



COR
COROLI

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Cor Coroli

Book One

A Work of Star Trek Fan Fiction

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Cor Coroli Book One

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Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Cor Coroli | 2 |
| 1. Ganymede | 6 |
| 2. Umoth Nebulae, Three Weeks Earlier | 9 |
| 3. The Imperial Guard Raider <i>Shrov</i> | 12 |
| 4. The <i>Kreke Disac</i> | 15 |
| 5. Dal Rorlac | 16 |
| 6. <i>Shrov</i> | 18 |
| 7. Setting the Trap..... | 21 |
| 8. Wegaos Skaffef | 25 |
| 8. I.G.C. Shrar, Two Weeks, Four Days Earlier..... | 28 |
| 9. Deck 12, <i>USS Isadore</i> | 32 |
| 10. Deck 3, Vehicle Bay, The <i>Terratt</i> | 34 |
| 11. Communications Research Building..... | 36 |
| 12. Starfleet News Service | 39 |
| 13. The <i>Shrar</i> | 42 |
| 14. Deck 1, <i>USS Isadore</i> | 44 |
| 15. Transit Mezzanine | 47 |
| 16. Before the Storm, Two Weeks Ago..... | 51 |
| 17. The Unsettling Calm | 55 |
| 18. Tempest! | 60 |
| 19. Unto the Breach | 66 |
| 20. The Glev glov Nansh..... | 72 |
| 21. Fury & Sacrifice, Two Weeks Ago..... | 77 |
| 22. Pyrrhic Victory..... | 87 |
| 23. N12, Six Days Ago..... | 95 |
| 24. Cor Coroli | 99 |

“There is no avoiding war; it can only be postponed to the advantage of others.”

Niccolo Machiavelli

1. Ganymede

Moddax stood dumb in the middle of the empty, curving observation promenade. The facility was eerily quiet. Though the pressurized habitable section of the refinery and shipping station was shielded from the ambient radiation washing across Ganymede's surface from Jupiter above, the honeycomb of transparent panels lining the corridor's exterior bulkheads did little to shield the interior from the intense cold of space. Moddax shrugged his shoulders forward and gathered the loose fabric from around his long black coat's collar to his throat to fight the chill. He allowed himself a slight shudder as he exhaled. His breath appeared in a white, wispy puff just beyond his hooked nose.

The refinery was more than two centuries old. It had been constructed by the Tellarite Mining Consortium shortly after first contact with the Tellarite Alliance, before the Federation's inception. At the time, Starfleet was striving to expand their warp-capable fleet – which meant raw materials such as dilithium, deuterium and anti-deuterium were in high demand. A pocket of dilithium crystals had been discovered on Io, but Terran engineers lacked the expertise and equipment to efficiently extract the precious crystals. The Tellarites agreed to assist the United Earth Government with mining Io for a percentage of the raw crystals and proprietary rights over a custom-built refinery within the Sol System. The Vulcan High Command at the time were leery of any Terran/Tellarite co-ventures, but as things worked out, the Ganymede facility proved a vital step towards cementing the foundations between Tellar and Earth.

The facility was massive. At its peak output the TMC Ganymede Refinery produced seventeen tons of dilithium a quarter. Over the first century and a half of its existence Ganymede provided Starfleet with a glut of crystals – more than enough to power its ever-expanding fleet of cruisers, frigates, transports, explorers, and freighters. Over the last six decades Ganymede had been largely converted to automated operations. The TMC still operated limited mines on Io, but had spread-out amongst the countless asteroids, moons and dwarf planetoids caught in Jupiter's massive gravity. Automated skiffs ferried raw ore to Ganymede, where it could be separated, refined, and stowed until other automated freighters could arrive to carry specific loads to various depots from the orbital works around Saturn to the expanded yards at Utopia Planetia, Earth, and then on to Tellar itself.

As Mr. Moddax watched the swirling storms of Jupiter on the horizon beyond, he was just able to see the bright blue ion thrusters of an automated skiff flash and fly away from Ganymede. Jupiter's ambient radiation made practical transporting impossible. To reach the facility, one had to either have clearance to land a shuttle at the refinery's uppermost pad, or ride down in the pressurized personnel compartments a handful of the industrial skiffs sported. Moddax had been ferried into low orbit aboard K3's service pod and then transferred aboard a support skiff arriving from Io. Ganymede was the nearest non-clandestine facility to the Jupiter Yards where Section 31 had made their base of operations aboard the refurbished K3 space station.

A faint sound echoed through the double-wide corridor. Moddax shivered again and held his collar closed as he turned to look for the source of the fading reverberation. The dark grey corridor seemed void of all life. The curving wall of viewports arched and faded

away into the shadows. While the Northern Hemisphere of Ganymede faced Jupiter the reflected sunlight from the gas giant illuminated the moon's rugged surface. As Ganymede rotated away from Jupiter in its natural orbit, the light faded and an eery twilight fell across the facility and slowly everything faded to a deep, black nothing. Moddax blinked rapidly, hoping his fierce, black eyes might pick out the source of the approaching sound, but he could see nothing in the seeping blackness.

The refinery housed a crew of just twelve Tellarites who were responsible for monitoring and maintaining the entire facility. Moddax knew that the facility's inhabitants worked and lived more than three kilometers below the surface. Watching his breath freeze in the air just beyond his nose, Moddax heard the faint sound again, then again, and again. Footsteps. Somewhere in the dark. Heavy, plodding footsteps growing closer.

He'd received his invitation to attend Ganymede over the same open-loop subspace frequency he himself had used countless times to contact Wegaos without Demby, Xillion, or even Bautlin herself realizing it. The relationship he'd cultivated had proved useful – to a point. Bautlin was still heading K3, but the recent audit only a few months ago gave Moddax some hope that he still might ascend to his rightful place. This was the first time he had been contacted though, and while he'd not had any practical assignment in months, the sudden summons was troubling.

In the darkness, the plodding continued. Moddax shivered and found himself almost missing the drudgery of his quarters aboard K3.



Figure 1:Umoth Nebula. Published 15 Dec. 2011 Pixabay Licence Free

2. Umoth Nebulae, Three Weeks Earlier

“Report.”

“Sir, I make contact at bearing 327 mark 15. Scout -class vessel, heavily armed.”

Dal Rorlac leaned back in the command chair and stroked the coarse brown whiskers he'd allowed himself to grow on either side of his mouth. The *Asga* was operating in *whisper-mode* within the Nebula so as not to attract any attention from vessels or listening posts beyond Cardassian space. The trooper manning the *Asga's* Sensor Post remained focused on the screens in front of him.

“Andorian?” Rorlac asked in a low steady voice.

“No readings on any kind of light drive, sir... emissions from their impulse reactors are consistent with Andorian and Starfleet vessels.”

Rorlac knew it was extremely unlikely that Starfleet would be operating any ships so far out from the Federation's core systems. The Andorians though had been patrolling the border from Salva II to Celtris III with flights of Raiders... at least according to the intelligence which had been shared with the squadron.

The bulk of the Imperial Guard's vessels were clustered near Argelis II, where two heavy cruisers and dozens of heavily armed Raiders seemed to be monitoring both the Cardassian and Tzenkethi borders. It was there that Rorlac felt the *Asga* should be patrolling. The Guard's Raiders were bothersome, but the new Andorian heavy cruisers were the overriding threat to the Cardassian fleet. Diverting four *Terok*-class warships from that front to lurk within the Umoth Nebula seemed like a waste of resources to Rorlac, but it was his duty to obey, not to question.

“Weapons signatures, trooper?” Rorlac watched the younger man work his instruments.

“Difficult to tell given the interference from the Nebula, Dal Rorlac. It appears the vessel is emitting energy fields consistent with phased pulse weapons.”

“A Raider then.”

No one on the bridge noticed the black-clad figure step through the secondary hatch from the deck below. The tall, dark-skinned Cardassian walked silently along the gravity plating, past the redundant control monitors, past the occupied young man at the Engineering Post and around the safety rails ringing the Communications Pit. The man wore no expression on his face. His eyes were dull and grey.

“It would appear to be, sir. Yes,” said the boy at the Sensor Post.

“Time to intercept?” Rorlac shifted in his seat and began preparing a mental checklist of the steps he was to take in this circumstance. He ran his left hand over his forehead and felt the old, ragged scar which marred his oval brows.

“Less than a quarter cycle at maximum impulse, sir.”

Rorlac rose from his seat and tugged at the waist of his brown vacu-sealed pressure suit. Gul D'gad and the crew aboard the new Type One *Galor*-class *Kreke Disac* had no need for the cumbersome, bulky suits. The prototype *Galors* were triple-hulled and double-

pressurized – a vast upgrade from Rorlac’s aging *Terok*-class Warship. Still, the *Asga* was an Imperial ship-of-the-line and Dal Rorlac was proud to have her.

“Communications, encode and send contact details to the *Kreke Disac*, for Gul D’gad’s immediate attention.”

From the narrow Communications Pit behind the command chair came a trooper’s obedient acknowledgement of the order. Rorlac turned back to his chair and retrieved his re-enforced tubular helmet. The ship was not yet at First Alert, but Rorlac was already aware of the course of action the *Asga* would pursue. Rorlac spotted the dark figure making his way around the Pit and ignored him. Rorlac returned to the Sensor Post and quickly studied the screens in front of the young man operating the consoles.

“Confirm they are on our side of the border.”

The young man readjusted his scope and cross-checked his prime readings with the redundant astral positioning array. “Confirmed, sir. Contact is nearly three quarter AUs past our border.”

“I’m curious though, Dal... do the Andorians realize they’re past our official, yet unannounced new border?”

Both Rorlac and the trooper manning the sensors turned to see Mr. Ligan standing just beside the Dal’s vacant command chair.

Rorlac sneered, “The border is the border, Mr. Ligan. Whether or not Central Command has chosen to politically declare that to our neighbors in the Federation, is inconsequential to that fact.” Rorlac motioned for the young trooper to return to his work.

“Yes, of course.” Ligan smiled and casually glanced around the bridge, taking in all the various readouts, status updates and ship operations he could from the various screens and displays.

Rorlac gripped his helmet tightly and swallowed his indignation. Ligan, dressed in his own simple, black pressure suit, was not a member of the Fifth Order, or of any Military Unit for that matter. He was a special advisor to the Fifth Order’s patrol squadron. Officially, he was assigned to Gul D’gad aboard the *Kreke Disac*; however, Gul D’gad had made it a point to have Mr. Ligan rotate through all five vessels comprising the squadron. Nobody had ever officially said that Ligan was with the Obsidian Order, but nobody really needed to state anything so obvious.

“I haven’t as yet formulated a response to these trespassers, Mr. Ligan.” Rorlac said this as he slowly made his way back to his seat, never once breaking eye contact with the black-suited figure standing in the middle of his bridge.

“Have you not?” Ligan nodded towards the helmet in Rorlac’s fist. He allowed a churlish grin to light his dark face. Ligan had made it very clear to all the commanders of the squadron what their course of action would be, should they encounter an appropriate contact during their sweeps of the fringes of the nebula.

“Dal Rorlac...” The voice came from the Pit behind the command chair.

“Communications, go.” Rorlac turned away from the dark Ligan and settled himself into his chair once again. He was uncomfortable being so close to the dark man, but he’d be damned if he was going to show it.

“Sir, a response from the *Kreke Disac*.”

Rorlac grunted and let his helmet fall to the deck at his side. He flipped the wide lefthand armrest on his chair forward to reveal a small oblong screen. "To my station."

Ligan took half a step back and quietly watched as the Communications Pit transferred a coded text message to Dal Rorlac's personal screen.

"Orders, Dal Rorlac?" Ligan purred his question in a low cloying tone as he stepped to Rorlac's side, pretending not to have just read the message from the squadron's command ship.

3. The Imperial Guard Raider *Shrov*

“Have you re-aligned the intermix regulator?”

“Have I what?!” Th’Ryllik lay the hydro-spanner he had been using on his chest and wiped the sweat from his brow. He’d been under the reaction chamber for nearly two hours without a break. Between the nearly insufferable heat and venting plasma manifolds, he was very near deaf.

“The...THE INTERMIX REGULATOR!” Ch’Echaakrirh leaned down and swatted at his partner’s legs as he yelled his question for a second time. He could feel Shrerian’s rock-hard calf muscles trough his heavy silver pants.

Th’Ryllik sighed and cautiously began wiggling his way out from beneath the crippled Raider’s warp reactor. Ch’Echaakrirh had been the one who’d keyed the wrong sequence into the drive computer and caused the reactor to SCRAM itself. It should be Ch’Echaakrirh sweating beneath the reactor, not Th’Ryllik. As the young man slid slowly out from beneath the reactor, he stifled the growing urge to scream curses at the younger man.

He’d gone through basic training with Thiss and did in fact enjoy Ch’Echaakrirh’s company for the most part. Now though, as the *Shrov*’s First Engineer, Th’Ryllik was responsible for Thiss Ch’Echaakrirh’s blunder. After nearly two and a half hours adrift on the fringes of the Umoth Nebula, Th’Ryllik had very nearly had enough of Ch’Echaakrirh’s company altogether.

“Engine Bay, Bridge. Status update, now.”

Th’Ryllik exhaled and allowed his antennae to unfurl and stretch – instinctively checking to be sure he was clear of any overhead obstruction, before slowly pulling himself up off the grated, hot metal floor.

As Th’Ryllik slowly rose, Ch’Echaakrirh, the *Shrov*’s Second Engineer, turned and loped the few steps to the communications panel. “Yes, Commander, Engine Bay!” Thiss answered the call with the unbridled enthusiasm of a first term recruit.

“Mr. Ch’Echaakrirh, have you and the First Engineer fixed my ship yet?”

Thiss turned from the speaker plate mounted to the bulkhead and looked to Shrerian. It occurred to him that he probably should have let Th’Ryllik answer the call from the Bridge.

Shrerian walked over to where Thiss was standing and handed him the sweaty hydro-spanner. Without a word, Thiss took the tool and sheepishly stepped away from the panel. Shrerian was drenched in perspiration. All the cadets aboard the *Shrov* had the regulation close-cropped hair style of the Imperial Academy – which made it nearly impossible to stem the steady flow of sweat and grime the over-heated engineering deck provoked.

“Bridge, this is First Engineer Th’Ryllik. Commander Shryn, sir, the warp core has been SCRAMMED as a result of...an errant command sequence...” Shrerian watched as his Second Engineer stowed the spanner and began taking readings from the monitor bank mounted on the far bulkhead.

“Yes Mr Th’Ryllik, so you said when we were tumbling out of warp into the nebula two some hours ago. Blame is for later. For now, status?”

Shryn was a stern taskmaster but was possessed of a seemingly unending supply of patience – which made him an ideal Commander for young trainee crews. He'd thus far been impressed with his crew of a dozen raw cadets newly rated for space service, but the *Shrov's* stricken warp drive was becoming a concern the longer they drifted along the edge of the nebula.

The Navigation Officer had lost external sensors a half hour earlier and was still struggling to get a reliable star-fix. The Communications Officer was having no luck in securing a clear subspace band on which to summon assistance from the other two Raiders assigned to the *Shrov's* training wing.

"Sorry, sir. It's a matter of waiting now, I'm afraid..." Th'Ryllik clamped his mouth shut before finishing his sentence. He was agitated and hot and he'd not thought about what he was saying...

"Th'Rullik, you are a First Engineer in the service of the Andorian Imperial Guard. You are afraid of nothing! You will be sorry for what I, and I alone determine you will be sorry for! Are we clear!? Or do I need to name young Mr. Ch'Echaakrith as First Engineer and arrange for a transport to ferry you back to Hakton VII for reassignment? Perhaps Third Cook aboard a Deuterium Transport would be a more appropriate post?"

Shryn allowed a measure of the old rage he'd been famous for in his youth to colour his voice. Around him, the other cadets fell silent as their Commander roared. The young men and women manning the *Shrov* lived or died at the whim of the old warrior they'd sworn their oaths too. As Shryn bellowed, the others listened. Their Commander, whose long braided white hair whipped violently around his broad muscular shoulders with every barrage of rhetorical questions, was a fearsome figure when provoked – but every cadet knew the old man had only their best interests at heart.

"No, sir! My faults are a great shame. I will conquer them with malice for the embarrassment they've brought this vessel!" Shrierian closed the channel to the bridge and loudly cursed himself.

This squirmed uncomfortably. He'd been the one who'd keyed the wrong commands into the computer. The reactor had gone into its emergency shut-down cycle because of his ignorance, and yet Th'Rullik was bearing Commander Shryn's wrath. His antennae drooped in shame. He tried to look as though he'd not noticed Shrierian's outburst and continued to take reactor temperature readings.

"Mr. Th'Rullik, Bridge."

Shrierian took a long steadying breath and then re-established the link with the deck above. "Sir."

"Status of my ship, First Engineer." The lesson was over. Time to get back to the problem at hand.

"Sir, the re-start sequence has been primed. I've vented the central manifold's plasma ducts into space to bring the core temperature down quickly. The intermix ratio is set and stable. We are presently reading..."

Th'Rullik looked over to where This was standing and waited for the younger man to mouth the readings to him.

“...presently reading two hundred thirty-eight klevics above nominal re-start temperature. Estimate a half hour to forty-five minutes before we can safely re-start the intermix and reaction sequencers.”

“Impulse engine?”

“Impulse engine operating at full capacity. Impulse power at your command, sir.”

On the bridge, Commander Shryn looked over to the cadet manning the Helm. The young woman quickly consoled her status screens and confirmed that the ship’s impulse drive had not been affected by the emergency core shutdown. He then turned to the Navigation Officer, who again reported that the Umoth Nebula had rendered their main directional sensors useless. They were still working on getting a star-fix to help them set a course out of the hazy, radiation heavy entrails of the hostile nebula.

The *Shrov’s* Weapons Station stood empty. The cadet on-duty had been sent aft to the observation port to assist the others in trying to calibrate the manual interstellar sextant the *Shrov’s* Quarter Master kept on-hand for unforeseen emergencies. The tool’s design had remained unchanged for centuries – though the sextant aboard the *Shrov* had only recently been machined by the craftsmen on Lorillia III. To the dismay of all aboard, the sextant had not been properly tuned prior to the *Shrov’s* departure. Commander Shryn signaled for his First Engineer to keep him apprised of any developments with the reactor restart.

At least we’re a sector away from the Tzenkethi and Cardassian fleets. Thought Shryn as he sat stoically in his command chair.

Until the *Shrov* had a functional Warp Drive, a sense of direction and/or a means by which to reach out to her sister ships, the *Toth* and the *Thylaal*, there was simply nothing for Shryn to do. They didn’t dare risk travelling blind – they were as likely to fumble further into the nebulae towards the Cardassian border as they were to find themselves back in friendly space...

No, thousands of times as likely to find ourselves hurtling into enemy space. Thought Shryn as his cadets continued to fumble their way through their current catastrophe.

He closed his eyes and listened to the noise below his feet. He knew the venting plasma was likely deafening for the boys struggling to revive the ship. The Communications, Navigation and Helm Officers all continued to monitor and update their status as per protocol. From behind the command chair, the hushed observations, suggestions, and discussions going-on around the sextant added to the din.

