... the unremarkable selection of finger foods... two bored looking porters standing either side of the buffet...

“Wait... is that?” Thom slowly rose from his chair to get closer to the screen.

Henry called for the computer to zoom in and enhance the image's upper left quadrant. As Admiral Knot stood silently watching, the screen shifted viewpoints and rushed towards the short porter dressed in black, blending into the bulkhead. The man had an expressionless face and dark eyes, but when the image reset to feature the porter from the waist up, it was his uniform that caught Thom's attention. The porter was dressed in black. Even enhanced and blown up his actual body was difficult to distinguish from the bulkheads. A pale Fleet insignia stood out on his left breast – grey or silver stitching... but just below the dull insignia, highlighted by a sliver of reflected light from *Isadore* through the viewing gallery's windows opposite the buffet...

"That's the same pin..."

"That's the same pin Admiral Bautlin wore on her uniform in Paris. The same pin her Lieutenant had displayed on her tunic and the same pin I'd seen Admiral U' Chtuklli wear on his uniform all the years he was in charge of Deployment Resources."

"What the hell is it? I'm a little embarrassed Henry, I just assumed it was..."

"A service pin or theatre award? Three hash marks against one bar." Henry watched his friend study the image, then slowly return to his chair.

"That's... that's not possible Henry, you're putting me on."

“I promoted Captain Maureen Bautlin to Admiral because a personal courier from the Office of the President presented me with direct orders to do so. I didn’t have a say in it. As far as Contemporaneous Accessibility, that’s the new name for a Division I have no purview over... the new name for what was Deployment Resources.”

Deployment Resources had come into existence shortly after the war with the Klingon Empire following the near disastrous failure of “Control” – the Fleet’s primary AI regulatory and strategic command system. The Fleet was largely depleted, and resources were stretched thin between the various worlds and installations which had been attacked, crippled, and in some cases destroyed by hostile Klingon forces. The only way Fleet Command and the Federation proper could possibly hope to maintain order and preserve unity while making optimum use of personnel and resources was to continue deferring most decision and deployment tasks to the system known simply as “Control”, and the consequences of that decision were very nearly fatal.

Knot listened to his friend expound on the history and folly of the Klingon War and post-war era. Thom was acquainted with what had gone on and how close they’d all come to being wiped out by their own computer’s AI. When he’d first made Admiral, he was read in on the classified details of the calamity and was soundly horrified at what almost came to pass.

“What you and the majority of the Fleet and Federation don’t know, Thom, is that Control was ministered to by another autonomous organization which operated under the banner of the “Control Analytics Division” – CAD, as they were often referred to. They drew their authority from Article 14, Section...”

“31?... My father used to call them “the black badges”, but they weren’t really, real. Were they?”

“Control Analytics became Deployment Resources. Deployment Resources was last headed by U’ Chtuklli who has close ties with Maureen Bautlin. Maureen Bautlin’s First Officer from *USS Victory*, Shohr Ch’ ornithon was made captain and assigned to *Isadore* not by us, but by Deployment Resources. Here at *Isadore*’s launch we have evidence of Section 31 being present.”

Thom threw back the rest of his drink. “That’s circumstantial Henry... it, it could mean anything.”

“Our missing starship, *Sheaffe*? I did some digging and at her last scheduled resupply and refit – she was outfitted with a type II phaser array, a dedicated energizer to provide that array with minimal power and state-of-the-art targeting sensors for the array, all of it authorized by Deployment Resources.”

“One array with no punch? That makes no sense.”

“Not when you consider we’ve been using *Mirandas* as testbeds for Fleet-ready upgrades and the *Constellation* serves as our exclusive prototype for propulsion and

exploratory upgrades for her class. The fact that *Sheaffe*, as obsolete and underpowered as she was, got that refit just makes the move all the more ridiculous, except...”

“Except what?”

“Those targeting sensors – I had a friend at Daystrom do some brainstorming. The amplitude the new sensors work on makes them nearly ideal for cutting through gravitons.”

“What are you saying, Henry?”

“I’m saying that any reasonable Science Officer would likely have been able to surmise the sensors’ capabilities and adapt them to serve as navigational beams to pick a path through heavy graviton interference – not unlike the field the *Sheaffe* encountered years ago which prompted this whole mess.”

“This Harris, he was...”

“Bautlin’s Tactical Officer aboard *Victory*.”

Ketor's final goodbye to Engineer Arthur Bradley was interrupted by the soft chiming of the Romulan's communicator. The *Vejul* had arrived in orbit. Tikot barked a few short commands to the ship's Romulan Commander waiting for transport coordinates, then returned the device to its place on his belt. The *Vejul* needed to get back to its operations around the Eisin lattice – with the *Volto!* no longer serviceable the compliment of functional Warbirds was stretched critically thin.

"Well Arthur, my time with you is at an end. I've informed Commander Veeta of your errant shuttlecraft. The suicidal madness of your pathetic Captain and the misguided paranoia which drove your vessel and shipmates to their doom will come to nothing."

Bradley moaned softly. The pain had grown to the point where he couldn't imagine it not ever being his screaming reality. Behind Ketor the Remans were spreading themselves out, disruptors in hand. They growled and snapped at one and other. Arthur wanted it to be over.

"All you've managed to do is delay me in my work... for ten years now we've been sacrificing loyal Romulans and taxing our greatest assets to their breaking point. The ore these Reman devils pull out of this rock no longer goes to Romulus. Now, they refine it right here and cast it into

cladding of immense proportions. For ten years we've been shuttering the exit port of the lattice. Even under ideal circumstances we will be working at closing off that door to hell for at least another forty years... protecting every living thing in this galaxy."

Tikot leaned in and reached past Art's immobilized head. Suddenly Arthur felt himself slump slightly forward – his head hung at an awkward angle. A sharp scream escaped.

"You're now only partially restrained, human. Mivik and his men want to see how proficient they can be with these medical instruments liberated from your vessel. I have enjoyed this opportunity to speak with you. Ru hwiyyhtaodt'ia'rhoinnie, Mivik."

Ketor walked towards the chamber's entrance and signalled to *Vejul*. The last thing he saw as he was dematerializing was Mivik and his warriors plunging their U'rels into the old human's torso. Mivik's blade struck so hard that it penetrated through the old man and protruded through the back of the exam table. The Reman's snarling laughter and hearty barks echoed in Tikot's ears as the scene washed away.

As Arthur Bradley passed his last sputtering breaths deep below the surface of Kea II, Nams and M'narr were picking their way blindly through the asteroid field awash in gravitons.

"Any luck getting a signal from Phanta II, Mr. M'narr?" Nams had just finished replenishing the antimatter supply in the rear of their shuttle. It was the first attempt at opening the fuel container and performing the delicate procedure.

M'narr glanced from his targeting monitor to the shuttle's pathetic Comm panel. "Nothing, Chief. Nothing's getting through this radiation." He couldn't help letting an ill-tempered Nausicaan snarl find its way into his voice.

Nams dropped his heavy, rubberized gloves into a crate he'd lined with lead foil then carefully pulled himself free of the thick, white radiation smock he'd been wearing. The procedure he'd followed to refuel the shuttle's antimatter chamber from inside the cabin was supposed to ensure no exposure to the fatal fuel, but Nams chose to err on the side of caution in such things. He climbed into the seat next to M'narr and consulted the fuel and status panels.