The children around him all wore identical brown and silver Imperial Academy pressure suits. They were all nearly as bald as newborn babes. They were wide eyed cadets. They were his burden. As he sat back and listened to his young crew work, he allowed himself a subtle smile. Clad in the rich blue uniform of an Imperial Guard Commander, years past his eligible retirement date, Shryn was grateful for his burdens and glad he still had something of use to share.

4. The *Kreke Disac*

“Gul D’gad, incoming communication from the *Asga*.”

Jesgat D’gad, a heavy-set, balding man of advanced age, was just preparing to stand-down from his Gamma Shift watch when Trooper Ellex called for his attention. Glinn Kom, a lean, athletic man in the full flower of youth, D’gad’s trusted second in command, stood silently at his Gul’s side.

“Let’s have it, Ellex.” D’gad sighed and craned his neck to the left to watch his Communications Officer decrypt the in-coming message.

“Sir, the *Asga* reports an enemy contact. Less than one AU from their current position. The *Asga* makes it out to be an Andorian scout-class vessel...which has crossed our border and appears to be disabled and alone.”

D’gad leaned forward in his seat and turned to look up at Glinn Kom. Kom nodded quickly at his commander and called for the Science Post to verify the *Asga*’s report.

“Sir, sensors confirm contact at bearing 327 mark 15. No warp signature.”

Kom ordered the trooper manning the Science Post to maintain a lock on the enemy target, then waited for Gul D’gad’s instructions.

The *Kreke Disac* was one of seven newly operational Type One *Galor*-class Heavy Cruisers in service to the Imperial Cardassian fleet. She was the most advanced vessels ever put into service by the High Command. Just to have been selected to serve aboard a *Galor* was an incredible honour and responsibility.

“Tactical, location of the nearest support ship to the *Asga*?” D’gad looked up to Kom and motioned for his young Glinn to draw closer.

“The Banot is two AUs astern of the *Asga*, sir,” came the response from the trooper manning the Weapons and Tactical Post.

“Sir, if the information Mr Ligan and his associates have provided is correct; this could be our opportunity.” Kom kept his voice low so that only Gul D’gad could hear his words.

“Agreed. The contact is well within our borders and likely blinded by the nebula’s radiation field...still, if it’s a trap of some kind...” D’gad had already committed to a course of action in his own mind, but he was interested in gauging Kom’s resolve.

“If the Andorians were laying some ambush, we’d have detected their vessels by now. The High Command has been clear about our mandate here, sir.”

D’gad smiled. They’d been pulled away from the main force of the Fifth Order’s fleet at Celtris III to co-ordinate the actions of the small squadron of *Terok*-class cruisers. Mr. Ligan and his “associates,” as Glinn Kom referred to them, had shared intelligence concerning the state of the Andorian patrols forming a crude picket line from Pendi II to the listening posts at Umoth VIII. The Imperial Guard had concentrated their best ships, including their two new Heavy Cruisers in the Gamma Sector in anticipation of a Cardassian, or even a Tzenkethi, incursion. They’d left the routine patrols in the Actium Sector to their raw recruits and light scouts.

“We’re in agreement then.” D’gad watched as a slight smirk lit his young Glinn’s face.

5. Dal Rorlac

Dal Rorlac gently closed the screen on his armrest and retrieved his helmet. Gul D'gad's orders had been clear. The *Banot* was already underway to intercept the enemy contact. Rorlac ignored Mr. Ligan's question and activated the *Asga's* internal address system.

"All hands, make ready. Battlestations. Set First Alert throughout the ship, Glinn Compar to the bridge."

The lighting on the *Asga's* bridge flickered and dimmed to a dull amber as every screen and readout increased in intensity to bring into high contrast the critical information displayed. A deep thumping claxon rang out the First Alert alarm in all pressurized sections of the *Terok*-class vessel.

Glinn Compar arrived on the bridge wearing his helmet, showing no signs of fatigue from the sixteen-hour watch he'd only just served some three hours earlier. "Compar, reporting as ordered, Dal Rorlac."

"Weapons, Compar." Rorlac bristled in his seat. Compar's proper place as First Officer was at his commander's side; however, Mr. Ligan remained fixed in place.

Compar, a heavily muscled, shorter man with a light complexion, relieved the young trooper at the Tactical Post without complaint; he was a fiercely loyal Cardassian.

"All compartments indicate ready for First Alert operations, sir," came the steady voice of the Communications Trooper sitting behind and below Dal Rorlac.

"Phaser crews report ready, sir. Powering..."

"No!" Rorlac checked himself quickly.

Compar was following standard procedure but powering the phased weapons reactors might give them away to their intended target too despite the Nebula's radiation. Rorlac ordered the Helm to set a course for the contact. As the trooper input the appropriate co-ordinates, Rorlac addressed his First Officer in a more subdued tone...

"Compar, load the forward and aft tubes with the modified concussive torpedoes. Do not activate your targeting beams until we are on top of them. As we approach, you're to fire our forward torpedo at minimal safe distance from detonation. If the Andorian has functional shields a direct impact should destabilize their entire grid..."

Rorlac looked over at Ligan, who was now wearing his own black, tubular helmet and holding his position at Rorlac's righthand side. The tactical information Rorlac was drawing upon had been provided entirely by Ligan in the last group meeting of Gul D'gad's commanders only three days earlier.

"Helm, you are to maintain course and speed throughout, understood?" Trooper Gillix nodded his acknowledgement.

"Once our first torpedo is away, we will continue toward the contact at speed. We will navigate the shockwave of our own attack and as we pass the target, Compar, you will fire our aft torpedo. Our first attack will disable their shields, our follow-on attack will destroy the invaders. Clear?"

The Helmsman acknowledged his orders. Compar sent word to the ordinance troopers to prepare and load the forward and aft torpedo tubes. Once the teams sent confirmation of their orders, Compar turned to face his Dal. "Sir, am I to wait until we've achieved minimal safe distance before triggering the second torpedo?"

Ligan narrowed his eyes and drew a short breath. Rorlac pretended not to notice the black-clad figure's obvious slight and hoped Compar was professional enough to do the same.

"We'll be travelling at the maximum register of our impulse drive, Compar. As soon as we've past the contact, trigger our aft torpedo. We should have sufficient momentum to clear the blast field. Once both our tubes are empty bring the phasers online. We'll turn, prepared to fight and by that time, Dal Ghadett and the *Banot* will be arriving to provide backup, clear?"

"Clear, sir. Torpedoes loaded and ready." Compar turned his attention back to his consoles. The Helmsman reported that engines were standing by, and the course was laid in. None of the tactics just laid out were standard Cardassian maneuvers, but Glinn Compar and the other men aboard the *Asga* were trained not to question the orders of their commander.

"Very well...COMMIT."

The twin impulse manifolds mounted to the *Asga's* port and starboard blades sparked to life and the faded yellow hull began moving at an incredible speed. She split the swirling pink and green dust of the Umoth Nebula like a lightning bolt rampaging towards the drifting, unaware ship of Andorian cadets.

Rorlac watched as his men methodically worked at their posts like the professionals they were. Compar stood ready at Tactical. Navigation called out the countdown to target intercept.

From his place at Rorlac's side, Ligan watched as each man on the bridge did his duty. Rorlac was old for a Dal. Ligan was aware of the man's past. A concise dossier on each of the commanders and key crew members of the squadron had been provided to him by the information office of the Obsidian Order. From sick Gul D'gad and failed Gul Gisgak down to poor Dal Rorlac; Ligan knew precisely what drove each man commanding the five warships. Perhaps more importantly, he knew what would motivate each man to do just about anything Ligan required of them. Rorlac had suffered an embarrassing loss at the siege of Juhraya nearly two years earlier. That blunder had stalled the man's ascent to the rank of Gul. Ligan knew that in exchange for a Gul's uniform, Rorlac would do anything the High Command, or for that matter the Obsidian Order, might ask of him.

As the Navigator counted down the seconds to attack, Ligan fortified himself with the satisfaction that the Order's plan was smoothly being put into effect.

6. *Shrov*

The *Asga* emerged from the swirling nebula like a phantom. Her impulse reactor had only just triggered the *Shrov*'s short-range sensors as Compar powered the *Terok* -class ship's targeting beams. Aboard the *Shrov*, the cadets scrambled to make sense of the partial readings their equipment was suddenly registering. A proximity alert began to sound. As the *Asga* bore down on the drifting *Shrov* a bright yellow flare of plasma belched from her forward torpedo tube and the first concussive charge flew from the breach at near light speed.

First Engineer Th'Rullik had been standing by the actuator for the reactor re-sequencer, waiting for the final moments until restart ticked away when the *Asga*'s first torpedo slammed into the dorsal plates of the *Shrov*. Th'Rullik was flung away from his control panel and slammed into the upper bulkhead like a child's toy. Death was instantaneous.

The *Shrov* had a basic deflector grid and structural reinforcement field which operated independently of the main reactor. Her defensive shields and adaptive deflector grid though relied on the power normally generated by the warp reactor; neither were functional when the Cardassians attacked. Power relays exploded all along the *Shrov*'s port side. A fifteen-meter section of the heavily armoured outer hull peeled away like paper under the withering torpedo attack. The Raider tumbled aimlessly through space as her systems died and all power bled away.

The *Asga* didn't slow. At his control panel, Compar cursed loudly as he tried and failed to align the steaking ship's targeting beams with the spinning Andorian. The Raider had been anticipated to have had its shields up and thus present a somewhat more entrenched target – as things were, the first torpedo strike had sent the Andorian ship careening out of the target envelope. *Asga* passed over the initial strike point. The targeting beams were too slow to acquire the tumbling hulk of the *Shrov*. Compar switched to manual targeting with less than two and half seconds in which to work – aligned the aft tube as best he could and triggered the second torpedo.

Aboard the *Shrov* a handful of cadets crawled around in the smoke-filled darkness of their vessel. Life Support, lighting and redundant safety systems were all failing. The sounds of cries and exploding relays echoed throughout the small ship. In the darkness and smoke came the sound of straining bulkheads and a queer roiling, bubbling noise cast-off from the thin inner hull along the dorsal panels of the Raider. With the structural containment field down and the heavily armoured outer-hull blown away, the delicate pressurized inner-hull was exposed to the harsh vacuum of space. Its bright silver skin began to pucker and bunch as the life-sustaining atmosphere within the Raider tried to rush out into the radioactive nothingness all around the ship.

The second torpedo flared to life just as savagely as the first volley had. Compar watched his targeting screens to visually track the torpedo's trajectory as Dal Rorlac and the

rest of the bridge crew focused on the *Asga's* run through the engagement zone. Compar cursed again as he watched the indicator meant to represent his torpedo speed past the green triangle representing the tumbling Andorian. He had missed.

The second torpedo roared past the *Shrov* on her starboard side. Though rigged to detonate on a proximity fuse affixed to her nose, the torpedo failed to explode even as it clipped the side of the Andorian Raider. The fiery yellow ball of destruction continued on into the swirling mass of clouds and radiation in a fading streak.

The *Asga* slowed to $\frac{3}{4}$ impulse and arched hard about in a sharp port side turn. Dal Rorlac called for phasers and Compar complied instantly by powering-up the reactors they'd left dormant to ensure the Andorians would not detect their approach. As the old *Terok*-class ship rounded on her axis, the twin cannons recessed ahead of her port and starboard blades began to glow an ominous red. No one on the bridge made any comment about the creaking groan which echoed throughout their ship as she completed her high-speed turn. *Asga* was never designed for such maneuvering.

As the helmsman brought their nose to bear on the tumbling target, Glinn Compar's reactors reached full power. The *Asga* fired her retro thrusters and her engines were cut to $\frac{1}{8}$ th power. It was Mr Ligan who broke the intense silence by allowing a relieved sigh to escape his throat as the terrible creaking ceased and the *Asga* settled into a more comfortable operating mode. The First Alert claxon still resounded. Dal Rorlac was just about to command Compar to fire on the Andorians...

The torpedo clipped the *Shrov* hard on her starboard side and failed to detonate. Nobody on-board the Raider had any idea of what had just happened. By the time the second shot from the unseen Cardassian ship was streaking away from the *Shrov*, there were perhaps five or six Andorians still alive within the crumbling Raider. The second torpedo strike ripped another section of outer hull away from the *Shrov* and tipped her sharply off the axis of the violent tumble the first strike had sent her on. As the fragile hull shifted and spun in a new counter-direction, the strained, screaming skin of the inner hull split and was blown wide open by the intense pressurized atmosphere within.

On the tactical screen centered on Compar's weapons board the spinning green triangle suddenly went red.

"Dal Rorlac, no energy signatures detectable from contact."

Rorlac called for his Glinn to transfer the tactical read-outs to the main viewer. With a quick flip of a diode the red triangle appeared in vivid relief on the bulkhead facing the bridge crew. The *Asga* was shown precisely $\frac{1}{12}$ AUs astern and above the red triangle. Their vessel was depicted by an orange and yellow Imperial emblem.

"Life signs?"

"None, Dal Rorlac. No atmosphere detected aboard. No transponder signal. No readings whatsoever." Compar reported this as he locked-on the phase cannons, should he be ordered to destroy what was left of their enemy.

"Keep a lock on the contact, Glinn Compar. The *Banot* should be arriving shortly to take that hulk in tow."

Before Compar could acknowledge his Dal's command a second orange and yellow Imperial Emblem appeared at the far edge of the tactical display. Dal Ghadett had arrived.

7. Setting the Trap

Six hours later all five Cardassian warships had converged at the place where the *Asga* had attacked the Andorian Raider. The *Banot* had the dead hull of the Andorian vessel in a static tractor beam and the *Asga* held position some three thousand meters abeam of her sister ship. The remaining two *Terok*-class vessels, the *Khintic* and the *Terratt*, held station to the port and starboard of Dal Ghadett's *Banot* to form a defensive bubble around their prize. All four *Teroks* shared a similar X/Y orientation while holding a steady Z axis elevation. At Z plus two thousand kilometers, hanging directly above the *Banot*, loomed the gleaming yellow hull of Gul D'gad's *Kreke Disac*.

The *Galor* was nearly twice the size of the standard *Teroks*. She boasted three times as many phaser cannons and twice as many torpedo tubes as her smaller sisters and her advanced sensor array was more powerful than anything the Cardassians had ever produced. Of the handful of operational *Galor* prototypes available, only the *Kreke Disac* had been provided to the Fifth Order. Five *Galors* were assigned to the mighty Seventh Order – presently reinforcing the border with the Tzenkethi and the Federation. A seventh *Galor*, rumoured to be even more advanced than the other six, was said to be in operation with the elite First Order.

In the rear-facing viewing room on the *Kreke Disac*'s second deck was a long blackwood table with an intricate Orialian effigy carved into its center. Gul D'gad had paid a handsome price to have the table custom-made for the *Kreke Disac*. D'gad now sat at the head of his table in a polished high-backed chair with his four commanders and the ever-present Mr Ligan all politely sitting in low chairs around the blackwood.

"I congratulate all of you on a task well done to this point." D'gad took the time to look from face-to-face as he spoke to drive home the sincerity of his remarks.

Gul Gisgak, seated to D'gad's left, nodded slightly to thank his commander. Dal Ghadett remained bolt upright and attentive. D'gad passed over Ligan, who was seated at the far end of the table and was pensively drumming his fingers on the polished wood surface, making no effort to hide his disinterest. Dal Bin, sitting to Mr. Ligan's left, had a look of irritation on his face, but it was obvious that Ligan's disrespect was the cause of this and D'gad offered the young commander an encouraging nod. Finally, to Gul D'gad's right, sat Dal Rorlac who'd managed to intercept and neutralize the Andorians with absolute perfect precision.

"Pardon my zeal, Gul D'gad, but are we going eat anytime soon?"

D'gad cleared his throat and refused to acknowledge Ligan for the time being. "Before we proceed with next-steps, I'd like all of you to witness a proud moment for a true son of Cardassia."

D'gad smiled and raised his left arm in front of him and triggered his personal communicator. The collection of commanders and Mr. Ligan sat silently for a moment, curious as to what fat old Gul D'gad had in mind. A few seconds later and the hatch to the service corridor beyond the viewing-room opened and Glinn Kom stepped into the room.

Kom was aware that the commanders of the other ships were aboard, but he was taken aback as he entered the room where Gul D'gad had called him.

“You summoned me, sir?”

Gul D’gad rose from his seat and turned to address his First Officer with a wide smile.

The others remained in their seats and watched.

“Yes, Glinn. I did indeed. We’re pressed for time, so I’m afraid I will have to do this somewhat faster than I might otherwise have liked...”

Kom fought the urge to take a step back from D’gad as the hulking old man approached him. The other commanders remained at the table with stoic looks on their faces while the Obsidian Order Agent just looked bored. For a second, Kom thought he had committed some failure which was about to end his career.

“I received approval from the Central Command only a short time ago... to confer upon you the rank of Dalin, Mr Kom. In recognition of your years of service not only to me, but to the Cardassian Empire. Congratulations, Dalin Kom.”

Gul D’gad beamed at Kom like a proud father and extended his left arm. None of the others knew that this was to be D’gad’s final command; secrecy was a virtue every Cardassian prized. As he stepped towards the strong young officer he’d come to think of as the future of the Fifth Order, D’gad made no attempt to hide his joy at Kom’s achievement. It would only be a matter of months before Kom was named Dal and then, considering the man’s immeasurable talents, Gul.

Lost for words, Dalin Kom gripped his superior’s forearm in his own left hand and the two men shook heartily.

“Lovely, lovely... well done, Kom. I’m sure we’re all very moved. Now, if we can get on with the business at hand, Gul D’gad?” Ligan rolled his eyes and made a show of climbing out of his own seat to activate the briefing panels built into the room’s far bulkhead.

“You’ve earned this, Kom. Return to the bridge.” D’gad remained focused on Kom, ignoring the black-clad figure at the far end of the table.

“Yes, sir. Thank you.”

The four seated commanders offered muted congratulations to the new Dalin as Kom backed out of the room and Gul D’gad remained smiling until the hatch was again sealed. Once Kom had left though, D’gad rounded towards Ligan who was in the middle of calling up some briefing materials.

“Was that necessary, Ligan?! Does the Obsidian Order have no reverence for the brave men serving Cardassia?” D’gad made no attempt to hide his outrage and his bald head flushed with colour. The other men around the table barked and supported their Gul.

“Why, Gul D’gad... I’m sure I don’t know where to even attempt to speak for the Obsidian Order’s position concerning soldiers in the field, though for myself... I can simply reiterate your own sentiment that we are *pressed for time*, so if I may get started?”

D’gad grumbled to himself but refrained from taking his comments any further. Ligan had still not admitted that he was an Agent for the Obsidian Order, but D’gad and everyone present knew the truth. They also knew that making an enemy of Ligan would endanger not only themselves and their careers, but their families back home.

“Gentlemen, our work has now begun. With the simple capture of this Andorian craft we can now set our trap.”

“Excuse me, simple?” Rorlac could not help himself. The *Asga* had been responsible for detecting and eliminating the Raider. He and his crew had performed perfectly, and he felt there should be some acknowledgement of their efforts.

“Yes, Dal Rorlac. Simple. As I shared with you all, the Andorians operating along this sector of our border are largely old warriors with no teeth and inexperienced trainees. Capturing or crushing any one of their vessels should not have been anything other than simple. The challenge, Dal Rorlac... is what comes next.” Ligan smiled.

“Tell us then, Mr. Ligan...” Gul Gisgak interjected before Rorlac could say anything further. “... just what does come next?”

At one time Gisgak had been considered for possible recruitment to the Obsidian Order himself. An unfortunate incident with an Orion trade convoy when Gisgak was but a humble Glinn though had eliminated him from consideration before the Order could take the first steps towards approaching the brash young man. Gisgak was never aware of the Order’s one-time interest in him.

Ligan smiled in a most disconcerting way and triggered the screen he’d been preparing. On the wall behind him a tactical readout of the border between the Umoth Nebulae and the disputed boundaries of the Actium sector appeared. Gisgak was defensive of poor scarred and passed-over Rorlac; they’d both been at Juhraya. One man won promotion, the other did not.

“We’ll strategically place the ruins of our Andorian Raider on the fringes of the nebula opposite Alpha 441. It shouldn’t take the Andorians long to locate the remains of their vessel and they will doubtlessly call for reinforcements to retrieve their debris. That is when we will spring our trap.” Ligan returned to his seat as the other men studied the map carefully.

“What makes you think the children and old men manning those other Raiders will be able to find their wreck? There’s nothing their sensors will be able to detect aboard that ship,” asked Dal Ghadett, who’d taken the time to investigate the wreck of the Raider thoroughly over the last few hours as it was his *Banot* which was tasked with holding onto the broken vessel.

“Prior to placing the wreck in position, Dal Ghadett, you will have one of your engineers attach a power source to the Raider’s transponder. The Andorians will be looking for their ship, have no doubt about that.” Ligan sat back in his seat and tugged at his snug black pressure suit. Only Gul D’gad and the crew of the *Kreke Disac* wore the comfortable battle tunics of the terrestrial battalion; a testament to the faith they all had in the *Galor*’s superior construction.

“Alright... who was on that Raider then, Mr. Ligan?” purred Dal Rorlac, as he stroked his moustache methodically.

Ligan was genuinely impressed with the Dal’s insightful supposition, but he was too well trained to betray anything he didn’t intend. “All you need to know, Dal Rorlac, is that the Andorians will discover the wreck and they will summon formidable support to retrieve it.”

Rorlac furrowed his brow but said nothing further. He looked from Ligan to the map on display and studied the information thereupon. The old scar on his forehead went pale.

“You’ve been provided dossiers on the tactical assignments each of your ships are to carry out by Mr Ligan. Go over them again tonight. We’ll move to place the Raider first thing in the morning and prepare for our primary target.” Gul D’gad signalled for Ligan to shut down the tactical display.

Once the displays and sensitive material were stowed, four young troopers brought in a modest feast for Gul D’gad and his four commanders to enjoy. Before eating, Mr. Ligan made a show of covering the offensive Oralian carving in the center of the table with a napkin.

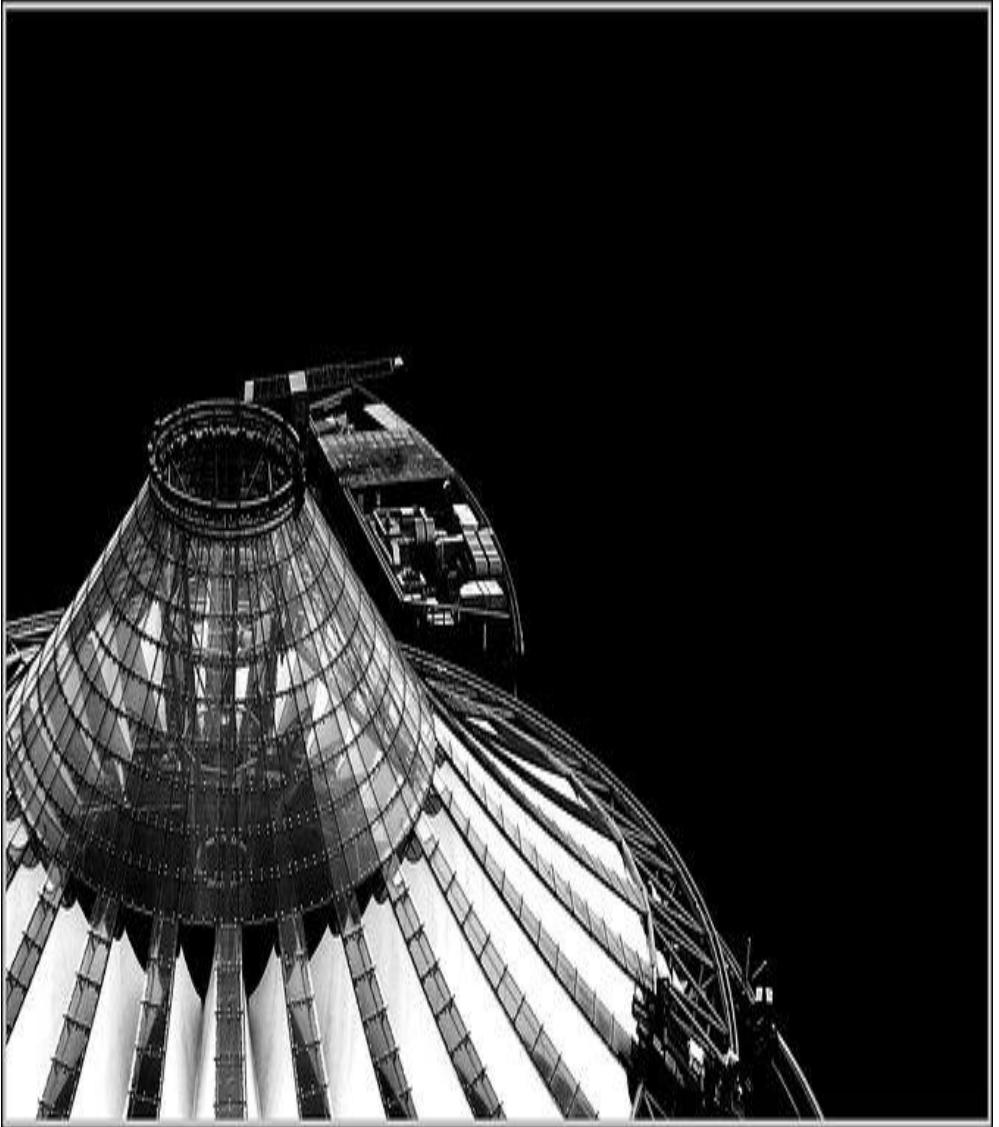


Figure 2:TMC Ganymede. Published 25 Nov. 2021 Pixabay Licence Free

8. Wegaos Skaffef

From somewhere deep below the reenforced plating lining the expansive floor of the haunted promenade ringing the surface level of the refinery, came a deep rumbling. Some giant piece of machinery had suddenly awoken. Moddax shivered as the light continued to fade. He couldn't hear the approaching footfalls any longer. A shrill scream of metal grinding on metal boomed through the icy atmosphere and a long, low whine spilled out of the depths. Moddax glanced to his left for just a moment to see that Jupiter had waned to just a quarter of her previous glory. The lighting elements running along the bulkheads of the interior of the gallery were mostly burnt-out. Perhaps one in ten remained functional. Moddax shivered again as he noted that he was not standing in an illuminated section.

Whatever machine had awoken below the surface soon fell into a steady humming and the echoing noises faded somewhat. Moddax turned away from the viewports as he sensed more than heard the approach of another body.

"Thayer Moddax. You look cold!"

Moddax instinctively jumped back half a pace coming face-to-face with an enormous fur-clad Tellarite.

"Bwa-ha hahaha!!!" Wegaos put his hands on either side of his huge belly and threw his head backwards as he roared with delight at the panic he'd inspired in his guest.

"Wegaos... forgive me, I didn't realize you were right there." Moddax shivered again and bit his lower lip to keep from cursing his own foolishness.

Wegaos Skaffef stood with his legs wide and his thick three-fingered piggy fists jutting into his hips like he'd just cornered some prized targ. As Moddax composed himself and tried to steel himself against the growing cold, he marvelled at the old Tellarite's size. The man was easily two hundred kilos now. The last time they'd met in person, Moddax remembered guessing the short Tellarite was somewhere between a hundred and fifty to a hundred and seventy-five kilos.

"Seek forgiveness from a Vulcan, human. You're supposed to be an Operative! You're supposed to be sharp!" Wegaos snorted slightly and allowed his jaw to pop slightly – an intentional insult.

Moddax nodded and offered the older man a wry grin. Wegaos had gotten the better of him and given his status and the fact that he was in the end, a Tellarite, Moddax accepted the rib and ceded Wegaos his victory.

"Come Thayer, walk with me... before you freeze your scrawny human hide."

Moddax could just make out the deep purple colour of the fur coat Wegaos was wearing. The massive Tellarite didn't seem to be bothered by the crashing temperature, though Moddax could clearly see the man's breath freezing in the air just in front of his huge lower tusks. Moddax offered his fur-draped host a polite nod and waited for Wegaos to take the first two or three clumping steps back towards a flickering light further back along the concourse. The purple fur coat Wegaos was wearing hung low over his rotund body and all Moddax could make out of the man's lower extremities were the heavy black boots favoured by most Tellarite males.

"It's been long since you last came to see me, Thayer, yes? Eight months?" Wegaos pushed his words out into the freezing atmosphere in between sucking for gasps of air.

"Eighteen months Wegaos Skaffef. It's been at least eighteen months since we last spoke face-to-face." Moddax ached with the cold now, but he paced himself to remain abreast of the fat Tellarite.

"Eighteen months... huh. Well, given how horribly ugly you humans are... you can understand how it does not seem so long since I had to look on you, yes, Thayer!?" Wegaos kept his eyes forward and concentrated on looking strong.

"Quite. Wegaos... may I ask, why you signalled for me to meet you here? I really should be back aboard K3..."

"Ha!" Wegaos stopped abruptly and again took up his wide-legged stance to face Moddax. In the last few months Wegaos had been developing problems with his equilibrium, by striking this pose, which Wegaos himself felt was rather heroic, he was able to provide himself a deep wide base from which to project strength.

Moddax took a step back and tried not to let his discomfort get the better of him. They were three meters away from the lighting element and he could now see clearly the ridiculous purple coat, complete with huge gold buckles and ludicrously shined black boots which Wegaos had clothed himself in. For a moment all that came to Moddax's mind as he took in the sight of the huge Tellarite was an ancient portrait of a medieval King of England he'd seen as a boy on a school field trip. As aching cold as he was, the urge to giggle at the sight of Wegaos standing there in all his glory very nearly overtook Moddax.

"You think, Thayer, that I don't know you've done nothing for months? You think that I am not kept abreast of the goings-on in the field?" Wegaos again let his jaw pop.

"I... Of course, Wegaos Skaffef, I wouldn't dare assume that you're not completely aware of what goes on... I, I just..."

"Bah! At least pretend to have respect for me, Thayer Moddax and lie."

"No, Wegaos, I won't lie to you. It's true, I've not had an assignment in some time." Moddax couldn't keep from shivering any longer and began to quake in front of the portly, purple-clad boar on two legs.

"Months now, I hear tell." Wegaos narrowed his flinty yellow eyes as he watched the tall human shudder in the growing cold.

"Yes, it's been nearly three months since my last assignment." Moddax coughed and stomped his feet. He could feel his nostrils beginning to freeze.

"Play-acting with holograms for the female. Bah! That assignment?"

"Yes... that was... I do as I'm ordered, Wegaos. I do my duty."

"Bah! Duty. You came to me. You hate the female. You want the female removed and I tell you what to do. You do it? No! You, you act human and try go backdoors with U'Chutkilli and don't listen to me, eh Thayer!?" Wegaos leaned forward slightly to make his last jaw pop particularly offensive.

The human just stood silently, shivering in the growing darkness. Even Wegaos was starting to feel the chill through his thick furs. They'd get nothing from the human if he died of hypothermia. Wegaos snorted his derision and led the man to an access shaft leading to the lifts.

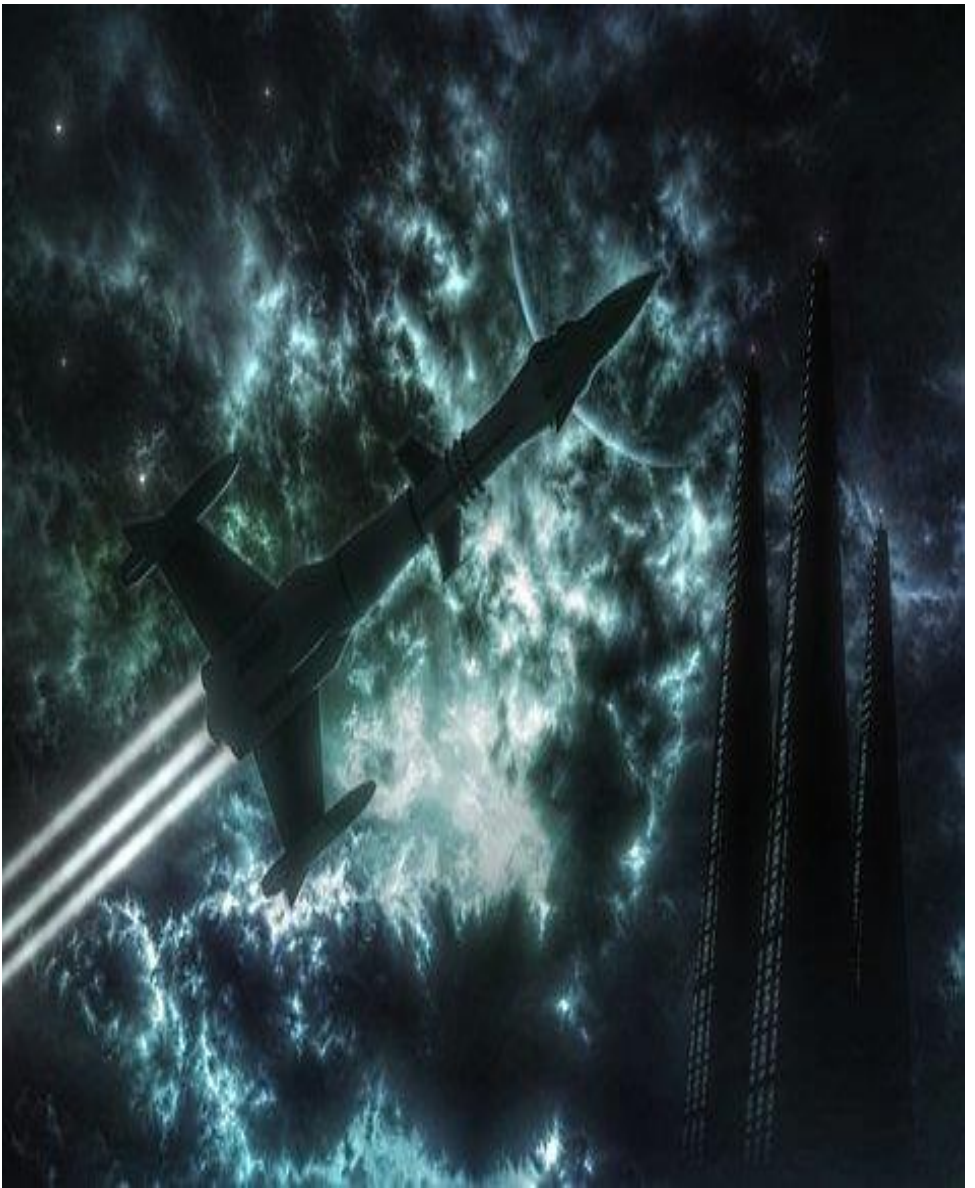


Figure 3:IGC Shrar. Published 9 Dec. 2014 Pixabay Licence Free

8. I.G.C. Shrar, Two Weeks, Four Days Earlier

The Commander's cabin aboard the Imperial Guard Cruiser *Shrar* was cool and dark. The long, narrow viewport which dominated the cabin's exterior bulkhead was completely shuttered by the heavy blast shields the old General had activated before settling into his narrow cot to sleep. He lay perfectly still, enveloped in complete blackness... not sleeping. U'Chtukilli hadn't managed more than an hour or two of sleep a night since rejoining the fleet after his brief investigation aboard K3 months ago. The old man opened and closed his right eye slowly – noting no discernible difference in the inky blackness in the cool, quiet cabin. There were five more hours of blackness until his next watch on the bridge was due to begin. Five long hours of cool, black nothingness.

Weeks earlier U'Chtukilli had given up the war against his advancing baldness and had meticulously shaved the last wispy white strands of hair from his scarred and mottled blue scalp. He was still getting used to the sensation of his firm, cool pillow, against the tender blue skin at the back of his head. While many senior officers in the Imperial Guard took pride in their long, often braided, white manes; U'Chtukilli took a perverse pleasure in the fact that without any hair at all, his antennae appeared far larger than they had previously.

Before the oblong amber tinted indicator began flashing on the panel opposite his cot, U'Chtukilli's antennae stood erect – sensing the nearly imperceptible instant the relays in the dormant panel connected to activate the indicator which signaled an incoming call. The indicator was no larger than a thumbnail, but its sudden amber glow cut through the blackness like a beacon. The General was sitting up at almost the same instant as the indicator sparked to life.

U'Chtukilli crossed the distance between his cot and the Comms panel in two confident strides. The room was still without form in the darkness, but the old man knew every inch of every deck of the *Shrar*. He easily navigated his way around a low side table and a raised input port in the grav-plating running along the floor, blind.

“Bridge, U'Chtukilli. Speak.”

“General U'Chtukilli, incoming urgent transmission. Encoded from the Andor Diplomatic Corps; your eyes only, sir.”

The old man called for lighting level one and blinked his right eye shut against the warm glow of the recessed elements lining his cabin's low ceiling.

What could the Diplomatic Corps want? Thought U'Chtukilli as he quickly stretched and ran his hands over his bald head out of habit to quell the muss of hair he'd once sported.

“Bridge, standby.”

“Aye, sir.”

U'Chtukilli moved to retrieve the long, robe-like great coat he kept stowed in the tall shallow closet where he always had three clean and pressed uniforms hanging. Once he'd fastened the warm coat around his shoulders – fastening the silver clasp at his throat which

linked the two silver discs denoting his rank as General Major, Imperial Guard, he retrieved his implant.

The artificial eye *–clicked–*into place easily. Five magnetic sensors aligned with the surgically implanted anchor points around the dark, white scarred pit where his left eye had once existed. A split-second later and the neurological sensory receptor node Starfleet medical had implanted following his injury, began sending signals from the sophisticated camera housed within the artificial eye.

U’Chtukilli didn’t bother to find a pair of pants. The long coat would hide his nakedness from whomever awaited him on the other end of the incoming call.

“Bridge, U’Chtukilli. Put that transmission through, now.”

Without a word, the Communications Officer channeled the waiting call through to the General’s private cabin.