"Shields are holding at seventy percent and our antimatter reserves are back up to 'optimal'."

“What’s our deuterium situation, Chief?” M’narr tapped the targeting monitor with his finger. The shuttle’s targeting sensor was barely cutting through the graviton heavy space stretching out ahead of the tiny vessel.

“We’re at seventy-three percent. Are we ready to try another warp jump?” The longer they stayed on impulse power the quicker they burned through their limited deuterium supply.

In the days since they set out from *Sheaffe*, they’d managed a scant three jumps to warp speed, none of which had lasted more than two hours. It’d been hoped that the targeting sensor aboard the shuttle would be able to lead them through the gravitons as effectively as those on the *Sheaffe* had. Instead, the single sensor was only just picking through the cluttered interference.

“I don’t know, Chief. Plotting any course even half a lightyear out is next to impossible at the moment. Could we maybe be travelling through a particularly dense part of the field we somehow missed on our way in?” M’narr was angry and fought waves of fury while enduring deepening despair. As a Nausicaan, he left much to be desired and as a Betazoid he largely considered himself a failure – having no real telepathic or empathic abilities to rely upon.

Nams called up the targeting info on his status panel. The sensor was performing at less than ten percent capacity. He wasn’t a pilot, but he knew full well that the trajectory they’d set out on was based only on estimates

and it was entirely possible they were flying into oblivion. M'narr was trying to gather enough readings to plot a course, but the graviton interference was waxing and waning in waves.

“Just keep on the present course I suppose, Mr. M'narr.”

Nams and M'narr had fallen into the habit of sleeping in shifts. While M'narr was the sole pilot, he'd so far been able to map out and set a clear course for their tiny shuttle using sensor data in preprogrammed four hour blocks. Nams would take control during these periods and M'narr would rack out in the back of the cabin. If anything urgent came up, Nams simply had to rouse M'narr as quickly as possible. Conversely, M'narr had next to no engineering skills outside of the specialized tech involved with subspace communication relays. While the Chief lay snoring behind him, M'narr would keep a wary eye on the shuttle's engine monitors and reactor settings – knowing only that if something blinked or pinged he'd have to get his Bolian technician up and alert on the double.

The original plan was to keep the shuttle running at low warp using the targeting sensor to pick a path through the field and emerge on the other side in short order. Once clear of the field they were to make best speed to Phanta II and transmit the all-important data they'd gathered. Failing that, they were to launch the probe strapped to

their belly at Phanta II, and in so doing hopefully pass on the data even if they found themselves doomed.

“Mr. M’narr... how complete do we need to have our shields?”

“What?” M’narr took his eyes off the small monitor and looked over at Licanat.

“I mean, if we were at warp – could we get away with forward shields alone?”

M’narr looked down at his own status panel. Running at sublight speed, their forward, aft and lateral shield emitters were operating at maximum to protect them from the ambient radiation. If they could go to warp, then the field their nacelles would generate around the shuttle would naturally divert much of the radiation away from the craft as it propelled itself forward.

“What are you thinking, Chief?”

“Suppose we disabled the aft, dorsal and lateral emitters and rerouted power to the targeting sensor through the redundant EPS feeds?”

“We’d be exposed to lethal radiation in minutes Nams. I mean even with forward shields at full power it’d creep in and kill us.” M’narr tried to work out how much more power they could shunt to the sensor by taking the emitters offline none-the-less.

“If we could boost the sensor and get a clear path, keep the forward shields at maximum and maintain the

ventral grid to protect the reactor – we could jump to warp and maybe outrun the radiation altogether.”

M’narr sat silently looking from his status panel to the targeting monitor and then out the forward view port at the churning field of asteroids. He gave up trying to calculate power gains and probabilities. He was no engineer, but what he did know was that if they took the emitters offline, they weren’t likely to get them back regardless of how successful they were. “I don’t know, Chief...”

“Sir, it’s been days and we’re nowhere near where we need to be. We’ll be out of fuel long before we see the other side of this field at impulse. *Sheaffe’s* gone, sir. For all we know, we’re the only ones left.”

“What if we don’t make it, Nams? Huh? What if, what if we reroute like you say and nothing happens?”

“We launch the probe. Either way, son, we can always launch the probe and pray it gets through. We keep on like this and we are definitely dead.”

M’narr weighed the situation. Licanat wasn’t wrong. They were running out of fuel. They were blind. Even their supply of emergency rations and water was beginning to run low.

It took them an hour and a half to rig a foil curtain behind the forward control positions and the rear of the shuttle, a small measure of protection against radiation. Then they shunted power from the shield emitters to their

feeds to the targeting sensor. The lateral emitters registered burnouts as soon as Nams cut their power – they would never function again.

Both men sat stoically in their seats glued to the targeting monitor once the aft shields were down. The cabin RAD detectors began to alarm and still the targeting beam returned no more data than before. Nams quietly prepared to arm the probe for launch. Just as Master Chief Licanat was about to apologize to M'narr for having killed them both – a return. Then another. M'narr began plotting his course and quickly jumped the shuttle to warp.

Maureen closed the secure channel and sat in silence contemplating what the General had shared. She found it remarkable that for all the years-long planning and careful preparation Section Command had committed itself to – the Romulans were perhaps playing a longer game than could ever have been imagined. The data gathered by the doomed *Sheaffe* and her singularly focused Captain had been scrutinized, diluted, redacted and subtly edited before it was passed on for her to share with Starfleet Security. What the Select Council had seen was only what Section Command had wanted them to see. In a scant three days, when the Federation Council gathered for its regular session – they would see only what they were supposed to.

The deck above what had once been Auxiliary Control aboard K-3 – which now served as Admiral Bautlin's office and living quarters, was the station's Operations Level. Below Auxiliary Control was the meal hall and communal spaces and below that were two decks of living quarters. The operatives would be settling in to their new quarters, many of them would be trying to rest in order to acclimate to station time having so recently arriving from San Francisco. Maureen activated her internal Comm panel and hailed the panel assigned to Lt. Bull.

“Bull here, go.”

Maureen smiled at the sound of the young woman's voice. "Lt. Bull, I realize it's late. However, I'd like you to report to my office before you turn in, please."

"Of course, Admiral. I'll be there directly."

The channel closed automatically. Section Order Five had been inevitable. U' Chtuklli had briefed her fully on what had to be done in order to ensure the directive was carried out successfully and made clear that once he was entrenched with the Imperial Guard, she would be the one to execute the Order. For more than a century Section 31 had maintained a presence on Earth. Only after the near catastrophe of the Control incident was the decision made to relocate Section Command off world to safeguard the higher administrative apparatus of the organization. The bulk of the Section's operational assets had remained quietly in play right in the heart of Fleet Headquarters, though. Now there was nothing of Section 31 on Earth for the first time since the founding of Starfleet.

An almost musical chime indicated someone was requesting entry to the office. Maureen straightened up in her chair and granted Lt. Jose Bull entry.

"Ma'am." Jose walked across the room towards the Admiral seated behind a long silver-grey desk. She held up just short of the plain moulded plastic chairs fronting the desk. Most of the furnishings in the office were throwbacks to the late 50's and early 60's, but everything looked brand new.