The amber indicator disappeared from the panel facing U’Chtukilli. The channel between the Bridge and the cabin was now closed. An oblong green indicator illuminated, and a sixty-square-centimetre panel appeared on the polished silver surface of the Comms panel. The Imperial Emblem appeared along with a disclaimer indicating the following transmission was not to be recorded or shared with anyone. The disclaimer stayed on the screen for three full seconds. When it faded, General U’Chtukilli found himself looking at Bos Ch’Eshryrrer, the Andorian Ambassador to Veloz Prime, a disputed planet just beyond the Cardassian Empire.

“Bos? This is unexpected.” The old man tried to recall when he’d last spoken to his old friend and was at a loss. They’d gone their separate ways shortly after the incident on Tessen III.

“I greet you, Ekohl. It’s been too long.” Ambassador Ch’Eshryrrer’s voice was hollow and weak. He squinted at his end of the call as if searching for some sign of the young warrior he remembered U’Chtukilli as being when last they knew one and other.

“Ekohl ...nobody’s called me Ekohl in years. Not even Maureen dared to be that familiar,” thought the old General as he studied his friend’s skinny, wrinkled face.

There was no trace of the beautiful young man he’d once been so close to. Bos had a thick head of shiny white hair trimmed to shoulder level. He was a diplomat, not a soldier so he sported no braids, but he was of an equal age with U’Chtukilli and had earned the right to sport such a mane.

There... the eyes, the same flecks of sharp green in the blue! U’Chtukilli allowed his mouth to curl into a warm smile. He knew his own face must be as off-putting to Bos as the Ambassador’s depleted face was to him. Finding those sharp green flecks of green in the man’s eyes, though, was heartening. These were the eyes of his young friend.

“Ekohl, I realize you’re in the middle of an action, but I’ll have you dispatched to the Actium Sector to rendezvous with a small taskforce to oversee the recovery of the IGR *Shrov.*”

The General cleared his throat and tried to make sense of what was being asked of him. “Bos, I’m... I don’t follow. I’m on the border with the Tzenkethi and the Cardassians. We’re anticipating hostile incursions at any time...”

“Ekohl, official orders from Imperial Command will follow this call dispatching you and the *Shrar*. This is not a request my old friend.”

The Ambassador’s voice was still hollow and weak. Though it had been decades since U’Chtukilli had shared a relationship with Bos, he could clearly see something was deeply wrong.

“I don’t know the Raider you’re referring to, Bos. You’re asking me to take the *Shrar* off the line and head to a sector where there’s nothing going on aside from training exercises for some cadets, as far as I’m aware.”

“That’s correct. Ekohl... *-sigh-* Ekohl, my son, This... he’s serving as Second Engineer aboard the *Shrov*.” Bos let his antennae droop and made no effort to hide his grief and concern from his old friend.

U’Chtukilli ran his hand over his smooth bald scalp and tried to recall the personnel lists he’d approved for training operations aboard the collection of old Raiders the Academy had deployed out of Hakton VII. He’d surely have remembered seeing the Ch’Eshryrer name among the dozens of cadets commissioned to train and serve in an active sector. Nothing came to him.

“I don’t recall...” U’Chtukilli began to say.

“The boy is registered under his mother’s name, Ekohl. This Ch’Echaakrih. My second wife’s child. The boy was going to be an artist up until two years ago when he suddenly decided a life of service in the Guard was a better path to follow.”

“I see.” The General drew a deep breath. What was top-of-mind now, was how the sudden absence of the *Shrar* might affect operations for the *Syre* and the eight flights of Raiders spread along the Tzenkethi and Cardassian borders. They’d been tracking several concerning contacts operating behind enemy lines at the edge of sensor range. U’Chtukilli felt these contacts might signify heavy warships unlike anything the Cardassians were known to possess.

“The *Shrov* was conducting warp exercises. It looks as though they experienced some catastrophe and lost contact with their training wing three days ago. A trio of Raiders triangulated the *Shrov*’s transponder signal yesterday, but the Raider doesn’t respond to hails. No power readings, but the egress pod appears to be in place.” Bos relayed the information as if reading from a script. He was so depleted that there was no emotion or strength in his words.

“Bos... you have my sympathies of course, but why don’t the Raiders simply stage a recovery?” The fact that the cadets were being put through their paces near a destabilizing nebula was not surprising. Certainly, the possible loss of his friend’s son was sad, but the General still couldn’t understand why he should take the Cruiser *Shrar* to go recover a single Raider.

“The Cardassian High Command have withdrawn their ambassador from Veloz Prime. They refuse to confirm where they see their official border lying within Umoth... and the static deep scan listening post at Hakton VII has returned a contact consistent with those you’ve been tracking behind the Cardassian border. The Raiders won’t proceed with recovery operations without the *Shrar* to back them up.”

The General sighed deeply.

“The pod can shelter and support the entire Raider’s crew for up to a week, Ekohl. The nebula is preventing the Raiders from getting clean returns. This and the others might be... he’s a good boy, Ekohl. To pass the qualifications to even join the *Shrov* he spent his last term break from the Academy studying computer coding at Tesnia, at his own expense. Our ends align here. You’re interested in those contacts. I need to know what happened... to my son.”

U’Chtukilli let his friend weep without judgement. They both agreed it had been too long, the silence between them. After Bos had signed off, General U’Chtukilli studied his orders from Imperial Command.

9. Deck 12, USS *Isadore*

At 0352 hours, the corridor outside of the *Excelsior*-class *Isadore*'s main Engineering compartment was empty. Yeoman Tracy stood mute in her bulky white radiation suit trying to muster the courage to step through the double-wide hatch into the main reactor room. She was nearly three hours early for her training shift, but she hadn't been able to sleep and hoped she might use the extra time to impress Engineer Barnes with her commitment and work ethic. She needed Lieutenant Barnes to write a letter recommending her for late term admission to the Academy's Engineering Extension Program.

After her relationship with Shohr had ended nine weeks earlier, Danelle had found herself re-examining a lot of her recent choices. Originally, she'd planned to serve a tour aboard the *Isadore* as a Yeoman to earn the required star hours needed to move on to a specialist posting at a Starbase, or possibly even Head Quarters. Her time with Shohr, though, had exposed her to so many more possibilities and opportunities a career in Starfleet could offer. Though their time together was over, Shohr had encouraged her to explore her options and approved her reassignment to Engineering to try and earn her way into the EEP through practical exercise.

Just as Danelle was about to step towards the door sensor to step into the reactor room, Chief Petty Officer Rhupp stepped off the turbolift behind her. "Danny?"

Yeoman Tracy jumped at the deep booming voice behind her. She turned to see Chief Rhupp looking at her with a crooked smile on his face.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Danny. What are you doing here at this hour?" Rhupp let his head tip slightly to the left as he took in the sight of little Yeoman Tracy standing awkwardly in the corridor wearing a radiation suit that appeared to be half a size too large for her. Her blond hair was pulled back and set high on the back of her head in a tight bun.

Danny laughed at her own reaction and explained how she couldn't sleep and thought she might get a few extra hours in engineering. She'd only just met Chief Rhupp a few weeks earlier, but she felt comfortable around the older man and had come to value his guidance.

"Well Yeoman, you won't be getting in there for another few hours. I've got the Beta Shift running level 3 diagnostics on the reaction chamber – and you're not rated to be anywhere near that. You're supposed to be shadowing Lt. Barnes, aren't you?" Rhupp checked the chronometer sewn into the left forearm of his own white radiation suit and sighed.

"I can't even observe?"

Rhupp tapped the RAD tag on his suit's left breast pocket to reset it before re-entering the reactor room. He liked the young woman. There'd been some unsavoury rumours about a relationship between her and Captain Ch'orithron, but he'd tried to ignore them. He rubbed his left hand against the heavy black stubble growing along his jaw and shook his head. Danny looked ridiculous in her bulky white suit.

"Can I wait for Lt. Barnes in the relief room?" Danny could see from the serious look in Chief Rhupp's light brown eyes and the emphatic way he'd shaken his head that there was no sense in pressing the issue.

"You need Mr. Barnes to write you a recommendation, right?"

Danny just nodded.

"You're slotted for a ten hour day with him and frankly, he's a difficult man to get a read on. Follow what I'm saying?" Rhupp was choosing his words very carefully.

"I don't, um, no. I don't think I follow, Chief."

"Unless you have ten hours of interesting facts about phase discriminators and quantum mechanics to pass the time, you're going to find the Lieutenant won't be terribly interested in you... unless..."

"Unless what, Chief? I only get two days with Lt. Barnes on this rotation, and it has to be an officer with practical knowledge of my abilities to recommend me to the EEP." Danelle suddenly felt foolish for thinking that by showing up three hours early for her shift she might impress Lt. Barnes and guarantee a glowing recommendation.

"The man likes current events."

"Current events? Like ship's gossip? I heard we might be rendezvousing with the *Enterprise* when we're done here. Is it true Captain Harriman is putting together a taskforce to revisit Cardassia?"

Rhupp shook his head at the lunacy of Tracy's question. As the more salacious stories circulating about the Captain and Danny came to Chief Rhupp's mind he cleared his throat to keep from smiling or saying something that might offend or embarrass Yeoman Tracy.

"No. He's a news junkie. FNN, Starfleet News Service, he even subscribes to the Vulcan Citizens Daily. Lieutenant Barnes is all business, unless you can get him into a discussion on the latest Federation Council Trade Committee talks, or the Andorian Ice Flow forecasts, Senior Fleet promotions, retirements, those types of things... and there's no plans to meet up with the *Enterprise*."

"Oh, I see."

The Yeoman just stood dumbfounded trying to understand what she might do to improve her chances at getting Mr. Barnes to give her a favourable writeup. Rhupp could clearly see she was at a loss. He glanced at his chronometer again and knew he had to get back to work.

"Look Danny, the relief room is empty. There won't be anybody in there until the shift is done now. Use my access code to call up the subspace feed on the common panel. You won't get anything from Terra or Vulcan, but you'll be able to access the Starfleet News Service. They broadcast the latest and greatest Fleet news on a loop. You can load up on some semi-current events to pass the hours with Mr. Barnes. Sound good?"

Danelle pulled at the loose rubberized fabric of her radsuit's left sleeve to get a clear view of her own chronometer. She was keeping the Chief from his duties. There was no chance of getting into the reactor room until the engineers were through with their diagnostic. Having nothing but work ethic to dazzle Lieutenant Barnes, the chance to load up on some conversation starters was too good to pass up.

10. Deck 3, Vehicle Bay, The *Trerratt*

Glinn Gomlir ran his hand along the nose of the bulging concussive charge secured to the belly of the *Trerratt's* lone *Hirvath*-class shuttlecraft. Reinforced struts had been affixed to the small craft's underbelly to allow the landing claw to hold the fat torpedo secure to the *Hirvath's* ventral plates. The single-phase emitter cannon mounted to the vessel's nose had been removed. In its place a rudimentary targeting beam had been wired into the shuttle's power grid. Gomlir knew the once agile *Hirvath* would handle like a fully laden waste freighter now that it was weighted down with its deadly payload. The shuttles housed on the *Khintic* and *Banot* were similarly modified.

Gomlir was the highest rated pilot aboard Dal Bin's *Trerratt*. He'd earned his Glinn rank while helping to suppress the uprising on Draygo IV, three years earlier. An entrenched force of rebels had fortified a position in the rocky hills of the Southern Province of Dombatt and had managed to fend off two Cardassian battalions. Orbital bombardment was not an option the Central Command would consider as the Dombatt ore extraction facilities were too close to the entrenched guerrillas. Gomlir, then just a common trooper, volunteered to pilot a Lufeki cargo skiff through the valley approaches to the entrenched rebels and drop two modified photonic mines into the heart of the murderous subversives' encampment.

Gomlir's commanding officer at the time, Gul Dacc of the Sixth Order, sanctioned the mission, but estimated the brash pilot's chances of survival at less than twenty percent. Gomlir took off in the unwieldy skiff to the cheers of the entire battalion. No one expected him to succeed. Upon his return, standing in front of his badly shot up skiff, Gomlir was heartily congratulated by Gul Dacc. Dacc then declared him to be a full Glinn before the entire company of celebrating troopers and officers of the Sixth Order's Fourth Battalion. An image had been captured and archived by the Central Command commemorating the victory. In the background of that image, behind Gomlir and Gul Dacc, were the thick black plumes of the burning rebel fortress.

The three technicians charged with maintaining the shuttle and operating the Vehicle Bay stood quietly by, watching as the tall Glinn inspected the craft. They looked at him with nearly unspeakable admiration. He was tall and lean and had a fair complexion that made him look like Crojeem Pem's "Ideal Cardassian" from the great poet's sonnet: *Duty to Duty to Duty Born*, come to life. His eyes were wide, clear and round, and it was widely rumoured that Glinn Gomlir could have any woman he wanted by simply casting those huge, deep brown eyes in their direction. His subtle frons was possessed of a most desirable hue of blue/green flesh, which only added to his heroic visage. They were in awe of the pilot and silently waited to service any need the great man might have.

Gomlir walked along the nine meters of the *Hirvath's* hull, silently assessing the weapon he would be expected to wield very shortly. No phaser. A fat torpedo nearly half the weight of the entire craft hanging off its belly. An under-powered ion fusion reactor driving all the regular onboard systems and twin engines, along with the targeting beam and rudimentary fly-by-light guidance computer tied in to the torpedo's onboard spatial nav

system. The defensive shields had been disconnected to reroute power to the extraneous guidance components the torpedo required.

Pilots aboard the *Khintic* and *Banot* were likely making similar walk-arounds of their own modified shuttles, Gomlir knew. They had all dined together the night before aboard the *Kreke Disac*. Gomlir, a trooper named Kultat Pid from the *Banot*, and Crojeem Rott – an old comrade from the Sixth Order. They enjoyed a hearty meal and then reviewed their mission briefing as a group one last time.

The *Asga*, which had sacrificed her own shuttle in order to use her Vehicle Bay to transport the bulky consignment of concussive charges the squadron required, lay in wait just eight thousand kilometers from the hulk of the dead Andorian Raider. Further back in the clouds of the Umoth Nebula were the *Banot*, *Khintic* and *Terratt*. Gul D'gad's *Kreke Disac* held station deeper-still in the murky nebula.

Long range sensors had detected a flight of three contacts approach the fringes of the nebula only a few hours after the transponder aboard the shattered Andorian Raider had been reactivated by the engineering team from the *Banot*. The *Kreke Disac* confirmed that the three contacts were indeed Andorian. Further, the deployed sensor drone net the *Disac* and the lesser *TeroK's* were using to overcome the nebula's interference determined that the Andorians had established a firm lock on the fading transponder but refrained from entering the Nebula to retrieve their vessel.

Dal Bin had shared with Gomlir that Gul D'gad and his Obsidian Order attendant were expecting a far greater target than three pitiful Raiders to appear in short order. Gomlir, Pid, and Rott would launch at the first sign of approach of a capital ship, assume a blade formation and wait for a predetermined signal from the *Kreke Disac* to deliver their payloads as specified.

Gomlir rounded the tail of his overladen shuttle and frowned. The tactics he and his team of pilots were expected to employ were not standard Cardassian stratagem, but his duty, as always, was clear. He looked over at the three young men standing off to the side of the shuttle and offered the boys a nod. Like starstruck children they eagerly nodded and waived back at him. He would have no weapons to defend himself. No shields to shelter behind; and he would be reliant on a compromised vehicle to ferry both he and his mission to victory. It would be glorious.

The young techs watched as the heroic Glinn in his brown and white pressurised flight suit completed his last inspection of the modified shuttle. He spoke not a word, but his confident wide eyes and reassuring nod was all they needed to see to know victory would be theirs when the time came. They waited for Gomlir to head back to the staging room before clearing the Vehicle Bay of tools and sundries in preparation for launch.

11. Communications Research Building

“Hey, Matrak, come take a look at this, will you?”

From across the room Lieutenant Matrak turned away from his relay console to offer his colleague, Lieutenant Jr. Grade Prell, an incredulous look. Vulcans were not supposed to show irritation or displeasure; however, since earning a promotion to full Lieutenant, Mr. Matrak had endured an unceasing amount of “ribbing” from his old friend and new subordinate, Henry Prell.

“Lieutenant Prell, I have a full schedule of transmissions to route, as do you. This is not an appropriate time for jocularly or distraction.”

Both men were taking their turn relaying and rerouting priority subspace transmissions along the Epsilon Network Starfleet relied upon for ship-to-shore communications with the greater fleet. The work was not overly stimulating, but it was crucial that the highly sensitive transmissions bouncing through subspace found their way to the appropriate receivers in order to keep the Admiralty abreast of actions in the field. While Mr. Matrak and Mr. Prell were primarily employed in the R&D Labs in the Communications Research Branch building at Starfleet Head Quarters – they took their turn as cosmic operators just as everyone else did from time-to-time.

“Well, Lieutenant, sir, I really need you to come have a look at this for me.”

Matrak frowned and slowly rose from his seat after transferring his load of incoming transmissions to another station. He pulled at the bottom of his newly pressed red tunic and quickly made sure everything was in place before walking over to where Prell was stationed. Mr. Matrak was the Duty Officer for today. Now a full Lieutenant, Matrak was responsible for supervising the entire shift of twenty-six officers and specialists handling relay duties.

The young Vulcan walked along the rows of relay consoles at a measured pace, making sure that everyone manning a terminal knew he was there and available if they had any issues requiring attention. For the most part the other young officers gathered in the relay room were too busy to even look up from their screens to acknowledge Matrak as he crossed the floor.

Henry had not taken his eyes from the screen in front of him. A backlog of transmissions were queuing up in a static action folder the system afforded operators who needed time to address the occasional issue that might come up with higher priority messages from time-to-time. As he waited for his friend to arrive, Henry transcribed the message’s authentication code into a secondary terminal for validation.

“Lt. Prell, what seems to be the issue?”

Henry finished keying in the alpha-numeric authentication code associated with the curious message he’d just received and pulled himself up and away from his screen to address Matrak. A smile came to his face the moment he saw his friend standing bolt upright in his fancy new red tunic.

“I just got this Priority One message out of the Actium Sector... it’s weird, man.”

Matrak cocked his left eyebrow and tried to discern if Henry was playing some prank. The odd smile his friend had on his face suggested to Matrak that some *shenanigans* might be afoot. “What do you mean by “*weird*”, Mr. Prell?”

Henry pushed himself away from his terminal to allow Matrak access to his console. “It’s Priority One and it’s flagged with a command code, but its from way out past any active zones.”

Matrak scanned the transmission’s origin and credentials with unblinking eyes. Prell stood silently off to the side while the Vulcan worked. Henry, like the rest of the junior officers on duty in the relay room, wore the comfortable red and white jumpsuit favoured by so many younger officers and non-coms in the research facility.

“The transmission is a set of deployment orders, though it does not appear to have been routed through Epsilon Eight as such orders might normally be expected to.” Matrak keyed his own clearance code into the terminal and began calling up deeper layers of authentication coding attached to the transmission in question.

“Right? Weird.” Prell reached around Matrak, who was accessing levels of data only the Duty Officer had access to and called up the details for the authentication code he’d pulled from the transmission.

A single word appeared on the secondary screen beside Prell’s workstation: “Command.”

“Curious, it would seem that whoever is sending these orders is doing so as a member of Starfleet Command.” Matrak cross-checked the authentication codes.

“Yeah, but from the Actium Sector?” Henry crossed his arms and looked directly at Matrak for guidance. They were to flag any nonconforming transmissions for follow up, but they were to ensure crucial updates, requests, or orders were relayed promptly and with minimal delay.

“The authentication code is valid, Mr. Prell. It’s an older code, but as you’ve already run it, we can see that it checks out.”

“Sure, but there’s nothing in the Actium Sector, Matrak. If this is legit, why wasn’t it routed through Epsilon Eight?”

Matrak took a moment to order his thoughts. “The message, possessing a valid Command authentication code, may have come from the relay station the Andorian Imperial Guard established on Hakton VII. This does not mean the sender is in the Actium Sector necessarily. After the loss of Epsilon Nine a significant hole was made in Starfleet’s communications network – necessitating the expansion of Epsilon Eight’s range of operations and requiring the establishment of several relay hubs throughout the quadrant, including this very room.”

“Thanks for that.”

“You are welcome.”

“It’s weird, Matrak. Let’s flag it.”

“It is not “*weird*”, Mr. Prell. It is a Priority One deployment order routed through the Andorian Epsilon relays on Hakton VII, with appropriate authentication. You will relay the order as directed.” Matrak had noted the dozens of messages Henry had piling up in his

static folder and didn't want to impede the day's efficiency rating by over-thinking a slightly anomalous transmission.

Henry looked at his friend and wrestled to accept the Vulcan's logic. Deployment orders coming out of a Sector void of any significant Starfleet presence. It didn't sit right. Still, Matrak was his superior and no logical reason for not relaying the message had appeared. He slowly routed the data package to its specified receiver and sent the message. It was still weird.

12. Starfleet News Service

...Star Fleet's Commander in Chief helped mark the end of an era this week as he, along with several members of the Admiralty were in attendance aboard Earth's Space Dock to welcome home the USS Revere NCC-595 for the last time.

The Revere, a Hermes-class Scout ship operated continuously by Starfleet for over fifty years is the last vessel of her class to see active service. Originally designed and constructed to aide Starfleet's exploration and scientific mandates, the Hermes fleet quickly became the unsung workhorses of an ever-expanding Federation. Ferrying vital cargo and personnel between Starships and Starbases and proving themselves to be versatile testbeds for developing sensor and scientific advancements throughout their long tenure.

Following the Klingon War and throughout the Cold War decades, the Hermes-class Scouts provided the fleet with reliable, relatively low-cost logistical support which proved essential to maintaining relations between numerous Federation Planets – freeing more expansive and complex vessels to safeguard our borders and expand our understanding of the Universe.

The Revere, as seen here on her final approach to Spacedock, filled many roles during her long service. She saw no fewer than fourteen captains in five decades. First deployed as a support ship for a three-year long survey of the Antares Maelstrom, the Revere NCC-595 proved herself vital in the successful recovery of the science frigate USS Blabber NCC-442. Later she was posted to Draken IV where she was utilized as a reconnaissance vessel along the Romulan Neutral Zone.

By the late 2260's new advancements in starship design and construction saw an unprecedented investment by Starfleet in the massive Refit Program spearheaded by the Newport News Design Consortium which refurbished and modernized the surviving original Constellation-class Heavy Cruisers, most famously the USS Enterprise. So successful was the Refit Program that in lieu of decommissioning the dozens of smaller scouts and support craft – Starfleet selected key vessels from the Saladin and Hermes-classes to refit as well.

The Revere was one of seventeen Hermes-class ships to put in for refit. When she emerged from Spacedock 17 in the Spring of 2272 as NCC-595, the Revere began a second career of equally distinguished service. She was a stout personnel carrier and interstellar transport for a number of years and managed to avoid a potentially fatal encounter with the V'ger probe just a year after her relaunch in 2273. She was then assigned to patrol the space around the Babel Diplomatic Complex where, in late 2286, she successfully foughtoff two renegade Orion Raptors attempting to abduct diplomats from Malcor III.

Today, the USS Revere, under the command of Captain Dij Kathiragmbi, comes home to be decommissioned after a remarkable fifty years of service....

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The images playing behind the well-dressed newsreader looped again and again to the expansive shots of the small ship's slow approach towards Spacedock. Danny had watched the same segment replay four times already, but she still couldn't quite place the attractive bald woman's accent. She'd never met a Deltan before, but she could easily see

why most of the young men she'd known in her life had harboured less-than-pure thoughts about Deltan women.

The footage of the *Revere* drifting towards the Dock's massive Space Doors faded and was replaced with a six second clip of Admiral Wallace shaking hands with Captain Kathiragmbi, an older Indian woman of short stature. Danny sighed. The newsreader was preparing to transition to the next story and offered no commentary on the brief clip of the actual decommissioning ceremony.

"...On a related note..." Began the impossibly attractive Deltan newsreader, as the clip featuring Admiral Wallace and Captain Kathiragmbi came to an end and different footage of Starfleet's Chief of Operations began to play.

...Starfleet Chief of Operations, Admiral Thomas Knot officially announced today that after nearly a year of exhaustive efforts, Starfleet Command has had no choice, but to close the search for the missing USS Sheaffe NCC-564.

The Sheaffe, herself a refit Saladin-class Destroyer and a contemporary to the USS Revere, was last stationed in the Omicron Sector at Archer IV. Starfleet has been restrained in speculating as to what may have happened to the Sheaffe and her crew of nearly two hundred, stating only that both ship and crew disappeared while on patrol without word.

USS Sheaffe was one of a handful of Saladin-class Destroyers still operated by Starfleet and had been successfully on station in the Omicron Sector for more than two decades. In the months since her disappearance rumours have abounded about what may have happened to her; however, as Admiral Knot has officially stated, Starfleet has found no evidence of neither ship nor crew and has no reasonable grounds to speculate as to the Sheaffe's final disposition. The USS Sheaffe has been officially declared lost...

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"You Tracy?"

Danelle nearly fell off the low bench she'd been perched on since being directed to the relief room by Chief Rhupp. She terminated the SNS feed and awkwardly got to her feet. The thick radiation suit she was wearing made most of her movements slow and cumbersome. Her left foot nearly rolled out from under her as she spun to face the middle-aged ginger-haired man standing in the doorway. He wasn't wearing a radiation suit. He was dressed in a red tunic with a gold turtleneck digging into his somewhat ponderous jowls. The flap on his tunic hung open, revealing the gold lining of the bib within, which marked him as being an engineer. Danny regained her balance, surveyed the older man and just as she picked out the full solid bar of a Lieutenant hanging from the man's strap...

"You Tracy, or not?" Barnes didn't have time for this. The entire schedule had to be scrapped and for some reason he had to play hide and seek with the captain's...

"Yeoman Danelle Tracy, aye sir!" *There was still another forty-five minutes until shift change. Why is he early?* Thought Danny to herself, fearing she'd blown her chance to make a good first impression.

“Fine. We’re getting underway, Tracy. No lessons today. Report to Chief Rhupp on Deck Eleven. I’m assigning you to damage control. Don’t mess it up.”

13. The *Shrar*

“General on the bridge!”

The entire bridge crew rose from their stations in unison, faced the General and saluted.

“Stations!” snapped General U’Chtukilli.

The crew quickly returned to their seats in front of the various consoles and monitors they were responsible for operating in tense silence. Commander Siriav, who’d been the one to announce the General’s presence, stepped towards the old man to receive his orders.

U’Chtukilli, having taken the time to dress himself impeccably in a fresh uniform, motioned for Siriav draw close. The Communications Station had not yet received the official directive from Imperial Command and U’Chtukilli wanted to brief his Commander on their sudden change of orders.

“Siriav, ship’s status?” U’Chtukilli stood at the crash rail which separated the raised walkway which ran from his cabin’s door on the port side of the bridge around the command deck below.

The narrow walkway ran along the bulkhead to the turbolift. A wide ramp ran from the lift to the recessed floor of the command deck at that point. Along the breadth of the Communications and Science Stations on the bridge’s rear bulkhead a second railing had been erected, though this rear portion of the bridge was level with the rest of the command deck. A second ramp to the starboard turbolift then carried the decking up into a raised walkway running along the starboard bulkhead where a second crash rail separated the walkway from the deck below. Across from the General’s cabin on the opposite bulkhead was the *Shrar*’s strategic conference chamber.

“General, reactors are operating at ninety-three percent efficiency, impulse and warp power at your command. All compartments show status ‘READY’.” Siriav, himself a twenty-year veteran of the Imperial Guard, was to assume command of the flagship and a promotion to full Captain, once General U’Chtukilli’s tenure was completed.

U’Chtukilli regarded his First Officer with a steady eye. The younger man was a battle-tested Commander. U’Chtukilli himself had endorsed Siriav’s assignment as Commander of the *Shrar* and was, in truth, eager to let the striking young commander with his full head of glossy white hair take full responsibility for the vessel.

“We’ll be receiving orders any minute now from Imperial Command. We’re to leave immediately for the Actium Sector to assist in the recovery of an Andorian Raider.” U’Chtukilli watched Siriav closely for some reaction. A tick, or the involuntary twitch of an antennae. The young Commander gave away nothing.

“Yes, sir. This means we will be leaving the task force short-handed though.” Siriav kept his voice low as he looked up at the old, bald warrior surveying each man at his post on the bridge as he spoke.

“It will. Once the official directive comes in I want you to contact Captain Sal Th’Oqosrirk and advise him that command of the task force will fall on him and the *Syre*, until we return.” U’Chtukilli narrowed his right eye and concentrated. With a little effort he

managed to focus his prosthetic left eye on the Communications Station, watching for the first sign of the expected directive.

“Should anything happen while we’re off the line, General...” whispered Siriav half thinking out loud.

U’Chtukilli smiled. Before stepping onto the bridge following his conversation with Bos, the General had accessed the independent Starfleet communications console he had installed in his cabin during the *Shrar’s* original fit out while still under construction. While he was bound by oath and honour to carry out the orders of the Imperial Command, U’Chtukilli was beholden to even higher vows of duty and service to the Federation.

Circumstances beyond his control had kept him aboard the *Shrar* months longer than he had anticipated. He’d not had the opportunity to finish developing the assets he’d hoped to cement before moving on. Still, he’d arranged for substantial, if unwitting, backup if needed while attending the Umoth Nebula. Using the *Shrar’s* transmitter with the Starfleet hardware created an open trace-loop in the Epsilon Network. The loop could be “filled” if another transmission was made from the same transmitter at the same frequency within twenty minutes of the original broadcast. This would obscure the evidence of the original transmission, so it could not be traced back to U’Chtukilli; but remain open long enough to be detected by those who knew what to *listen* for.

“You are correct, Commander. Would you think it wise to request additional support to the line?” The Communications Station remained silent.

“The only assets of significance would be the Imperial Frigates stationed at Kobliad IV, though the Cardassians are known to monitor long-range ship-to-ship communications...” Siriav mused, recalling the last confidential briefing he’d attended.

“Yes... *Shyb*-class vessels, as I recall. Three of them. Heavily armed.”

“IGFs *Tavab*, *Esas* and *Okess*, General,” whispered Siriav, still thinking.

U’Chtukilli’s antennae stood erect as his implant detected a subtle shift in the display thermals at the Communications Station.

“General, incoming URGENT transmission from Imperial Command!” announced the officer manning the Communications panels.

U’Chtukilli had the message broadcast on the main viewer for all to hear. At maximum sustainable cruising speed, *Shrar* could reach her destination in just under twenty hours. As the ship made ready, the *Syre* was made aware of her sister ship’s orders and Commander Siriav used the *Shrar’s* dedicated communications link to access the Epsilon transmitter at Hakton VII to request IGF *Tavab* and *Okess*, the heaviest armed of the three frigates at Kobliad IV, to get underway to back up the task force immediately.

The trace-loop was closed by Siriav’s official transmission and U’Chtukilli’s fine craftwork was protected.

Shrar could manage a best speed of warp 7. The frigates could manage warp 6. Andorian vessels were not as swift as Starfleet’s, but their firepower was considerable. As *Shrar* got underway, the frigates too began their journeys. The *Syre* would be on her own for twelve hours.

14. Deck 1, USS *Isadore*

“The orders are authentic, Captain.” Commander Yeal stood silently beside Lieutenant P’nom at the Communications Station waiting for Shohr’s response.

Ch’orithron remained silent, seated in his command chair, lost in thought. *Isadore* had been stuck doing static patrols around Morikin VII for nearly twelve weeks as delegations from Boslic IX and Galvin V (both non-Federation worlds located in the Maxia Sector) worked with Federation mediators to negotiate an end to a decade-long war the two planets had been embroiled in. Officially, *Isadore* was on station to demonstrate the Federation’s resolve to both parties. In truth, following a diplomatically unpleasant encounter with an Imperial Klingon D7 nearly a year earlier – *Isadore*, and more specifically her captain – were being kept out of the way.

“Captain Ch’orithron, sir? Sir?” Yeal raised his voice slightly.

Shohr had read the directive with Nigel Yeal, his First Officer, when P’nom had first received it only ten minutes earlier. *Isadore* was to set course for the Actium Sector and taken up position at Alpha 441 to monitor the Umoth Nebula for an imminently anticipated eruptive event. Yeal had ordered the Helmsman to lay in a course and signaled Engineering to make ready, as per standard operating procedure. Shohr though, had failed to give his command to *execute* when all stations reported “ready”.

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“P’nom, confirm the validity of those orders.” Shohr growled after the coordinates had been input into the Nav computer.

Yeal shifted in his seat at the Science Station and slowly rose to walk over to where P’nom was already decompiling the authentication code uniquely affixed to the subspace transmission they’d just received.

The prospect of breaking away from the monotonous fly-by duty *Isadore* had been trapped in for months was as appealing to Shohr as it was to any of the other officers on the bridge – perhaps more so, but the sudden and unexpected change of orders was... odd. Shohr had learned at great expense while serving on his uncle’s Raider as a fresh Academy graduate to scrutinize sudden oddities and vanquish the unexpected whenever and wherever possible.

“Is there a problem, Captain?” asked Nigel, turning away from P’nom’s monitors to look over at Shohr still rooted in his command chair.

“This seems... out of place. Why would Command have us leave the Sierra Sector to cross Actium at speed, just to observe a nebula? Surely, there must be other vessels that are closer? Mr. Ayr?” Shohr spoke directly to the newly promoted Junior Lieutenant manning the Tactical Station.

Ayr, a young man who’d been born and raised on Mars, began working at his own console as Captain Ch’orithron spoke. Where Commander Yeal could only respond to the captain’s needs only after Shohr laid out every request in painful detail; Ayr had worked hard to anticipate his Ch’orithron’s needs and had become proficient at giving Shohr answers and information without aimless supposition.

“Yes, sir. *USS Fury*, a *Constellation*-class Starship, was last reported to be on station cataloguing gaseous anomalies in the Volon System, on the edge of the Actium Sector.” Ayr turned to face Captain Ch’orithron as he spoke.

Shohr was impressed with the young, fair-haired human. The boy was a refreshing example of human efficiency. Not for the first time, Shohr lamented that he was saddled with poor old middle-aged Yeal as a First Officer and not this young, vibrant and efficient boy. He thanked the Lieutenant and bid the young man to prepare all tactical systems for departure, then called back to P’nom for an update on the transmission’s authenticity.

“Sir, I’m waiting for a response to the authentication code. I can confirm that the transmission was carried on the Epsilon Network.” P’nom, a half-human, half-Vulcan, responded in a frank, flat, no-nonsense tone. She continued to work through the data stream on the transmission while she awaited confirmation from Starfleet Command.

“Mr. Yeal, what do we know about the Umoth Nebula?” asked Captain Ch’orithron absently.

Nigel Yeal stood up straight and quickly pulled at his red tunic to flatten out any wrinkles he’d caused while bending over P’nom’s shoulder to watch her pull apart the transmission. He’d tried to find something of a balance in working with Captain Ch’orithron; for a time, while they were patrolling the Neutral Zone hunting Romulans, Nigel had even believed things between them were improving. In the months following their redeployment from the Archanis Sector though, Shohr had grown harder and more authoritative than ever before. Yeal thought hard and tried to respond as quickly as he could...

“The Umoth Nebula... so named for the small system of eleven dwarf planetoids orbiting an ancient “G” class star. Umoth VIII is reported to be barely class “M” – no reported inhabitants. The Nebula is expansive, roughly four times the size of the Argolis Cluster... For the last century at least, plasma storms have been known to ignite and burn for years in various parts of the Nebula. These areas of activity are largely avoided by spacecraft.” Nigel cleared his throat. He wasn’t just the First Officer; he was also *Isadore’s* Science Officer.

“Captain Ch’orithron, the message is authentic sir, Epsilon-carried, Starfleet Comms confirmed. Authorized through the Science Division... sir?”

Shohr inhaled slowly and without turning to acknowledge his First Officer and hesitantly said: “Alpha 441, Warp 8. Execute.”

Isadore’s sleek hull rounded gently to port and a second later the *Excelsior*-class Starship was gone in a flash of light.



Figure 4: Transit Mezzanine. Published 5 Mar. 2017 Pixabay Licence Free

15. Transit Mezzanine

Wegaos snorted and ushered Moddax into a waiting lift car. It was still unbearably cold. Moddax stomped his feet once inside the bare metal lift to try and keep his blood circulating and hesitantly took hold of the waist-level handrail ringing the plain metal walls of the car. A happy sigh escaped his throat as he closed his numb fingers around the handrail. He'd feared the rail would be icy cold and possibly cause his flesh to freeze to the unknown metal; blessedly, he found the railing to be coated in a soft rubber-like finish and was in fact, heated. As Wegaos waddled into the car behind him, Moddax gripped the handrail with both hands, eagerly trying to absorb as much warmth as he could.

The hulking Tellarite wedged himself into the corner of the car opposite Moddax and braced himself by wrapping both of his massive three fingered hoof-like hands around the warm railing. The lift's doors clattered and screeched loudly as they pulled together to seal the car off. For a few seconds the car was pitch black. Moddax clutched the warm railing and listened to the heavy, raspy breathing of the massive old Tellarite he was sealed in with. Wegaos didn't speak; Moddax couldn't speak as he was clenching his jaw closed to keep his teeth from chattering wildly in the cold.

A pained, metallic creaking filled the darkness. Moddax readied himself for the expected drop as the lift's mechanical elements prepared to engage. With a loud *-clank-* the car suddenly began sailing along laterally – Moddax very nearly lost his balance as the car shot away, nearly throwing him at the sealed doors. A single dirty light recessed in the car's ceiling flickered to life at that moment. Wegaos snorted and giggled as Moddax recovered from his near fall.

They travelled in silence for a full three minutes. Moddax took note of how his rotund companion had anchored himself in his corner of the car and readjusted himself accordingly. The car lurched to a sudden stop. Both men grunted and tensed their arms. Moddax wondered if the lift would now begin a decent to the habitable levels of the refinery. His stomach lurched wildly as the car violently spun one hundred and eighty degrees to the right and slowly bounced further along its track while making a loud smacking sound.

Moddax clung to the railing as the deafening metallic clanking deafened him. He very nearly fell forward once again as the lift jerked to another sudden stop. The dirty little light extinguished itself as the doors squealed open. Wegaos popped his jaw, grunted, and promptly waddled his way out of the claustrophobic car. Moddax slowly followed.