“Lieutenant, you’ve done remarkable work today. None of this could have come together as well as it has without your efforts, I want you to know that.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” Jose tried to keep the exhaustion out of her voice.

“What I’m going to ask of you now is just as important to the mission. Like yourself, I went through the Academy and pursued a career in the Fleet. It was only after years of experience and meeting certain people who recognized various attributes that I was recruited into this select service...”

Maureen touched her finger to the blank display screen mounted to her desk and called up her final directives for Section Order Five. She quickly skimmed the details displayed, then rose to her feet and continued addressing Lt. Bull.

“You’re aware that ‘Jose Bull’ no longer exists in any official capacity whatsoever on Earth. You scrubbed your own records and digital self from every server, computer core and archive on the planet. Mr. Moddax and his operatives also included you in their own scrubs to be doubly sure nothing was missed. As you agreed years ago when Admiral U’ Chtuklli first approached you with this unique assignment – you’re in this for life.”

Jose shifted in her seat. The Admiral had made her way around the desk and was now pacing somewhere

behind her. “Yes, ma’am. I understand my obligation to the oath I took.”

“So, you can continue on here as my assistant until such time as you earn your way to the position of operative – which shouldn’t be too long in the offing. Or you can consider a return to Earth.” Maureen watched the young woman closely. “You’d be someone else, of course. Jose Bull no longer exists. We’d give you a background, a new name... slight surgery to alter your appearance just enough to throw off anyone who may have known you as Bull. New fingertips, minor DNA changes...”

“May I ask why, ma’am?”

“We’re off Earth. This is the concentrated centre of Section activity now. We need someone reliable back home to plug into things at the source, as it were. Someone we can trust – an agent. If this appeals to you, I’d have you stationed at the Logistics and Strategies Compound in Sydney. You’d be back in the Fleet – likely a Lieutenant Commander, Science Division.”

Jose couldn’t help herself from smiling.

Following a rather distinguished tour aboard *USS Victory* as Captain Bautlin's Tactical Officer, Brian Harris was promoted to full Commander. Details of his "heroic" actions following *Victory's* encounter with an unidentified hostile were laid out in his personnel file along with Captain Bautlin's logs and reports. When his tour aboard *Victory* concluded, Harris had several options presented to him. Bautlin expressed her desire to keep him on for another tour and suggested that he submit himself for further command training. Harris opted to join the team on Mars developing the next generation of defensive technology for the modernization of the Fleet.

Harris deployed to the Mars Research Institute and almost immediately fell into the role of lead instructor for the new phaser array program. His quarterly performance reviews were all glowing. His immediate commanding officer was impressed with his focus and ability to connect with front-line officers and service personnel. Once the 'Upgrade' commenced, his role in developing and deploying practical tactical upgrades in the field was expanded. According to Rear Admiral Cahill, Commander Harris was evaluated three separate times for suitability for Starship command training.

Cahill had a great appreciation of her Commander's abilities but had expressed a reservation in whole heartedly

recommending him for a field command position. During their “off-the-record” talk about Harris, Cahill had shared her concerns with Admiral Knot that Brian was too goal-oriented at times – prone to losing focus of the whole while driving for a pre-defined objective regardless of cost. She echoed Captain Bautlin’s glowing appraisal of Harris’ innate tactical prowess, but repeatedly mentioned his tendency to surrender “good judgement” in favour of a direct path to his defined objective.

Admiral Wallace had supplied Thom with a complete dossier on Harris’s service, including the three command assessments. Cahill’s position that Brian Harris was prone to focus too intently on defined objectives at the peril of all else was mirrored in all three official assessments. Harris was not considered to be a suitable candidate for starship command.

Cahill had worked alongside Harris for only a short time as her Command was located at the Moscow Tactical Institute with a purview over the tactical divisions at the Mars Research Institute. While her insights into Brian Harris’ career were interesting, it was her recollection of how the Commander left the MTI and disappeared without anyone noticing that interested Admiral Knot. He’d agreed to be as discreet as he possibly could in probing Cahill as Admiral Wallace still had real concerns about Maureen Bautlin’s CAD/Section 31 operating behind the scenes.

“So, he was a stellar instructor and driven tactician, but not captain material, Admiral Cahill?” Thom had raised Moscow from his personal Comm terminal in his office.

“That would be my assessment, sir. He wasn’t easy to replace either. I’ve got two Lieutenant Commanders and the tactical officer from the *Thrum* filling in for him now.”

Cahill looked alert and fresh. She wore a clean-looking and sharply-pressed uniform and Thom noticed a steaming ornate tea service stood waiting on a bureau or low table behind her. It would be late afternoon in Moscow... teatime. By comparison, Thom was aware that he looked exhausted and disheveled.

“Thank you, Admiral. In closing though, can you recall the specifics of the orders which took him away from the MTI?”

There was a pause. Thom tried to remain as passive as possible, as Chief of Ops he should have complete access to all personnel transfers within the fleet, she’d know that. He waited patiently as Cahill thought. With luck she’d deduce that he was enquiring as some follow-up to Harris’s assessments or present assignment. The disturbing fact was nobody had any idea that Commander Brian Harris had effectively dropped off the radar months ago and had apparently taken the *Sheaffe* with him.

“As far as I recall, Admiral – Brian was contacted by HQ and instructed to report to Deployment

Resources...” Cahill paused and tried to call up the request and subsequent transfer records for Commander Harris.

Knot watched her work, frown, resubmit a request for records, sigh and shake her head.

“I’m sorry, Admiral Knot. I don’t seem to be having any luck calling up the orders... the data base. I’m sure it’s just some kind of glitch. I can get my people on it and send it along as soon as they recover the data.”

“That would be appreciated, Admiral Cahill. Have you been having computer issues in Moscow lately?”

“Not to my knowledge, but we’ve been transferring and duplicating terabytes of information for the new facilities at Utopia Planitia.”

“Fair enough. Off hand, can you recount the substance of the orders?” Thom had already been through the master files of all personnel orders issued over the last eight months – there was nothing on file regarding Commander Harris.

“The order was fairly standard: Commander Harris to report to HQ for potential redeployment, Deployment Resources. I can’t remember off-hand if we got anything further after he left, but we were on our own to replace him once it was clear he wouldn’t be returning.”

“Ha, ha! I should have liked to have seen the look on that Klingon dog’s face when you sent him scurrying back to his side of the line, beaten and humiliated!”

“Yes, General... it was satisfying.”

“Ah, but you’re disappointed the Klingons didn’t give you cause to truly engage them in righteous combat. I can see it writ across your face, Shohr.”

Shohr stiffened and looked around his quarters uneasily. Danny would be arriving anytime now to spend the night. The unexpected call from General U’ Chtuklli had caught Shohr by surprise, and the General’s intimate knowledge of *Isadore’s* most recent engagements were unsettling.

“General forgive me, but how is it tha...”

“That I know about your dalliance with the Klingons? Shohr, you disappoint me. If you’ll recall, I made you.” U’ Chtuklli sat back in his chair and let the Starfleet Captain see the glorious uniform of an Imperial General.

“I appreciate your part in my promotion to Captain, General – however, I earned my command through years of dedicated service and hard work.” If he’d been in the Imperial Guard instead of Starfleet, Shohr knew his response would earn him derision and possibly punishment – but he wasn’t in the Guard and his former Admiral was pressing a very Andorian attack.