Wegaos plodded towards a raised chair fronting a tall, narrow, metal table and heaved his considerable backside up to its grimy-looking padded seat. Moddax cautiously looked around the round room he'd been escorted to. Three dim yellow lighting panels flickered at odd intervals around the dark chamber. There were no windows, no viewports, and the only exit appeared to be the lift they'd just disembarked from.

“Wegaos Skaffef, where have you brought me?” Moddax was careful how he addressed the old Tellarite, keeping in mind the man's position.

“Ha! Thayer Moddax, is this not more comfortable?” Wegaos popped his jaw and shifted in his seat. He clawed at the gold buckle just below the heavy purple fur collar of his great coat and forced it open.

Moddax stepped closer to where the Tellarite sat and noticed that this round chamber was considerably warmer than the promenade had been. He loosened the material he’d gathered from his coat’s billowing collar from around his throat and chin. His breath had frozen the fabric stiff.

“I mean to ask, why have you called me here, Wegaos? I have a pod in orbit I need to return to the station before it’s missed.” Moddax pulled the stiff fabric away from his face and ignored the pins and needles exploding up and down his numb limbs.

“Bah! Pod was sent back to K3 as soon as the skiff you rode down landed. You, Thayer Moddax, can be my guest. My shuttle comes soon.” Wegaos shifted on his tall seat and leaned back to rest his left arm on the table behind him.

The thick purple fur coat Wegaos wore parted as he shifted his considerable girth and Moddax could see the heavy silver standard issue coveralls of the Tellarite Mining Consortium. “I see...”

“Thayer Moddax, why you not listen to me? Hmmm? Why, Thayer Moddax, why you not simply expose female as being wasteful, incompetent, inappropriate for promotion, hmmm!?” Wegaos leaned back and snorted loudly.

Moddax bristled and held his tongue for a moment to keep from saying anything that might anger the Tellarite. “I did that, Wegaos Skaffef. Section Command held a full investigation around her stripping 74 and launching that ridiculous operation to woo that damned old man...”

“Bah!”

Wegaos lurched forward in his seat and very nearly toppled off his perch. His yellow eyes suddenly wide and his mouth hanging agape to display his large tusks. Up until this point his demeanour had been largely subdued, but the human was twisting reality. Attempting to rationalize away the failings of which he and he alone was guilty of. The human took a step back. That sign of weakness was even more maddening.

“You speak false, human! You not listen to me! You spent months grousing to U’Chtukilli about her! Months of letting that Andorian *ph’mugah* know your displeasure and conceit towards her!” Wegaos snorted loudly and glared at the human, waiting for a response.

“I... I was the Admiral’s Chief Operative, of course I went to...”

“Thayer Moddax! Stupid, stupid human *-snort-*! I tell you eighteen months ago, expose her, not REPORT her! U’Chtukilli has a life-debt with her! Stupid human!”

“Well I know that now, Wegaos!... No thanks to you.” Moddax took two steps towards the reclined Tellarite and gave up trying to restrain his anger.

Wegaos snorted loudly and quickly hopped down from his perch to face-off against the approaching human.

“You no thank me, human?! You no ask about U’Chtukilli and Bautlin! Why you not listen me?! Bah! Made a mess of this whole thing, Thayer Moddax.” Wegaos let a rolling

growl spill fourth from his heavy jowls and slipped his right hand into the thick purple fur coat he still wore.

Moddax dramatically stopped his forward momentum. Wegaos was an old man, but he still moved like a warrior and Tellarites, when provoked, were known to be cunningly lethal adversaries. He still wasn't sure why Wegaos Skaffef had summoned him to Ganymede, or why Wegaos had apparently stranded him here; but seeing the suddenly enraged Tellarite reach for something within the ridiculous purple coat he was wearing, was enough to quell his indignation. The hulking boar in front of him was breathing heavily, bearing his tusks, waiting to see what he would do next.

Moddax slowly raised his open hands to show Wegaos he meant no harm. "Of course, Wegaos Skaffef. Of course, I thank you for your guidance in all these matters... I just don't know..."

Wegaos popped his jaw and cleared his throat. "You not know?! No, you not know anything, Thayer Moddax. You very nearly expose me, stupid human!" Wegaos cleared his throat again, then walked back to the table where he leaned heavily against its sturdy frame for support. He kept his right hand on the disruptor he had concealed in his coat.

Moddax concentrated on his own breathing and anger. He had no doubt Wegaos was armed. Attacking the man would serve no purpose; even if he managed to evade whatever weapon the great pig had hidden under his furs – he was trapped within the automated refinery with no way back to K3. Wegaos had been provoking him the entire time. This wasn't surprising, given the natural Tellarite disposition, but this time it had seemed different somehow. Wegaos knew Moddax loathed anyone knowing, let alone using his first name and yet, from the start he'd been "*Thayer Moddax*" not the usual "*Mr. Moddax*."

"I have never sought to harm or shame you, Wegaos Skaffef. If I wanted to harm you, all I ever needed to do was let it be known that you sit on the council at Section Command..." This was a dangerous tact, Moddax knew.

Three years earlier, while following up on errant communications traces from Deployment Resources to Ganymede, Moddax had discovered a chain of directives Admiral U'Chtukilli had been receiving from the Office of the Chair of the TMC. An investigation led Moddax to uncover the truth that Wegaos Skeffef, the head of the Consortium, was also one of the eight members of Section Command. Several probing, properly coded messages were passed between Moddax and Skeffef over the years. Blackmail was never mentioned, but the implication was enough to persuade Wegaos to develop a relationship with the ambitious young human.

"Bah! You will come with me, Thayer Moddax."

"Where? Why?"

Wegaos chuckled. "If I want end you, human. You would be dead already. I need you and I to speak. Not here. Not secure. You will come with me. I am no fool to think I fix what has passed, but you and I must talk *-snort-* must secure our future."

Moddax nodded dumbly. Wegaos kept his right hand buried in the purple fur of his ludicrous coat with the garish gold buckles. Together they'd wait in the facility's transit mezzanine for Skeffef's personal shuttle.



Figure 5: Kreke Disac. Published 9 Nov. 2017 Pixabay Licence Free

16. Before the Storm, Two Weeks Ago

Gul D'gad watched silently as Ligan moved the palm-sized blue plastic triangle along the projected star map in the middle of the long blackwood table in the *Kreke Disac's* viewing room. Ligan had traded his tight-fitting black pressure suit for a comfortable, plain black, wide-necked tunic. The Tactical Post on the main bridge had a comprehensive three-dimensional star map detailing the precise locations of all four *Terok*-class warships comprising the squadron, relative to the *Kreke Disac*. The shattered Andorian Raider they were using for bait, the three contacts holding their distance just beyond the Nebula – which were designated as Andorian Raiders, and as of a day and half ago, the large contact which could only be a capital ship – were all also perfectly captured on the *Galor's* enhanced sensors. Ligan preferred plotting logistical tactics in two dimensions, though.

The dark-skinned *advisor* Central Command had put aboard D'gad's ship said he'd been trained to plot such engagements in two dimensions, while thinking in three. Decades earlier during the great Cultural Awakening on Cardassia, the heroes of the revolution who successfully fought to over-throw the corrupt Civilian Authority, had prided themselves on superior stratagem behind the lines. Where the CA leaned heavily on simple policing tactics to try and resist the surging military revolutionaries fighting for the people, the group that would form the Central Command knew success lay in planning as much as execution. Mr. Ligan had boasted more than once that his father's father was one of the great minds directing the forces of those great revolutionaries.

D'gad was alone in the viewing room with Ligan, having left Dalin Kom on the bridge. The old man shifted in his high-backed chair and grimaced as he watched the Obsidian Order's representative stand back from the table and make a show of studying the relative positions of the ridiculous collection of models he'd brought along. The *Kreke Disac* was represented by a long yellow rectangle. The five escort *Teroks* were smaller yellow cubes. The Raiders were bright blue discs. They were arranged carefully atop a matte grey pad Ligan had apparently brought along to cover the *offensive* carving D'gad's blackwood table sported. The blue triangle appeared to have moved only a millimetre since the last time Ligan had bothered to play with his odd collection of toys.

"This is intolerable, Ligan," growled D'gad.

"Oh? Do tell, Gul D'gad, what is it that you can not tolerate?" Ligan studied the map before him and didn't bother to look across the table at the old fat Gul planted at the head of the table.

"The entire squadron has been at Alert Two for nearly four days, my pilots have been at READY Three for almost forty hours. If we're going to strike, what in blazes are we waiting for?" D'gad shifted his weight forward and dropped both his arms on the tabletop, which caused Ligan's models to quiver and shake.

"We will engage once our quarry takes the bait." Ligan looked up slowly and smiled.

D'gad scoffed and pushed himself to his feet. The pale skin on his bald scalp flushed as the old man momentarily let his anger get the best of him. "Scans confirm that is the contact we want! We should form up and attack now. What are we waiting for!?"

Ligan turned away from his map and slowly walked towards the end of the table, running his long, narrow index finger along the cool blackwood, still smiling. "For a man who still puts his faith in make-believe Orialian gods, you have quite the temper."

"For a man who only a generation ago would have been lucky to be considered a second-class citizen you have quite the sharp tongue!" D'gad was breathing hard. He'd allowed Ligan to provoke him and in so doing, he'd allowed Ligan to wrestle away the moral high ground.

"Ah well, such is the way of progress, dear, old, fat, dying, Jesgat D'gad. You will hold your position until that heavy cruiser crosses the terminus and enters Cardassian space. Your squadron will do the same. If, in your advanced age and poor health, you're suddenly possessed of a feeble mind and can not execute your duties, I will relieve you, sir." Ligan kept his voice low and made a show of grinning broadly at the end of his remark and bowing ever so slightly.

Dark-skinned Cardassians had been an undesirable substrate of the population for centuries. Such men and women were forbidden from holding elected office under the Constitution of the old CA. They couldn't serve on top order space freighters or ever hope to work their way up the ranks in the mercantile fleet.

Men like Ligan's grandfather had bucked convention during the early days of the Awakening by applying their skills to tasks far above their station. Many such men were found guilty, tried, and executed for such transgressions. The Cultural Awakening was about many things, but for men like Ligan, it was first and foremost about Civil Rights. The Obsidian Order supported those rights. The Order sought only competence and loyalty; skin colour was inconsequential. As the Central Command established itself after the revolution, the dark days of persecution ended.

D'gad swallowed the words rising in his throat. He was ashamed of himself for airing his bigotry and knew he'd just ceded all credibility now and forever with the calm and cool Mr. Ligan. His chest tightened.

"You will announce your retirement upon your return to the Fifth Order after this mission, Jesgat, yes?"

D'gad exhaled and allowed his shoulders to slump. "How did you know that?"

"It's my business to know it. Just as it was my business to know where to intercept that Raider, and how to successfully engage that Andorian monster hanging out there."

D'gad felt faint and stumbled slightly before reaching for the back of his chair to once again seat himself at the head of his long blackwood table.

"You were selected to command this ship for a reason, D'gad. After we destroy that ship, your career is over."

"...why?"

"Your time is done, old man. Quite literally by the looks of things. The Obsidian Order might let your wife and grandchildren live long enough to enjoy your pension when this is done..." Ligan narrowed his dull grey eyes and let the obstinate smirk drop away from his face.

"I only ever did my duty... I've always been a loyal Cardassian..."

“Yes, and as a loyal Cardassian, you will execute the orders and strategy I have relayed to you regarding this, your final sortie. Are we clear?”

D’gad was having difficulty sitting straight in his chair. Chills were running up and down his spine and along his neck ridges. Ligan was standing over him less than an arm’s length away and staring directly at him. D’gad tried to suppress a shuddering wheeze and cursed quietly under his breath as he groped along the hemline of his uniform tunic. He fumbled the small vial of *nirath* out of a concealed pocket and slid a green pellet under his tongue with a shaky hand.

“A faulty third aortic valve deformity, old Jesgat? You should have let them implant an artificial unit when you were a young trooper. Shame you were too pig-headed to listen to the doctors. Once your thorax calcified as you became a full-grown adult, that option disappeared.” Ligan watched the old man slump a little lower on his chair.

A wave of relief slowly rolled over D’gad as his heart medication was absorbed into his bloodstream. Nobody was supposed to know about his condition. Of course, Ligan had finally admitted what everyone knew. He wasn’t a *nobody*; he was Obsidian Order, thought D’gad.

“I... when I retire, I want... I would like Kom to...”

Ligan inhaled and shook his head slightly. He was astounded that the fat old bigot still thought he was in a position to request anything. The thinking at the Order had been that in order to assemble an effective attack squadron from among the motley Fifth Order – the men would have to have some great heroic figure to rally behind. D’gad was a walking corpse. His reputation was such though, that if managed properly, the fat old man could serve as just such a figurehead to galvanize the resolve of a select group of commanders to commit to this clandestine assignment.

“Take a moment to breathe, Jesgat. I need you alive until we’ve destroyed that Andorian cruiser. Do as I’ve instructed, and you may live long enough to see retirement. Your protégé, if he performs his duties well, may find himself in a Gul’s uniform if that’s what you’re trying to spit out...”

D’gad took a long painful breath and forced himself to sit up straight. He looked up at Ligan. Gone was the cocky smirk, the impudent twinkle in the grey eyes and cloying demeanor. The dark man looked now like D’gad had always suspected him to be – a heartless assassin. At that exact moment, D’gad realized that it was his career and legacy which had just been slaughtered.

“The *Disac*... Kom should...”

“No, no Jesgat, the good Dalin may well be jumped up to Gul, but he won’t command this ship. Depending on how well poor passed over Dal Rorlac performs, I will be recommending him to replace your ponderous backside at the head of this vessel. Kom may find himself as master of the *Asga*, but only time will tell.” Ligan remained stoic and solely focused on the slowly recovering D’gad.

“Bridge to Gul D’gad.” Kom’s strong, young voice crackled through the speaker recessed in the viewing room’s Comms panel.

D’gad coughed and cleared his throat.

“Yes, Dalin Kom, report?” D’gad tried to sound strong, but knew he’d failed.

“Sir, the large contact has closed within $\frac{1}{4}$ AU of the border and one of the Andorian Raiders has entered the Nebula and is closing on our decoy.”

Ligan looked from the Comms panel, back to Jesgat. He allowed the cloying smile to return to his face. Jesgat D’gad’s usefulness was nearly at an end.

“Set Alert One across the squadron... dispatch Intercept One... scramble Ready three.” D’gad could see no way out. Images of his wife and their grandchildren ran through his mind.

“Yes, sir!” came Kom’s response and the channel closed.

17. The Unsettling Calm

Isadore hung peacefully in the interstellar vacuum of space between the churning dust and radiation of the Umoth Nebula and the sparse systems clustered around Alpha 441. The silver/blue hull of the elegant and sizeable *Excelsior*-class starship reflected the light from a nearby dwarf pulsar. From a distance she herself looked like a small, brilliant star in the blackness.

Shohr sat alone in his Ready Room staring blankly at the mission updates displayed on his desk's small terminal. They'd been hanging limply in space for more than two days. Long range sensors had been directed towards the Umoth Nebula as their orders had dictated and nothing of note had yet been detected. Commander Yeal had been given free run of the bridge while the Science and Astral Imagery Departments conducted their batteries of tests, observations, and sweeps. Nothing.

Lieutenant Ayr had briefed Shohr and Commander Yeal on the latest operationally *classified* tactical updates made available to his computer from the secure Starfleet Epsilon Network. The closest Starfleet vessel was the *USS Fury*, on assignment in the nearby Volon System; however, *Isadore* had been directed to keep to a communications blackout until their current assignment was complete and they were out of the Actium Sector. The Imperial Guard had taken responsibility for patrolling and supporting the systems along the distant Cardassian border. Details were sparse, but it appeared as though a large fleet of Andorian Raiders, along with their two new Battlecruisers had been dispatched to keep the peace somewhere in the Gamma Sector.

Shohr knew that the mysterious Admiral who'd originally offered him his Captaincy and command of the *Isadore* was likely commanding one of those mighty Battlecruisers. Ayr had continued with his situational report, but Shohr had found himself daydreaming about the promises he'd been made and lamenting the fact that since being pulled off the picket line in the Archanis Sector, he'd had no word from U'Chutkilli. No further tasks. No indication of if, or when the old one-eyed bastard actually intended to ameliorate Shohr's name with the Imperial Guard and see to it that he finally found his way to the bridge of an Imperial Raider.

He sat in silence, trying to concentrate on the small screen before him, a cold cup of untouched tea rested to his right. His uniform tunic lay neatly folded over the arm of the stiff sofa staged below the painting of the mythical earth beauty, *Isadore* – for whom his splendid *Excelsior* was named. He poked the screen with a thick blue finger to call up the mapping images their probes had partially assembled of the nearby nebula.

"Computer..." Shohr muttered.

From a hidden speaker came an automated tone to indicate the ship's AI was prepared to receive instructions.

"Lower ambient lighting level to setting two."

Another, slightly higher-pitched tone announced that the computer had understood the command and almost instantaneously the lighting in the Ready Room dimmed dramatically.

Shohr's antennae curled and stretched as he yawned and took a deep breath. In the darkness, wearing just his white turtleneck and lit by the small screen in front of him, Shohr looked like a phantom.

He felt like a phantom too. Sitting alone in the dark, unable to focus on the mundane readings and meaningless returns from *Isadore's* probes; Shohr once again began to wonder why he'd worked so hard and sacrificed so much just to be floating here in nothingness, alone, meaningless and empty. Many Andorians were prone to periods of emotional instability if not suitably stimulated with a task, or some purpose. A few, unable to find or commit to such endeavours suffered mental illness which required intervention, less they slip into crippling depressions. Shohr had struggled with such periods of illness his entire life.

He'd been born into a family of the lower caste. The Ch'orithrons were merchant wholesalers. Shohr's father and his father's father had all diligently worked as purveyors of fine spirits. They didn't vint any wines, or brew ales, but they did a swift trade in brokering sales between breweries and vineyards and eager merchants. Shohr's father, Shorha, was known as the Western Province's chief *Picollo* (wine supplier/merchant) and for the first ten years of young Shohr's life it was expected that he would one day inherit the family business. Any thoughts or dreams about joining the Imperial Guard, defending Andor, or seeing the Universe, were roundly frowned upon.

When Shohr was about to enter his thirteenth season his father's brother married into nobility and this gave him the right to call himself Ch'Orithron. Shorha had always derided his younger brother for shunning the family business to serve aboard a dirty space freighter as a lowly civilian crewman. With his new name and high-status wife though, Shohr's uncle joined the Guard and quickly rose in the ranks. Shohr was inspired and as his uncle was earning his Commander's rank, he was entering Starfleet Academy. Shorha never spoke to his son again.

With help from his uncle, Shohr had managed to secure a posting with the Imperial Guard for he and his best friend, Ensign Brian Harris. While patrolling for Orion pirates, shortly after joining the crew of his uncle's Raider, Shohr's friend showed him up by saving the ship from ambush and embarrassing Shohr before everyone. A place in the Guard would never be his...

Until Admiral U'Chtukilli promoted him and then recruited him to the clandestine service. Promises were made and Shohr agreed to do whatever was asked of him if it meant a full commission into the Guard.

That seemed like so long ago now. U'Chtukilli never made good on his promises to amend Shohr's name to Ch'Orithron, so that he might join the Imperial Guard. In fact, the old Admiral who himself traded his red Starfleet uniform for the rich blue uniform of an Imperial Guard General, had taken control of a massive Battlecruiser and vanished from Shohr's life all together.

Only nine weeks ago Shohr had ended his relationship with Yeoman Tracy as well. She'd tried so hard to understand him and the shame he wrestled with everyday he wasn't on the bridge of an Andorian ship. She'd truly loved him. He had no doubt about her feelings. Starfleet discouraged such relationships between commanding officers and

enlisted personnel. They'd managed to keep their affair a secret up until two months ago, when Shohr learned from his own First Officer that rumours had begun to spread. Danny had her whole career ahead of her. Shohr couldn't let her taint her reputation and throw it all away because of him, so he had ended it.

She begged him to reconsider to no end. He saw her potential and told her she could be so much more than just a Yeoman, or some glorified hostess. He encouraged her to think about what she might like to do with her career. When she committed to applying to the Academy to work towards becoming an officer, Shohr had happily approved a transfer of assignment aboard ship for her. She had a methodical mind and enjoyed working with her hands. Shohr had Commander Yeal reassign her to Chief Rhupp's team of technicians where she could get hands-on engineering experience and benefit from some distance from the upper decks. The rumours which had begun circulating were not the kind Shohr wanted to colour Danny's reputation going forward.

So, here he was. Sitting alone in the dark. Doing a mindless job for an organization that was trying to bury him. Holding ranks and accolades no family cared for. Avoiding the short trip back to his cabin where no lover waited for or missed him...

Shohr thumbed the Comms relay built into his desk to call Yeal on the bridge just beyond the sealed doors of the Ready Room. He knew where his dark thoughts would lead if he entertained them any further. While he may not see a way forward now; he'd be damned if he would allow himself to stagger towards meaningless oblivion by surrendering completely to the dark thoughts running through his mind.

"Bridge, Commander Yeal..."

Yeal sounded jubilant. He was getting to flex *Isadore's* scientific muscles and indulge his own penchant for examination and exploration. For a Starfleet Officer these were perhaps the noblest pursuits imaginable, thought Shohr as he tensed and sat back in his chair in the dark. These were but secondary concerns for a member of the Imperial Guard though and Shohr sighed heavily as he admitted to himself in the darkness – he was a poor Starfleet Officer.

"Commander Yeal, have Mr. Ayr do some digging... I want to know when the last time a Cardassian vessel was seen in this area. We're close to their borders and without any backup." Shohr waited for the short response closing the channel.

"No need, sir."

"Repeat that, Commander?"

"No need to do any digging. Lt. Ayr furnished me with a full report not ten minutes ago. As per the array at Hakton VII, the last Cardassian incursion of any significance was recorded twelve weeks ago. A convoy of four heavy freighters to the Bajoran System, sir. All four vessels remained in unaligned space for three days, before returning to Cardassian territory by way of Athos IV."

"*Bajor?*" Shohr leaned forward and rubbed his temples.

"Yes, Captain Ch'orithron. The Cardassians have several trade agreements with the planet. Mostly industrial products and the like in exchange for agricultural produce, textiles, and an alcohol the Bajorans call Spring Wine. I asked Mr. Ayr to consult the records to rule

out any anomalous subspace residuals such as old warp signatures to get the clearest scans possible for this Umoth assignment.”

The man sounded so joyful it was nauseating, thought Shohr. Still, by dumb luck the pink-skinned scientist he had to rely upon as his First Officer had given him what he wanted without the usual aggravation.

“Nothing else in twelve weeks?” Shohr shut his desktop terminal off and sat in the darkness wanting the back and forth with Yeal to be over.

“Not according to the data from Hakton, sir.”

“Very well.” Shohr had his thumb ready to close the channel.

“There are some contacts deeper into unaligned space though, sir.” Yeal’s voice dropped half an octave. The glee with which he’d been possessed while engrossed in his scientific duties faded.

“What contacts?”

“Mr. Ayr is working on tuning our lateral array towards the trace signal Hakton’s flagged to get a cleaner picture, sir. It appears there are several Andorian vessels operating on the fringes of the nebula.” Nigel had intended to give Captain Ch’orithron a full status update once the young Lieutenant at Tactical had finished compiling the data. He braced himself for Shohr’s wrath for not having immediately summoned him to the bridge.

“Mr. Yeal, we are under strict blackout orders. Make no attempt to contact the Andorians and ensure Mr. Ayr does not draw any attention towards us, understood?”

Nigel looked over to where Lt. Ayr was working to see if the young officer had heard what the captain had just said. The handsome young man gave Commander Yeal a grim nod.

“Aye, sir. Understood. Do you want...”

“Keep your focus on that damned nebula for now, Commander. We’ve been here for nearly two days. If something doesn’t happen soon, orders or not, I’m pulling out. Ch’orithron, out.”

Something was very wrong. Shohr could feel it in his bones. The orders dispatching them out here were odd. The communications blackout was odd... and now, Imperial Guard vessels a full sector away from where they were supposed to be operating? In the darkness Shohr rose from his seat and moved to where his sofa was. He lay down with his head on his red tunic. His antennae were erect. Something, was very, very wrong.

What he knew from the network was that the Imperial Guard were supposed to be picketing the Federation borders along Cardassian and Tzenkethi space. The Cardassians had pulled their ambassadors from the embassy on Volnar; which itself was one of three disputed planets in what was supposed to be unaligned space.

Juhraya, Draygo IV and Volnar had all reportedly seen Cardassian occupation forces land and take control of major planetary governments in the last decade and half. All this happened well beyond Federation borders, so there was little Starfleet, or any Federation power could do about it. Five years ago, the government on Veloz Prime had asked for assistance with Cardassian political overtures, however. A make-shift embassy had been established, at the request of the Cardassian Empire on Volnar where it was hoped diplomacy might curb any aggressive expansion.

The narrow swath of space containing the unaligned systems buffering the Cardassian Empire from the Federation ran nearly two sectors long. Most of the inhabited planets and settlements within were either prewarp societies, or worlds disinterested in, or even hostile towards, the prospect of a Federation presence. Bajor for example, was known to possess warp-capable vessels, but it was a backwards world of farmers and priests who worshipped a pantheon of gods above all else.

Why was Isadore here? Shohr couldn't come up with a plausible answer. It galled him. He lay in the darkness trying to pinpoint what game they'd been pulled into, but no answers came.

18. Tempest!

“General U’Chtukilli, *IGR Bihr* is signalling again. Captain Th’Ashryriq is asking clearance to commence recovery of the *Shrov*.” Commander Siriav delivered the update without emotion.

U’Chtukilli, sitting in his command chair on the bridge of the *Shrar*, kept his eye focused on the tactical display burning on the main viewer. They’d pushed the long, sleek Battlecruiser hard at her top register of sustainable warp speed to join the flight of Raiders waiting for backup to retrieve the shattered *Shrov*. For more than forty-eight hours since arrival, the *Shrar* had been blasting the Umoth Nebula with every kind of scanning beam possible. The worrisome contact Bos had mentioned was nowhere to be found, but upon dropping out of warp, a strong duranium-composite return registered for a fleeting few seconds and then was gone.

Captain Th’Ashryrig, commanding the Imperial Guard Raider *Bihr*, the lead Raider of the wing of ships awaiting the IGC *Shrar*, could not confirm the fleeting contact the enormous Cruiser had registered as she arrived. The two flanking Raiders in Th’Ashryrig’s patrol wing began sweeping the surrounding nebula for contacts but came up with nothing. Both these Raiders were manned by new recruits and supervised by Acting Commanders – both were supposed to have been with the *Shrov* when she disappeared. Only the *Bihr* was properly manned by regular Guardsmen.

All three Raiders were eager to sweep into the Umoth Nebula under cover from the glorious *Shrar* immediately upon General U’Chtukilli’s arrival, but that cursory contact gave U’Chtukilli pause. The duranium return was consistent with known Cardassian frigates. The contacts the *Syre* and the primary fleet were concerned with in the Gamma Sector were far larger than the brief return *Shrar* had glimpsed, but it was enough to put U’Chtukilli on edge. The Raiders could “see” nothing in the nebula, but *Shrar* had detected one positive and two suspected metallic contacts at fixed points within the radioactive dust and debris.

“General, the *Bihr* stresses at best the *Shrov*’s egress pod has an hour of atmosphere left. If there are survivors, the time to recover them is now.” Siriav had quietly stepped up to U’Chtukilli’s side, so he could speak without any of the other Guardsmen on the bridge over hearing.

U’Chtukilli focused on the one small contact depicted on the tactical screen. Far too small to be even a pod, but possibly a sensor drone. The Cardassians didn’t seem to have the same difficulties navigating the nebula as the Raiders, or even the *Shrar* herself. If they’d deployed static sensor points throughout...

“...The good captain is impulsive,” growled the old man, still focussed on the display.

Commander Siriav didn’t react. He remained bolt upright at the General’s side and waited for U’Chtukilli to respond. There was no more time for caution. The mission was to recover the *Shrov* in time to rescue any of her crew sheltering in the egress pod, even though U’Chtukilli knew from the readings the chances of anyone having survived an explosive decompression were slim.

“Bring the ship to battlestations, Commander.” U’Chtukilli scoffed and shook his head to break his gaze away from the display. His implant had ceased operating nearly two hours earlier and was now little more than an aesthetic affectation.

The alarms rang and the Weapons Officers began plotting tactical packages into their computers. The Engineering Station lieutenant reported his ‘READY’ status to Commander Siriav as the Helmsman made ready to bring the deadly Battlecruiser to life.

“Communications, send to Captain Th’Ashryriq, execute. Tactical, stay sharp!” U’Chtukilli reached up with his left hand and pried the artificial eye from his deep blue/black socket, exposing the angry white scars radiating from that hideous pit like wild bolts of lightning.

*

Gul D’gad sat back in the oversized, elevated command chair on the bridge of the *Kreke Disac* and watched silently as the trooper manning the *Galor’s* enhanced Sensor Post plotted the real-time dispositions of the three Andorian Raiders and massive Battlecruiser which had arrived two days earlier. Dalin Kom was moving about the bridge like a lithe *gila cat*, overseeing the men at their duties, keeping the crew sharp. D’gad had not fully recovered from his cardiac episode in the viewing room nearly nine hours earlier. He restricted his movements and spoke sparingly, while Kom, as First Officer, saw to the practical command of the bridge.

Ligan stood ominously behind the great Gul’s chair like a living shadow. He’d escorted D’gad to the bridge following their *tête-à-tête* instead of the *Disac’s* Infirmary on deck five. D’gad was too weak to protest. As Ligan motioned for Dalin Kom to assist Gul D’gad into his chair, he quietly whispered to the young officer that the old man was dying and there was nothing to be done. D’gad, thinking of his wife and grandchildren on Cardassia, could only smile at Kom and quietly confirmed what Ligan was sharing.

Though he couldn’t say for sure what the Andorians were waiting for before moving to fetch their broken ship, Ligan was supremely confident that at any moment, the slaughter would begin. D’gad was wheezing but holding up well given his condition. Ligan had confiscated D’gad’s vial of *nirath* and had kept him from getting the time-sensitive hypo spray that could have restored normal cardiac function hours earlier. Through the fat old man, Ligan gave direction to loyal young Kom. As long as D’gad drew breath, Ligan could rely on the appearance of all of this being a sanctioned military operation instead of an intricate Obsidian Order assassination.

The four *Terok* Warships held their positions as Gul D’gad had ordered. When the time came the lesser vessels would be directed from the *Kreke Disac*. At the edge of the Umoth Nebula, marred by the radioactive dust, Glinn Gomlir and his team of pilots from the *Khintic* and *Banot* sat hovering atop their deadly torpedoes waiting.

“Gul D’gad, the Andorian Raiders are moving, lead vessel on intercept course for their dead scout!” The trooper at Tactical couldn’t hide his excitement at finally detecting some movement.

Ligan’s eyes flashed to the status screen, and he whispered into D’gad’s ear.

“...Dalin Kom: signal *Asga* to engage, *Khintic* to follow,” wheezed Gul D’gad as he gripped the armrest of his chair, seized with sudden chest pains.

“Yes, Sir!” Kom sent the order on a secure subspace frequency carried by the network of sensor probes the squadron was connected to within the Umoth Nebula.

*

“The *Shrar* has signalled the commit order, sir.” The Lieutenant on the *Bihr*’s communications panel turned away from his console to speak directly to Captain Th’Ashryriq.

“Finally, I thought that old *sharbot* would never give us leave to get the *Shrov*. Dispatch Acting Commander Zh’Etehlir immediately.” Th’Ashryriq pushed himself out his seat and called for battlestations.

The impulse manifolds on the *Toth* flared to life and the nimble Raider began pushing into the dust and debris marking the edge of the Ominus nebula. All three Raiders had maintained positional locks on the wreck of the *Shrov*, which floated listlessly ¼ AU below a dense cluster of green and orange dust clouds. Aboard the Raider, the trainee crew working under Zh’Etehlir performed their duties diligently as a team of specially trained medics and extraction techs geared up for rescue operations.

As the bright blue thrusters of *Toth* disappeared into the swirling mass of dust, the engines aboard the *Thytaal* sparked to life. Acting Commander Sh’Exaorath was given orders to support the *Toth* throughout the recovery operation. The *Bihr* remained in place so that Captain Th’Ashryriq could coordinate the young crews.

*

Shrar slowly moved closer to the fringes of the nebula using her manoeuvring thrusters only. Her weapons were charged and the elite crew of Guardsmen specially selected by General U’Chtukilli himself to man Andoria’s greatest warship ever built, stood ready.

*

As Mr. Ligan had briefed them all; the Andorian vessel attempting to retrieve the wreck serving as bait in this elaborate trap, was unable to use its tractor beam in the radioactive nebula. Relying on the grid of sensor drones the *Trerratt* and *Banot* had deployed nearly ten days earlier, Dal Rorlac waited for confirmation that the invading Raider had tethered herself to the dead wreckage of her sister ship before commencing his attack run. This time he was approved to go in weapons hot.

Toth had just secured the second of four tritanium reinforced mooring lines to the shattered, hollowed-out corpse of the *Shrov*, when the proximity alert began to scream on the Raider’s bridge. The Weapons Officer had been focused on operating the spatial harpoons and for half a second – froze.

By the time the boy aboard the *Toth* was beginning to key-in the commands to raise shields, the *Asga* was on top of the old Raider.

No shields detected; Dal Rorlac opted to forego unleashing the concussive torpedo loaded in the *Asga*’s forward tube and gave the weapons officer leave to open fire with phasers.

The proximity alert aboard the *Thytaal* sounded as further below them the *Toth*, still tethered to the dead *Shrov*, spun wildly on her Y-axis. The Weapons Officer aboard the *Thytaal* pulled the shields up just as a panicked distress call from the *Toth* crackled over

subspace. *Asga* did not slow or come about to engage the burning *Toth*. She locked her targeting beams on the *Thytaal* and triggered her specialized torpedo.

Fast on *Asga's* tail, the *Khintic* discharged both her main phaser emitters into the spinning *Toth* and as Gul Gisgak ordered his ship to pour-on more speed to catch *Asga*. The *Toth's* reactor exploded in a violent white ball of plasma. *Asga* was coming up fast. *Khintic* was a much newer ship with a superior engine. Gul Gisgak allowed himself to grin broadly as they caught sight of Rorlac's old vessel charging ahead. He was playing with his old friend like they were children running after one and other in a schoolyard. The *Thytaal* drifted between the two dusty yellow *Terok* vessels like an annoying obstacle to be swept aside. *Asga's* torpedo had destabilized the Raider's shield grid and the little vessel, though heavily armed, was clearly in chaos.

"Target that ship and fire!" Gisgak roared. After days of waiting and weeks of tolerating the ignorance and insolence of the damned Mr. Ligan from the damned Obsidian Order – Gul Gisgak was finally in his element.

The *Khintic* thundered past the *Thytaal* without slowing. Their orders had been made very clear. The squadron was to press the attack until the bitter end – whatever that may be. *Khintic* very nearly approached full impulse speed as Gisgak's bow drew within two hundred meters of Rorlac's tail and the order was given to reduce speed and maintain formation. A nonverbal transmission of text icons appeared on Gisgak's personal screen, sent in feigned rage by Rorlac. Gisgak howled in delight and ordered Tactical to raise shields and reinforce forward deflectors. *Asga* was clearing the heavier clouds of the Nebula and the third Andorian Raider was waiting, weapons hot.

*

"TWO ENEMY CONTACTS IN-COMING! TWO! 45 by Z -326!"

"SHIELDS! Evasive maneuvers, broadcast CODE 99 to the *Shrar!*" Captain Th'Ashryriq strapped himself into his command chair and prepared to face the on-rushing Cardassians.

Contact with the *Toth* had simply ceased. Not two seconds later the *Thytaal* was signalling they were under attack and then they to, were gone.

Bihr rolled smartly to starboard, and the internal lighting dimmed slightly as the pulse phase cannons discharged. The Tactical Officer and the Helmsman were both yelling status updates back towards Th'Ashryrig wanting direction, but he was having difficulty hearing them clearly. *Bihr* suddenly lurched backwards and up. A piercing alarm from the engineering deck below blasted through the bulkheads. Th'Ashryrig ordered his men to recover the ship and to return fire. His stomach turned as the inertia dampeners went offline and the artificial gravity began to fail. A loud shudder shook the *Bihr* fiercely as the attacking *Asga* flew by less than fifty meters off their port bow.

Asga had no torpedo loaded in her rear tube. The concussive charge, normally used by heavy mining freighters, which had been fired at the *Shrov* a week earlier to bait the trap the Andorians now found themselves in, had damaged Dal Rorlac's aft launcher. *Asga* had managed to land three of four phaser bursts before streaking past IGR *Bihr* on her way to confront their real target.

Khintic came into weapons-range of the *Bihr* just as *Asga* passed her. The Raider was correcting her course following Rorlac's phaser attack and were just half a second too slow in recovering themselves to get a firing solution on Gul Gisgak's charging *Terok*. Two long blasts from the *Khintic* brought the *Bihr's* forward shields down to less than twenty percent. *Bihr* was once again knocked off course and unwittingly fired a burst of high-energy phased energy into wide-open space.

"RECOVER! RECOVER! Weapons, shields double front, make ready phasers!" screamed Th'Ashryrig, angry at their poor showing against the Cardassians.

Khintic passed the *Bihr* in a blur. Gisgak's Tactical Officer reported the Andorians had shifted their shield concentration to their bow as they were attempting to round on their attackers. A bright flash of suddenly ignited plasma illuminated *Khintic's* stern as Gisgak ordered their aft concussive charge to be fired at the scrambling Andorian.

Bihr tumbled away from the streaking Cardassian warships. Her shield matrix was smashed, her overworked energizer had failed. Th'Ashryrig and his crew scrambled to restore power as they tumbled through space in darkness. Far above them the *Shrar* was engaging two Cardassian warships. Not so far below them, lurking in the swirling dusts of the Umoth Nebula, another two warships approached, and three armed shuttles darted through the radioactive clouds to reach their ultimate objective.