“Mind your tone, Captain. You have four years and some months left on your current assignment after which time you will still be master of *Isadore*, if you so choose – to begin another five years of mindlessly patrolling empty space, observing and reporting on Romulan ghosts you’ll never get to engage.”

Shohr took a breath, held it for a few seconds, then exhaled slowly. He couldn’t see where the General was going with this, but he was still a superior officer in the hierarchy of the Federation and some caution was prudent. He studied the General’s face. The brilliant white scars which raced out from the pit where an eye had been seemed a glorious trophy, hard-won in mortal combat. Behind U’ Chtuklli were the non-descript blue/silver bulkheads of an Andorian vessel.

“You had an opportunity years ago to earn your way into the Guard – an opportunity you squandered, yes?”

Shohr bristled and flexed his antennae. He didn’t respond.

“I’ll make this brief then, Captain. I am going to offer you one final opportunity to earn your way into the Guard – if that’s truly what you want. One opportunity to be called Ch’ Ornithon and wear Imperial blue without anyone questioning your right to serve the Empire and her allies. Would you be interested in that, Captain?”

Shohr took another deep breath, but before he could ask the General to explain what it was he’d have to

do, if he was indeed interested, the chime at his cabin's door announced the arrival of Yeoman Tracy. Captain Ch'orithron excused himself for just a moment, turned the display on his Comm panel off and walked to the door. The door hushed open, and Danny tried to walk into the cabin before anyone should notice her in the hallway. Shohr held up his hand causing her to stop and retreat half a pace. She looked concerned, stunned even. He quietly told her they'd have to reschedule and promised to explain in the morning. The door hushed closed just as the *Isadore's* Third Officer got off the turbolift at the end of the hall.

Shohr returned to the Comm panel and reactivated the viewscreen – General U' Chtuklli was waiting. "Apologies, General, we won't have any further interruptions."

"No, I hope not. Now, are you interested in finally joining the Guard, or do you wish to continue your glorious service floating around the Romulan Neutral Zone?"

"What would I need to do to earn this opportunity?"

"Become my agent. Report to a designated authority for status updates and instructions, whilst continuing to serve as captain of one of the most powerful spacefaring vessels in the quadrant knowing you'd be serving the interests and security of the Federation in a far, far greater capacity than any mere captain anywhere ever could."

"If I agree... I won't be expected to compromise..."

“If you agree you will be serving an elite branch of the Federation. I’d ask you to serve until the end of your present tour, then if you still want to join the Imperial Guard – command of a Raider will be yours. Who knows, in time perhaps even command of one of our new Battle Cruisers.” U’ Chtuklli was satisfied to see Shohr’s antennae stand erect. “I have a ship to launch and a fleet of my own to lead along the Cardassian border – the Obsidian Order has been active of late, and the Central Command has plans to expand the Cardassian Union’s influence in the wake of our deployment along the Romulan and Klingon borders.”

The General ended the call before Shohr could ask any more questions. The Captain of the *Isadore* would be contacted again in thirty-six hours for his answer, though U’ Chtuklli was already sure he’d secured a new agent.

“An agent?! That’s ridiculous!” Moddax stepped away from his console in K-3’s Command Centre and balled his hands into fists. The other operatives manning the terminals around him kept their attention on their work – trying their best not to be drawn into the storm raging between Commander Moddax and Admiral Bautlin.

“She’s qualified, gifted even - and she has the benefit of actual Starfleet training at the Academy. Once Dr. Ormaz is done altering her appearance and genetic signature and Demby has dropped her new identity into the appropriate servers, Ms. Bull will be returning to Earth to serve as our first active agent in over a decade.” Maureen held her composure. Moddax was tired too, but where exhaustion gave Bautlin focus – it only eroded Moddax’s temper.

“She’s a jittery, frightened child. We have far more skilled operatives who can...” Moddax stifled himself, suddenly becoming aware of his volume and tone.

“Oh, Commander we do have skilled operatives, there’s no arguing that. However, we do not get to have a say in CAD operational decisions, do we? Section Command put me in charge of CAD. A fact I’ve repeatedly had to remind you of. One I fear you will never come to accept... clear the floor.”

Quickly and quietly the seven operatives who'd been manning the various consoles and monitoring stations spread across the Command Centre locked their posts and exited the main chamber. Moddax and Bautlin found themselves alone.

"It is my duty to execute Order Five and in order to do that I must have an agent in play that I know CAD can trust. This is your last chance, Moddax, to get on board with that reality. General U' Chtuklli is securing the Federation's exposed flank with the Cardassians, and the Klingons are taking liberties up and down the line. Frankly, I don't have time for your wounded ego or childish tattling. Section Command has given me full authority to deal with you as I see fit."

Moddax stood dumbfounded for a moment. He'd overplayed his hand and lost. In doing so he'd lost sight of what mattered. Now, standing alone with her amidst the chirping humming computers aboard K-3, Moddax realized that he had a stark and final choice to make.

"Well, Commander?"

"We haven't had agents in play since the failure at Khitomer..." Moddax unclenched his fists and took a step back from the Admiral.

"We came very close to being completely exposed not only to the rest of the Fleet and Federation, but to the Klingons and Romulans as well. Section Command was fortunate that Admiral Cartwright was committed to our

ideals and kept his agency out of his confessions, but there have always been agents. What was U' Chtuklli, if not an agent? Bull? Myself?" Maureen remained in place – tired as she was, she had no intention of backing down even a little until Moddax made clear his intention to either accept her finally as his superior, or reject her and face the consequences of that rejection.

"The Romulans... can't be trusted. The Klingons are little better than rabid targs..." Moddax couldn't help flushing with rage and embarrassment – of course there'd always been agents.

"You know as well as anyone that dealing with the Romulans is like engaging in a chess match, and the Klingons would storm across our borders and kill every one of us if their resources would only hold out. Now Commander, what say you?"

"I've dedicated my life to the defense of the Federation. I can only offer my sincere apology for letting... poor judgement on my part jeopardize that dedication. You've every right to appoint whomever you choose to serve as an agent on Earth, of course."

"You understand that the back channels you've been using to report on me are closed to you now? That all you've done is reveal yourself as a weak link?"

"Yes, Admiral... I submit myself for whatever discipline you deem appropriate."

The field generator monitoring and control station began to alert. Maureen walked over to the console which had been placed into a diagnostic cycle and adjusted the power flow converters as needed. Once the alert was silenced, she looked up at Moddax. He hadn't moved.

"You will be put in charge of 37. For the time being, Operative Demby will assume command duties aboard the station. We've committed ourselves to an irreversible course, Commander. The realities of what is yet to come are nearly too terrible to contemplate... only a generation ago we had Control to calculate and predict our best course of action, now there's only us. I want to believe that I can rely upon you. If I find I cannot, you'll be gone."

The day following their failed inspection, Admirals Wallace and Knot met in the private boardroom adjacent to the C-in-C's office. Neither man had slept. Knot had attended his obligatory status and tactical meetings that morning and spent most of his day reading through Brian Harris's files and quizzing Rear Admiral Cahill about the man. Admiral Wallace had taken three conference calls with the Office of the President and attended two diplomatic updates himself. Both men were exhausted.

Henry removed his tunic and draped it over the end of the conference table before taking a seat. "Where do we stand on Harris, Thom?"

"Cahill concurs with the assessments you provided. There was no way that man was getting a command; simply not suitable." Thomas rubbed his eyes and glanced over to the chronometer display; it was barely 1800 hours, but he could hit the rack right now with no reservations whatsoever.

"Did you get a brief on the incident in Grid 247?"

Thom looked away from the clock and directly into Henry Wallace's bleary eyes. "The D-7 that was caught on our side of the line... yes. I read Captain Ch' ornithon's report. Damned lucky that didn't turn into a fire fight, or worse."

“Did he offer any explanation why he deviated from his assigned patrol?”

“Made note of anomalous readings and his familiarity with the shortcomings in our sensor grid and such. Bautlin’s First Officer...” Knot turned his head and yawned into his fist.

“There are pieces moving on our board independently, Thom. That’s not good.”

“I don’t know what else to say, Henry. You won’t let me utilize T’Chou to dig at any of this and I can’t find a single breadcrumb to explain where this Harris went. Now, we may have a rogue element commanding the *Isadore* and rattling sabers along the Klingon line.”

Admiral Knot went through every detail of the interview session he’d had with Admiral Cahill. She’d seen an electronic copy of the orders directing Commander Harris to report to HQ and meet with Deployment Resources, but she’d been unable to retrieve a copy of those orders from her database at the Moscow Tactical Institute. Thom had done some digging once the Rear Admiral had specified Harris’s departure date and had discovered that a total of fifty-nine transports had left Moscow that day on scheduled trips to the North American Continent. Thirteen of those transports had destinations along the West Coast and nine of those had landing privileges at Starfleet Headquarters. Thom had personally gone through the manifests and logs of each of those nine

shuttles, identified all their passengers and their pilots and had found no records of a Commander Brian Harris anywhere. Short of rounding up some thirty-seven passengers and twelve pilots months after the fact and conducting interrogations, he was at a loss.

“Did you go over the landing platform footage? Perhaps we have a capture of Harris disembarking?”

Thom shook his head. “Through a Commander who owed one of my staff a personal favor, I got a hold of footage for seven of those arrivals – nothing. Again, if I could just read Xao in on this, he’d have the entire database to pull from.”

It was Henry’s turn to shake his head. There would be no involving Fleet Security on this, at least not yet. “I had a chance to go over some footage myself between calls with the President. With all the activity going on at the time with the deployments and work crews, picking out a single face in that mob seems next to impossible.”

Thom sighed and let his shoulders slump forward. “So, where does that leave us? I mean there’s no sign of Bautlin anywhere. I redirected the *Ontonabee* to Archer IV to cover the *Sheaffe*’s patrol, but we’re still missing a starship and a crew...”

“Admiral Bautlin is scheduled to attend the next General Council Session in three days. They’re to adopt the

measures recommended by the Select Council and approve asset allocations – she'd be a fool to miss it."

"So, we'll take her into custody..."

"For what, exactly? We have to tread carefully here, Thom." Henry allowed himself a long yawn and stretched his arms above his head before continuing. "You know, after my last brief this afternoon I could barely keep my eyes open. Getting old, huh? Anyway, I went down to the main platform, there's a sort of café on the second concourse – Bolian coffee, addictive stuff. I got a taste for it when I was Captain of the *Brandon* and I have to confess I can't drink anything else now."

"That's fascinating, Henry, thank you. I'll either rush out to try some, or I'll remember to avoid it for the rest of my life."

"The Bolian barista who runs the café is a man named Hawer Donin. I've been drinking his brew ever since coming to HQ five years ago. Aside from the fact that I'm the C-in-C, Hawer likes that I actually take the time to sit and enjoy his coffee like a "civilized gentleman"." He threw Thomas a sly nod.

Dumbfounded, Admiral Knot just shook his head.

"You see, almost nobody takes the time to sit and take ten minutes to simply enjoy a cup of coffee, which is just considered rude in Bolian society. So, Hawer makes a note of the few regulars and very occasional visitors in-transit who properly take the time to drink

correctly. Anyway, we got to talking and he went on and on how a few months back in the middle of all the madness, a Starfleet Commander stayed for almost a half dozen cups; quietly whiling away his time seemingly contemplating the complexities of life over Bolian brew.”

“You’re not seriously telling me that...”

“Hawer has a memory like a steel trap. The date he assured me was one day after Harris supposedly arrived in Moscow. When I showed him our missing Commander’s picture, he didn’t hesitate to confirm his guest was our man.”

Thom pushed himself to his feet. “Excellent! Let’s pull the records and...”

Henry motioned for his friend to sit back down. “I spent two hours before you got here going over every piece of footage from the platforms. I watched Hawer walk back and forth a half dozen times between his counter and the empty seats overlooking the main platform. No Harris.”

“What do you mean, no Harris? I thought you said your Bolian friend positively identified him.”

“Yes, he did. It even looked like he was attending to an invisible patron a few times on the data stream, but no Harris. Our man’s been wiped out. With the naked eye you’d never be able tell – I imagine that the deletion would probably stand up to most forensic examinations as well. I also reviewed the footage from the corridor leading from

the turbolift to what was the office of Deployment Resources. Nothing.”

“My God! If they can be that thorough...”

“We’ll keep this between us for as long as possible, Thom. In three days we’re going to have a very frank talk with Maureen Bautlin. Until then, I need you to screw down the fleet. Keep a close eye on *Isadore* and be sure none of our support groups go off-mission. I have a meeting with the Klingon Ambassador tomorrow afternoon to discuss the matter in 247. For now, go home and get some sleep – I know that’s what I’m going to do.”

“What about the techs Xao said were responsible for getting the probe footage? The ones who were supposedly working out on Phanta II?”

“Gone, without a trace. More ghosts to keep this Harris guy company.”

Isadore cruised her plotted patrol grid at a steady warp one. *Ogden* matched her course and speed half a sector away. Both ships scanned the Romulan Neutral Zone in an overlapping pattern meant to maximize their chances of detecting cloaked vessels. It had been thirty-six hours since General U' Chtuklli had made his proposal. Shohr sat in his Command chair pretending to study the tactical read-outs flashing across the main viewer – waiting.

“Captain, incoming transmission coded RED URGENT.”

Shohr blinked his eyes twice and glanced toward his Ready Room. He rose from his seat and ordered Yeal to take command. Without speaking another word, he stalked off the Bridge.

“Captain Ch' ornithon, good to see you again. Have you an answer to my proposal?”

U' Chtuklli's image appeared on the small screen on Shohr's desk. The Captain of the *Isadore* remained standing, intentionally positioning himself above the General.

“General U' Chtuklli, before we resolve the question of your proposal...”

“You want to know if I had anything to do with the admonishments Fleet Command levied against you for your little encounter with the Klingons?”

The morning communique from Command had included a strongly worded reprimand. “No, sir. I was notified of the death of Brian Harris a short time ago – you’ll recall the same day you informed me I was to be named Captain, Brian was waiting to see you as well?”

“I recall both meetings, Captain. Is there a question you need to put to me?”

“General, the transmission I received was a personal message. It should have automatically been saved to my files. However, when I tried to retrieve it just this morning, there was nothing. It’s as if it never existed in the first place.”

“There is no record of Commander Harris’s last mission. You were notified as a courtesy. He was selected – as you were selected – to perform a vital task for the Federation. His end had purpose. Now, I’ve offered you an opportunity to have purpose. Your answer, Captain?”

The General remained seated, backed by blue/silver bulkheads, quietly waiting for a reply. Shorh cleared his throat: “Provisionally, the opportunity sounds positive.”

A commission in the Guard, command of a Raider; of course he’d accept.

Brian snapped at Br'ev to get away from the Command chair. The medic was hovering, clearly concerned about the Captain's shattered ribcage and immobilized lung. Bradley had just stumbled into the turbolift to try and reignite the *Sheaffe's* scrambled warp core. Br'ev took a seat at the deserted Communications station. The taste of hot copper rose in Brian's throat. The pain was mostly numbed by whatever Br'ev had injected him with, but he was struggling hard to catch a breath.

St. Cyr confirmed the lead Warbird was now in weapons range and the Warbird astern was coming on hard. Brian called for evasive maneuvers from Lt. Casso at the Helm. Kross was doing his best to acquire a phaser lock on the charging Romulan, when suddenly the *Sheaffe* lurched starboard violently.

Brian rocked in his seat and tried to protect his crushed ribs. "Report!"

"The trailing Warbird has just overtaken us!" St. Cyr tried to remain calm, but there was panic in his voice.

...wheeze... wheeze... "...damage?"

"That wasn't a disruptor hit, sir... some kind of tractor beam – hit us like a hard shove. Our portside shields are gone..."

Brian called for a course correction and had to explain to Casso how to bring *Sheaffe* back on track with

the lead Warbird while presenting the Romulans with a minimal aspect target ratio. Kross reported that the automated torpedo load mechanisms were offline. St. Cyr struggled to manage the myriad of power failures and requests for damage control and medical teams flooding his board at Ops. There was no way of knowing if Nams had fled with the all-important data. On the main viewscreen, they all watched the massive Warbird which had been cloaked and trailing them, speed away and past the two Warbirds growing closer ahead of them.

The lead Warbird came to a gentle stop. Behind the massive grey/green vessel Brian could see the Warbird which had just passed them arch in a slow, deliberate turn. St. Cyr continued broadcasting friendship messages to no effect. A blue/green light suddenly flashed and before Kross could relay his tactical readings the *Sheaffe* found herself in the violent grip of another immensely powerful tractor beam. Alarms blared. St. Cyr's status panel was a riot of incoming alerts. The entire ship was pushed down along her 'Z' axis by nearly a kilometer.

"Dorsal shields are gone Captain!"

"Phasers on that ship, FIRE!..." Brian ordered, coughing again. He propped himself over to his 'good' side as Kross triggered the *Sheaffe*'s primary phaser bank.

Three bright orange bursts flew from the crippled *Sheaffe* into the shields of the lead Warbird. Neither St. Cyr nor Henrik Kross at Tactical could get a reading from the

Warbird, but Brian could see for himself that the phaser bursts had no effect on the Romulan. He called down to Engineering to demand power for shields and phasers but got no response. On the screen, Brian could see the third Warbird now lining up to come alongside her sister which held *Sheaffe* firmly in place. The second Romulan ship had pulled away and taken up station just outside of weapons range.

Still wheezing, Brian managed: "We need to break that thing's hold on us..." He glanced over to the empty Engineering station, then over to Henrik. "...we have" – cough– "...we have torpedoes in the tubes?"

Henrik nodded grimly. Brian ordered Kross to loose tube one on the Romulan ship holding them in place. A second later and a bright blue ball of energy crashed into the Warbird's shields and the *Sheaffe* shuddered violently as the tractor beam was released. St. Cyr reported that he'd shunted available power from all non-essential systems, but the main energizer had failed. *Sheaffe* was relying completely on battery backup power.

Before Casso could reengage the engines, the Warbird moved forward in an aggressive lunge and let loose a single disruptor blast and smashed the *Sheaffe's* torpedo bay. The Romulan looked for a second to be on a collision course, then pulled up and away. St. Cyr reported that the torpedo bay had decompressed.

“The lead Warbird is turning away, Captain, but that third Romulan just lit up her sensors and is now on-pace to overtake us along the starboard side...”

Brian grunted his acknowledgement. If the approaching Warbird was to register the shuttle back towards Kea III – everything would have been for nothing. Casso was stammering that the Impulse engines were offline. Kross was just sitting at Tactical dumbfounded – none of his station’s indicators, status panels or monitors seemed to have any power whatsoever. St. Cyr confirmed that *Sheaffe* was running out of power. Multiple decks were simply going offline. There wasn’t even power enough to launch escape pods. The second Warbird maintained her vantage point just on the edge of weapons range and the ship which had broken off her tractor beam was departing the immediate action field. The approaching Warbird with the amped-up sensors was the primary threat now.

Brian keyed his Comm panel and tried for a third time to contact Engineering, but again there was no response. Slowly the lights and monitors at the Science stations went out. *Sheaffe* was bleeding power. The Warbird was almost on top of them.

...wheeze... “Lt. Casso...” –wheeze– “...do we still have maneuvering thrusters?”

“Yes...just barely.” The lighting on the bridge had grown dim and from somewhere the smell of an electrical

fire and wisps of blue smoke had filtered through the air vents.

Brian pulled himself out of the Command chair and nearly collapsed. Br'ev rushed up to his good side and caught him. Brian wheezed and was grateful for the help. He had Br'ev walk him to the Engineering post where he slumped into Arthur Bradley's empty seat and immediately transferred all Engineering control back to the Bridge.

"Casso... when I signal, fire all our..." –wheeze– "...ventral portside thrusters..." –cough, cough– "...understood?" The pain he'd not been feeling since Br'ev's injection arrived all at once and he slowly wiped away more foamy pink blood from his chin.

Amber turned to her panel and prepared to execute the Captain's orders. Beside her, St. Cyr's Ops station was dark. Nobody spoke. She realized then that the alarms were all silent.

Brian disengaged the magnetic field controls. He was in agony now. Struggling to breathe and beginning to sweat profusely he worked as quickly as he could. All he had to go by was the static laced image on the view screen and his own best guess as to when the Warbird, easily twice the size of *Sheaffe*, would be alongside the stricken dying starship. Once the confinement fields were offline the Ops panel sparked slightly – mercifully St. Cyr was able to get some distance readings on the Romulan.

By taking power from the magnetic actuators, Harris had disabled all maglocks and seals throughout the ship. He'd also triggered a build-up to a core breach by killing the magnetic confinement field in the reactor. It was his intention to jettison the core at the passing Warbird and in so doing ensure Nams the best possible cover for escape. Aboard the Romulan vessel the sudden buildup to a reactor failure was registered too late. The Warbird fired a close-range disruptor blast to try and clear the small Earther ship, but as her Commander ordered evasive maneuvers, *Sheaffe* rolled hard to starboard. Brian used the last remaining reserves of battery power to eject *Sheaffe's* warp core into the *Volto's* port nacelle.

The resulting explosion was enough to cripple the Romulan and send *Sheaffe* tumbling into space. On the Bridge everyone was knocked from their posts to the deck. Brian fell on his crushed side and managed two more wheezing gasps of air before he was blown like a ragdoll at the turbolift. Emergency bulkheads slammed into place throughout most of the ship, but with no maglocks, all it took was the impact of the explosion's shock wave to jar loose the core's ejection port. The *Sheaffe* explosively decompressed into space. Anyone not closeted in a sealed compartment was blown into nothingness. On the Bridge, a grim pile of bodies was crushed together at the turbolift doors.

Just as *Sheaffe* made her final stand, Lt. Commander M'narr commenced his run into the graviton field.

Admiral Henry Wallace, Starfleet Commander in Chief, arrived at the Presidential Annex attached to the Council Meeting Hall in Paris two hours before the Council session was slotted to convene. It was expected that the President would meet with the Head of Starfleet along with relevant representatives of the Diplomatic Corps to be briefed on any evolving issues which might be pertinent to the Council. Wallace was greeted by the President's Executive Assistant and was ushered into the Salon d'Observation, an elegantly appointed small conference room adjacent to the President's Office.

The Admiral stepped into the Salon expecting to see at least a few Ambassadors, but the room with its antique mahogany conference table and flights of high-backed mahogany chairs was empty and silent. He paused a moment to take in the sweeping panoramic view of the Seine and the Old City.

"The President is attending to a matter that's run a little long, Admiral. She'll join you just as soon as she's clear, sir." The young man stood at the threshold of the Salon's door and offered the Admiral a well-practiced smile – non-threatening, but not overly friendly.

"Thank you. Will Ambassador Sestrack, or anyone else be joining the President and I?"

“No, sir. Just the two of you, I’m told. The President should be by in short order.” The young man smiled again, then turned crisply to the right and the Salon’s door hushed shut. Henry’s entourage had been asked to remain on the lower level. He’d never had the room to himself before.

“Ambassador Sestrick is still trying to reconcile the information she’s reviewed one hundred times in the Vulcan Science Academy’s Archives since the Select Council Meeting, with what she’s sure she remembers reading forty years ago when she first joined the Vulcan Diplomatic Mission here on Earth.”

Henry couldn’t help himself from jumping slightly at the sound of Admiral Bautlin’s voice. She’d been sitting in one of the two overstuffed wing-backed chairs facing out over the Seine. He drew a quick breath to steady himself as Maureen rose slowly from behind the back of the chair where she’d been waiting. She casually made her way to the far end of the conference table where she took a seat. She was dressed in a freshly-pressed uniform. The golden starburst on her shoulder sparkled in the sunlight – as did the silver bar with the three red hash marks below the Fleet Delta shield fixed to her breast.

“The President isn’t coming, is she?” Henry adjusted his own tunic and took a seat at his end of the table.

“Like the young man said: just the two of us, Admiral.”

Henry began saying that CAD's rather abrupt departure from Fleet Headquarters hadn't gone unnoticed – but Maureen cut him short. She was impressed with the speed at which he and Thomas Knot had moved to try and storm the Contemporaneous Accessibility Division's offices. She was particularly taken with the ingenuity of securing a unit from her old ship – which she correctly credited Thom with. Bautlin went on to reveal that she was fully aware of Admiral Knot's intentions to detain her at the Council Session in a few hours. She assured the Commander in Chief that those plans would not come to fruition and slid a pad along the table towards Henry.

Wallace picked up the pad and opened the single file loaded into it. He found a Presidential Directive to stand down all operations relating to CAD, its administration and any of its operatives or agents, pursuant to Article 14. The Directive wasn't signed by the President herself, but Article 14 gave the order just as much gravitas as if it had been. This was the second time Henry had received such a Directive – the first time had been when he'd been ordered to promote Captain Bautlin to full Admiral.

“So, that's it then? You're untouchable now?”

“Henry, after today it's not likely you'll ever have to see me again. We're on the same side. You just need to rein in Thom and remind him of where his focus should be.”

Admiral Wallace set the pad down. He knew that there'd be no lasting record of the Directive, or likely even of this meeting... at least no record he'd have access to. He kept his anger in check and calmly asked Bautlin just where he and Thom should be focusing if not on a division that seemed to be able to make people and entire starships disappear.

"You'll continue to police the border and keep the Klingons in check. The Andorian Imperial Guard will secure our flank with the Cardassians."

"What are you talking about? What about the Romulans?"

Maureen smiled and reiterated that the border patrols would continue, but it was the Klingons who bore watching. The reconnaissance presented in the Select Council proved that the Romulans weren't building some mass graviton weapon. The activity detected along the borders looked to be diversionary. In fact, it was possible that the Romulans were working in both the interests of the Star Empire *and* the Federation. Nothing was one hundred percent clear as formal channels had dissolved following the Khitomer incident, but Maureen was satisfied that CAD had a solid read on what was actually going on, now that they'd secured some definitive intelligence.

"What was definitive about..."

"Maintain the patrols, Admiral Wallace. Watch the Klingons."

“And what, leave the Romulans to you?” The anger he’d worked so hard to suppress seeped in and his words came out almost as a shout.

“Frankly, yes. You saw what the rest of the Select Council saw... more detailed readings have been cloistered for security purposes.”

“Cloistered!? I’m the Chief of Starfleet! It’s the Council for the love of God!” Wallace rose up and slammed his hands onto the tabletop.

“Calm yourself, Admiral. I’m not here to provoke you. She can’t ever admit it, but the President has been fully briefed on the full findings from the Kea System and she is in full agreement that we will maintain our defensive stance along the borders. At this time, we do not suspect any immanent tactical Romulan threat to the Federation at large.” Maureen slowly got up from her own seat, it was clear that Wallace wasn’t in the mood to have a quiet talk.

“How the hell can you know that?”

“Hells.” Maureen chuckled as the memory of Brian Harris’ signature expression flared.

“What?” Henry stood up straight and stared at the woman across the table from him.

“Something Commander Harris used to say. Hells. With so many lifeforms in the Universe, he figured there must surely be as many hells.”

"Harris... one of yours then? Is that what you did, Bautlin – did CAD install a fake captain to steal a starship and, what? Go hunting Romulans?"

"Henry, the last time the Romulans asserted themselves, they made a show of destroying outposts along the border to demonstrate the power of their fleet. They haven't done that this time. It's chess with them." She turned and walked back towards the window and waited for Wallace to follow. "You opened a file two years back on the El-Aurians – maybe it's time to review it."

"Are you Section 31, Admiral?" Henry found himself suddenly exhausted, too angry and too confused to feel anything other than depleted.

Maureen deftly picked up a communicator she'd left on the small table between the two wing-backed chairs. "After Cartwright, it'd been decided not to involve such highly placed Fleet personnel in these matters, but believe me, Henry, if we're right about what could be coming next, you'll want to put that on. 37, energize." She nodded slightly and smiled.

In a swirl of silver/blue light, Admiral Bautlin was gone. Henry stood dumbfounded for a moment, then noticed that she'd left the silver service bar with the three red hash marks on the table. Outside dark clouds were gathering far off, threatening rain and possibly a storm.

2364: Jupiter Station

“We have an update from Sector thirty, sir.”

Admiral Measham, CAD, looked up from his cluttered desk at the young operative and nodded his understanding. The young man placed a pad on the Admiral’s desk then returned to his workstation on the lower level of K-3’s command deck. Measham had been tied into Fleet Security since they lost contact with the outposts along the Neutral Zone in Sector thirty-one on Stardate 41903.2. Originally, Command had planned on routing a support ship to investigate, but CAD had intervened and lobbied for a proper starship to attend. Measham was pleased to have a reliable agent in place at Starbase 718, who capably briefed the Captain of the Fleet’s Flagship no less, on the urgency of the mission at hand.

The Admiral cleared the reports from his desk to retrieve the pad. He opened the updated file to see that two of the Sector thirty outposts closest to Sector thirty-one had been completely destroyed. Immediately Measham’s mind jumped back to the incident of 1709.1 – the reappearance of the Romulans after the War a Century earlier. They’d spilled over the Zone and destroyed a half-dozen outposts along the Federation’s line to demonstrate their firepower and the terror of their cloaking technology. After nearly fifty-three years of silence, were the Romulans now repeating history?

Measham called up classified Section files relating to the Romulans and their supposed activities since the *Tomed* incident. If they were flexing their muscles again, setting the stage aggressively to resume the grand chess match they'd walked away from decades earlier; did that mean they'd been successful in their endeavours in the Kea System? Measham read on.

All their outposts in were reported as having been destroyed in the same manner. The investigating starship reported actual contact with a Warbird shortly after examining the site of the Delta-05 Science Station. The Romulans claimed that outposts on their side of the Zone had similarly been "scooped away".

The Admiral rose from his seat and walked to the viewport behind his desk. The swirling beauty of Jupiter backlit the silhouettes of the mothballed ships hanging in neat rows all around K-3. The message from the Romulan Commander – a man named Tabok, was clearly recorded:

"Matters more urgent caused our absence, now witness the result – outposts destroyed, expansion of the Federation everywhere. Yes, we have indeed been negligent. Your presence is not wanted. We are back."

The Admiral turned the scant details over and over in his mind. He had most of his active agents working along the DMZ with the Cardassian Union. Regardless of how successful the Romulans may have been in addressing the threat in the Kea System, their re-emergence required

immediate attention. He returned to his Comm panel and asked the operative at dispatch to retrieve the dossier on Nompel, the Romulan Senator.

2380: Delta Quadrant

CUBE 79938 NO LONGER COMMUNICATES.

Tens of thousands of thoughts – gone. The remaining voices, discordant. Tens of millions speaking at once, out of sync, lacking harmony. Even within the confines of Unicomplex 4. Discord edging on panic. She struggled to order the stream of consciousness flowing to her from the adjuncts designated essential to the functioning of the Unicomplex.

EXPLAIN.

CUBE 79938 ENTERED THE TRANSWARP CONDUIT IN GRID 986. TELEMETRY CONFIRMS CUBE 79938 EMERGED FROM THE CONDUIT. CUBE 79938 CEASED ALL COMMUNICATIONS ONE ONE-TRILLIONTH OF A SECOND AFTER EMERGING FROM THE DISPLACED TRANSWARP HUB.

Species 5618 had crippled the Transwarp Hub in Grid 986. They had collapsed several interspatial manifolds while traversing the conduits towards the Alpha Quadrant. In the process they had cut the Collective off and destroyed Sphere 634. There were now only five Transwarp hubs left in all the galaxy.

She paused, tilted her head to the right and tapped into giga-quads of data to understand for herself what had happened.

THE INTRODUCTION OF SPECIES 3259'S RED MATTER WAS SUCCESSFUL. OUR DAMAGED HUB WAS

SPACIALLY DISPLACED TO THE KEA SYSTEM, BY-PASSING THE COLLAPSED MANIFOLDS AND LEAVING A SINGLE CORRIDOR OPEN BETWEEN THE DELTA AND ALPHA QUADRANTS.

CONFIRMED. PRESENTLY THE CORRIDOR INDICATES AN INCONSISTENT BLOCKAGE AT ITS EXIT APATURE.

WE WERE UNPREPARED FOR THE EIGHTY-FIVE-YEAR TEMPORAL DISPLACEMENT AND THE EXTREME CONCENTRATION OF GRAVITON RADIATION THE CREATION OF THE RED MATTER'S ARTIFICIAL SINGULARITY PRODUCED. CUBE 79938 WAS BLINDED.

CONFIRMED. WITHOUT INVESTIGATION ALL THAT REMAINS IS SPECULATION.

There were traces of frustration, anger even. The voices from the Unicomplex were in distress. Frustration is futile. Anger is irrelevant. She focused even more intensely on her adjuncts.

WE WILL ADAPT. COMPLY!

Slowly the adjuncts' thoughts converged. A variance remained. It had been there since she'd first tried to respawn following Species 5618's attack two years previously. The neurolytic pathogen had almost immediately attacked the Collective on her first attempt to download to a new drone. Unicomplex 2 had functioned for two minutes and thirteen seconds before it had to be severed from the Collective.

Adaptation. Unicomplex 3 functioned nearly twenty-two minutes before the pathogen again surfaced. She still had the memory engrams of the events preceding the attack when Unicomplex 3 came online. She'd noted the variance then as well. Perhaps it was itself a sign of the pathogen. After twenty-one minutes, fifty-eight seconds, Unicomplex 3 was severed from the Collective. Terra-quads of information had to be purged; memories deleted.

After two long years, Unicomplex 4 was mostly stable. She was again, as always, the Queen at the heart of the Collective. All that remained was the knowledge of Species 5618's importance, their savagery, their menace. Everything else had been wiped away. Only an engrained hatred of 5618 and the all-important need to assimilate them remained.

TRANSWARP HUB GRID 1003 SHOWS A BETA-QUADRANT MATCH AT PULSAR T-334. TACTICAL CUBE 8843 COULD TRAVERSE THE INTERCEDDING DISTANCE TO THE ALPHA QUADRANT IN LESS THAN...

NO. WE WILL FIND OTHER WAYS TO ADAPT. WE WILL NOT RISK ANY OF OUR REMAINING FUNCTIONAL HUBS. EQUIP AN INDIVIDUAL CUBE WITH ENOUGH RED MATTER TO GENERATE A SMALL SINGULARITY. FROM PULSAR D-248, A CONDUIT CAN BE OPENED TO THE ALPHA QUADRANT SECTION J-25. OUR NEUTRINO FIELD WILL MITIGATE THE TEMPORAL EFFECTS TO A FEW DECADES.

FROM THERE WE WILL BE WITHIN SEVEN THOUSAND LIGHT YEARS.

Red Matter had been assimilated from a Scientific Facility operated by Species 3783 on stardate 4190.1. She knew this because the Collective knew this. They had been to the Alpha Quadrant before. They would be there again.

**SUBSPACE TRANSMISSION. BORG
ENCODED. REQUESTING IMMEDIATE SUPPORT FOR
MASS ASSIMILATION.**

FROM WHERE? She accessed the incoming transmission herself and found harmony in the convergence of coincidence.

**TRANSMISSION ORIGINATED IN THE ALPHA
QUADRANT – SECTOR 001.**

The transmission was at least 240 years old. The voices harmonized. The Collective focussed. She would maintain her Collective with the single goal of again finally reaching the Alpha Quadrant and assimilating Species 5618.

She dispatched a cube knowing she'd heard the transmission before, a memory the Collective had been forced to purge. Cube 42495 departed the Unicomplex under conventional power. The familiarity of it all soothed her as she brought order to chaos. The unity inspired by the Borg's greatest enemy was galvanizing.

... in medias res.