*

On the bridge of the *Kreke Disac*, Dalin Kom was gleefully relaying tactical updates to Gul D'gad. The *Galor*-class cruiser was now at First Alert. The troopers manning stations throughout the massive *Disac* were prepared and eager to join the fight. Ligan had come out from behind D'gad's throne-like command chair and was calmly observing the goings on at the ailing Gul's righthand side.

One Raider was destroyed. The remaining two appeared to be disabled. Rorlac, for whom Ligan had the strongest affinity, if indeed he had an affinity for any of the squadron's commanding officers, was just about to engage the mysterious and fearsome Andorian Battlecruiser. Ligan looked down at D'gad in the midst of the jubilant din on the bridge. The fat old man was an ashen grey colour and not breathing. Nobody had yet seemed to notice.

"Dalin Kom, signal the *Trerratt* to engage, please."

Kom pulled his attention away from the status board to find Ligan standing beside the slumped body of Gul D'gad. "D'gad!"

Troopers at the Tactical, Science, Helm and Engineering Posts all turned to see the dark stranger with the grey eyes standing perfectly still beside the corpse of their Gul.

"His heart gentlemen... his last words were that his heart couldn't take the pride he was filled with at this moment. Now, you have an enemy to destroy, back to work." Ligan kept any trace of emotion from his face and delivered his words with an ominous bravado any Legat would cower to.

Kom took two steps towards Ligan, then stopped when the man dressed in black simply shook his head and fanned his right hand towards Kom's most recent place at the status board. D'gad was dead and there wasn't anything to be done about it. For now, they had a battle to attend to.

“D-Dalin Kom, sir?” The young trooper manning the long-range sensors was unsure who was now in command. Dalin Kom had been Gul D’gad’s First Officer, but the man from the Obsidian Order was the one standing on the command dais.

“Report!”

“Drones report the second Andorian Raider has restored engines and weapons. She’s getting underway to intercept Gul Gisgak, sir.”

“Well don’t just stand there! Transmit commit orders to the *Trerratt!*” Kom hadn’t meant to bellow at the young man, but timing was crucial and the deadly Andorian Battlecruiser; their prize, was preparing to engage.

In the murky darkness, Dal Bin acknowledged his orders and brought his warship to life. Gomlir and his wing men waited for their signal to strike.

19. Unto the Breach

“We no longer register the *Toth*, General U’Chtukilli, Raiders *Thylaal* and *Bihr* are adrift, status unknown.”

U’Chtukilli ordered the helmsman to engaged impulse engines and put more distance between the *Shrar* and the approaching contacts. As the young man plotted and engaged the course as ordered, he repeated the command back to U’Chtukilli automatically. Commander Siriav smoothly moved from the Sensor Station, past the Helm, where he quickly confirmed the young private was executing his duties without issue – then to the Weapons Station where Lieutenant Ch’Atynnirh had the offensive systems on-line and ready.

“General, two contacts approaching at $\frac{3}{4}$ light speed, Cardassian, medium cruisers,” called Siriav back to the old warrior seated in the command chair.

“Tactical analysis, Lieutenant Ch’Atynnirh?” asked U’Chtukilli, his eye fixed on the tactical display at the main viewer.

Shrar’s trio of fusion impulse drives hummed throughout the long body of the sleek silver Battlecruiser. Though the inertia dampeners were supposed to mitigate any unsettling sensations of motion, Ekol U’Chtukilli could feel his mighty vessel begin to pick up speed.

“Contacts are armed with phased energy emitters, General. No indication of active torpedoes. Their defensive energy shields are concentrated around their forward sections. They will be in weapons range in eighty-two seconds.” Lt. Ch’Atynnirh activated the *Shrar’s* shields and spun on his station’s moulded stool to face towards the bow of the ship.

As he turned, an integrated servo system engaged and caused a panel to extend from the Weapons Station and hang a full meter out from the bulkhead where the logistical and status panels were affixed. The panel lit up as the operator’s stool locked into its new position and the targeting and firing control console emitted a short chime to signal all weapons now stood ready. Commander Siriav nodded at the younger man, satisfied the Lieutenant was prepared to do his duty and then returned to the General’s side.

“They’re approaching from below and will pass us up our ventral port side, sir,” said Siriav as Weapons reported thirteen seconds until the Cardassians were in weapons range.

U’Chtukilli cursed himself silently. This had all felt wrong the instant he answered Bos’s transmission. The damned nebula was a warren of radiation and sensor killing particles; even on the fringes, the sensors aboard *Shrar* and the Raiders had been affected. The young woman at the Communications Station reported all subspace frequencies were suddenly garbled. U’Chtukilli didn’t need Siriav, or anyone else to tell him the approaching Cardassians were jamming communications. There would be no calls for reinforcements.

As the *Shrar* pulled away from the projected point of intercept with the approaching Cardassians, the lead contact opened fire. Two sharp volleys of ragged phased energy streaked up along *Shrar’s* nose from below. Tactical reported no damage, the shields had held. By the time the second Cardassian contact came into range, three seconds later, *Shrar* had cleared the intended weapons envelope. The second Cardassian raced up and over the *Shrar’s* aft section, nearly colliding with the port nacelle wing.

U’Chtukilli took hold of the armrests affixed to his chair as the *Shrar* shuddered in the displacement wake of the streaking Cardassian. They’d been clever in approaching from below and at such a steep angle, thought Ekol. The *Shrar* outgunned the smaller warships easily, but her two banks of four-by-four pulse phaser emitters were mounted along her two support pylons capping the nacelle wings – facing forward. Her two-by-two primary torpedo tubes, recessed port and starboard along the elegant bulkheads of her primary hull back of the Command Deck at the *Shrar’s* bow, also faced forward. At best, Ekol could have called for defensive fire from the twin ventral phaser emitters; but the Cardassians had concentrated their shields forward for just that contingency.

What the *Shrar* needed was room to maneuver and space to bring her formidable primary weapons to bear. “Helm, starboard turn 187 by 32, bring us about! Weapons, stand-by to target primary phaser banks full yield, maximum spread!”

The *Shrar* executed a speedy, yet graceful, banking turn to pull her long silver nose around to point in the direction of the two streaking yellow Cardassian warships. If the open trace-loop signal U’Chtukilli had sent before warping into this trap had been noticed or received, he had no way of knowing. The discharge of *Shrar’s* full array of phasers would be the tell...

“The Cardassians are coming about, sir. Their weapons are still charged!” Ch’Atynnirh checked his status panel to confirm main phasers were ready and called up the targeting lock screen.

A full-yield discharge would release an incredible amount of destructive energy. Such a tactic was usually reserved for heavy bombardment scenarios, or close ship-to-ship encounters. The *Shrar* would temporarily be without phaser cover as the heavy emitters would need eight to twelve seconds to recycle after such a release. Ch’Atynnirh knew the recommended tactic was to use only two or three phasers at a time to keep enough charge in the system to allow the remaining emitters to be used on demand. Orders were orders. The young Lieutenant primed all eight emitters.

“Phasers ready, sir...”

On the tactical display U’Chtukilli watched as the lead contact came about and almost immediately began firing. The first three bursts went wide of the *Shrar’s* slender hull. The last bolt of phased energy impacted the starboard nacelle’s shield and was absorbed.

“Fire on that ship!” U’Chtukilli commanded.

Ch’Atynnirh guided his targeting beams and hoped the scattering effect of the trace particles drifting just beyond the Umoth Nebula wouldn’t interfere with his aim. The attacking Cardassian was far more agile and evasive than any of the tactical briefings had led the young Officer to believe possible.

*

“Dal Rorlac the Andorian is targeting us!” Trooper Pall called out to his commander over his shoulder. He was trying to keep the reactor powering the primary phasers charged. Engineering was siphoning power from every system aboard the *Asga* to keep the Impulse Engines running and the over-taxed structural integrity fields operating.

“Lock on and fire, Pall!” Rorlac roared from his seat.

On the screen facing the *Asga's* bridge crew a volley of four red fiery energy streams raced away from their struggling old warship towards the giant sleek Andorian Battlecruiser. The distance between the two vessels rapidly closed.

"Signal Gul D'gad: We've engaged the Primary Target, SEND WAVE TWO NOW!" Rorlac leaned back in his seat as he shrieked down to the Communications Pit behind him. Only one of Pall's shots impacted the Andorian.

Glinn Compar braced himself at Rorlac's side. The young Glinn cursed the poor shot but understood the strain Trooper Pall was under. The tactics Mr. Ligan had somehow persuaded Gul D'gad to endorse called for the *Asga* and *Terratt* to charge the enemy cruiser at speed and to harass and distract them while the second attack wave formed up. *Asga* was an old vessel. Her spaceframe was growing brittle as it was, regardless of the enhanced integrity field generators which had been installed just prior to their departure for the Umoth Nebula. The ship creaked and groaned under the strain of performing tight stressful maneuvers. Her aft torpedo tube was fowled and useless following their attack on the Andorian Raider a week earlier. Her forward tube had been too heavily modified to launch the concussive charges to allow for normal function. They were armed with but a pair of type 2 phased energy emitters and an out-dated, slow targeting system.

The Communications Officer shouted a mouthful of words after signalling the *Kreke Disac* as ordered. Neither Rorlac, nor Compar could make out what the man had said. The only word that came across clearly in the chaotic din of the bridge alarms and shouting crew was... "*Terratt.*"

A new series of alarms began to sound... the Andorians returned fire.

*

"Captain Ch'orithron to the Bridge."

Shohr opened his eyes and immediately sat up from his repose on the sofa in his Ready Room. He hadn't been sleeping, but he had just managed to allow himself to relax in the darkness when Commander Yeal had broken through on the Comms panel. There was panic in the man's voice.

Shohr got to his feet without thinking and immediately scooped up his red tunic from the armrest. He knew Nigel Yeal well enough to understand when the man sounded panicked. Setting aside his personal belief that most humans were panicked most of the time, Shohr donned his uniform jacket and stepped out into the light of the *Isadore's* bridge to see what had his pink skinned First Officer so upset.

"Report."

Commander Yeal was standing beside Mr. Ayr at Tactical. The Science Stations along the far bulkhead of *Isadore's* bridge were all locked in static diagnostic mode. Shohr paced over to his command chair and looked at Yeal with piercing blue eyes.

"Sir, Mr. Ayr observed a concentrated burst of high-energy plasma from just outside the Umoth Nebula..."

Shohr pulled the flap shut on his tunic and fastened it at his right shoulder. "Mr. Ayr?"

"Sir, I caught it on the lateral array..." the Lieutenant looked to his panel and called up the readings in question.

Shohr tugged at his tunic to snug it down at the shoulders, then took his seat. Commander Yeal took up his place at the Ch'orithron's right hand. "Let's have it on the main viewer, Mr. Ayr."

The entire bridge crew watched the brief sensor report play on a loop twice before Shohr turned to Commander Yeal and asked if the lateral array had simply detected one of the plasma storms the Umoth Nebula was known for.

"I don't think so, sir. Those storms have only ever been known to occur within the Nebula itself. The readings we've captured here took place well beyond the boundaries of the radiation clouds the storms are known to feed off. Again please, Mr. Ayr."

The loop resumed.

"So, what have we captured here after all this time?" Shohr watched the energy spike appear in an instant and fade, over, and over again.

"As soon as Mr. Ayr reported the event, I had primary sensors redirected to that location, sir... but we're getting nothing now." Commander Yeal nodded towards the bank of science terminals.

"Nothing, as in no more energy readings?" Shohr was growing agitated. Yeal had a frustratingly human way of stringing out whatever needed to be said.

"Nothing, as in our scans are suddenly being scrambled, sir. That spike we captured on the laterals; it has all the markings of a massive, phased energy discharge." Ayr spoke with certainty and conviction. He didn't mean to interrupt the First Officer, but he was aware that Captain Ch'orithron appreciated direct, factual responses.

"Weapons fire." Shohr watched the readings again and saw that the recorded burst fell perfectly in the preferred frequency range of Imperial Guard cyclical phased energy emitters.

"I'd be willing to bet on it, sir," said Lt. Ayr.

Commander Yeal scoffed quietly. "It could be some discharge event generated by the unstable particles colliding at the greater nebula's event horizon, sir. I mean, for it to have been generated by a weapon it'd have to be ludicrously massive."

Shohr sighed as the sensor report played repeatedly. Yeal was correct. To think a single weapon could generate that kind of output was ludicrous. Though, as informed as the pudgy Commander was, his expertise when it came to Imperial Guard design was lacking. One weapon might not generate such a reading, but an entire bank, or two entire banks of weapons fired simultaneously...

Shohr swore under his breath. He'd been right about the curious orders dispatching *Isadore* here. "Distance to the site of that discharge, Mr. Ayr?"

"Sir, it's approximately four AUs from our present position."

Shohr ordered the view screen to tactical mode, called for a Yellow Alert and instructed the helmsman to lay in an intercept course for Mr. Ayr's mysterious energy reading.

"Sir?" Yeal tried to keep his voice low.

"Be prepared to go to RED Alert upon arriving at those coordinates, Mr. Yeal."

Nigel swallowed hard nodded and cleared his throat. In keeping with the captain's expectations, Yeal promptly parroted Shohr's orders to helmsman.

“Mr. Ayr, load pre-programmed tactical packages alpha through gamma.” Shohr ordered as he watched Yeal begin to open his mouth. He silenced the human with a stern shake of his head. There would be no alerting Starfleet. There would be no calls for backup.

Throughout the ship, crewmen, officers, and technicians manned their action stations. At warp speed, *Isadore* set off like a blue streak of lightning towards the embattled *Shrar*.



Figure 6: Three Red Stripes. Published 23 Mar. 2018 Pixabay Licence Free

20. The Glev glov Nansh

Moddax stepped lightly along the narrow gantry leading to the pressurized airlock atop the refinery's upper landing pad. Wegaos Skeffef wanted to discuss how they might secure *their* futures, but he still had his right hand buried in his coat and insisted on walking behind Moddax. Wegaos was in an odd mood. The old Tellarite vacillated between ill-temperament, to rage, to amusement, all in an unsettling way. When the four-by-four-meter panel of ceiling in the transit lounge suddenly began to descend to the floor on pneumatic struts, Moddax had jumped back in near panic. Wegaos had laughed wildly at that. They rode the platform to the upper pad in silence.

The gantry sported two long casements of reenforced plasticized transparencies to the right and along the ceiling. At one time it appeared as though the left-hand wall of the gantry also housed a casement, but it had long ago been sealed over by a heavy sheet of duranium. Above there was nothing. Not even a haze of light from Jupiter could be seen as Ganymede had orbited away from the gas giant. To the right, Moddax could just see the aft quarter of a type-IV shuttlecraft.

From what Moddax could make out, the craft abutting the airlock ahead was badly marred. Its sage green painted panels were pitted with small impact dents and sported noticeable scuff marks and deep scratches. A purple smudge of ancient paint was distorted by a particularly nasty looking gouge running along the shuttle's upper starboard gunwale. Moddax couldn't make out the details of the purple smear as the landing pad's lights weren't managing well in the near total darkness of Ganymede's dark side, but he assumed it was the emblem of the Tellarite Mining Consortium.

The battered airlock hissed, and its solid black hatch swung outward on well lubricated hinges when Moddax triggered the motion sensor. Without slowing, Moddax stepped across the threshold into the dark accordion-like docking collar linking the landing pad's airlock to the shuttle. Moddax took two steps along the soft collar and stepped into the waiting shuttle. Wegaos, three paces behind the lithe, black clad human, pulled the airlock's hatch closed behind him before ducking into the craft. The sound of the magnetic seals energizing was absorbed by the collar's thick pliant folds.

Stepping aboard what he thought was going to be a workhorse of a cargo shuttle, Moddax made no effort to hide his awe at the splendor he found himself surrounded by. The bulkheads were lined in rich tufted purple fur perfectly held in place by gleaming gold buttons. An over-stuffed sage green recliner was anchored to the richly appointed gold shag carpeting which cushioned the entire deck of the shuttle. The ceiling offered panoramic views to the black nothingness of space above through two narrow strips of transparent aluminum which ran along either side of a central beam supporting a wide drop screen entertainment system. Beside the recliner, built into the portside bulkhead was an elaborate replicator unit. Mounted to the side of the squat unit, Moddax noticed, was a purple slab of Mazarrian marble – a tabletop that could be raised in front of the great chair if desired.

The shuttle's rear hatch hissed closed and locked seamlessly into place as Wegaos boarded his personal craft. Moddax didn't turn to look. There were two young and

surprisingly fit looking Tellarites standing at alert at the shuttles forward bulkhead just back of the cockpit. A firm, comfortable looking sofa was anchored to the deck along the starboard bulkhead. Moddax could see that the sofa could pull out into a double-wide bed. He doubted anyone would be napping.

“Wegaos Skeffef, fifteen minutes ago I should have left to make my rendezvous!”

Moddax stood perfectly still as a third Tellarite suddenly appeared at the head of the garishly appointed cabin. This man was dressed in the standard black uniform Mr. Moddax was accustomed to seeing aboard K3. He was clearly the shuttle’s pilot – given he’d just appeared through the open hatch to the cockpit. He sported a silver service bar with three red hash marks pinned to his chest.

“Frevrir Gorn! Do not think to chastise me. It is your failing if we miss the rendezvous! Bah! To work!” roared Wegaos.

The heavy young Tellarite in the black uniform snorted and dropped his deep-set eyes to show Wegaos his compliance. Moddax watched as the pilot pulled himself back through the hatch and could hear him priming the directional thrusters.

“Sit, Thayer Moddax. We depart now.” Moddax half turned to see the fat old Wegaos undo the rest of the gold buckles on his atrocious purple fur coat and collapse into the grand recliner. The pronounced grip of the Tellarian disruptor pistol holstered awkwardly on Skeffef’s stomach just below his ponderous left breast, was now clearly visible.

Moddax slowly took a seat on the firm, red leather-bound sofa as the sound of the docking collar retracting from the hatch could be heard within the shuttle. Wegaos made a show of rutting around in his recliner to get comfortable.

The shuttle lifted away from the landing pad smoothly. Moddax could neither hear nor feel the battered and worn looking little ship’s engines as they worked. Wegaos was still fluffing his nest, completely oblivious to the bouncing, exposed weapon strapped to his belly. Moddax kept both the young Tellarites posted at the head of the cabin in sight. There was little wonder why Wegaos suddenly had no compunction about letting his weapon hang and bounce loosely about. The two silent Tellarite sentries held snub-nosed Tellarian assault rifles in their shiny, black-gloved hands, and each had a disruptor pistol strapped to his leg.

Moddax noted the young men had bulging muscular hands under their tight black gloves with distinctive silver piping along each of their three wide fingers. They were easily half Wegaos Skeffef’s age, if not more, and at least half the great man’s weight. Though possessed of remarkable strength relative to human standards, very few Tellarites sported any sort of physique one might describe as *athletic*. These two young men, though bulged against their heavily padded silver tops and it seemed that the heavy black piping along the seams of their sleeves and torsos was doing all it could to keep them from bursting out of their distinctive uniforms completely.

Their disruptor pistols were identical to the one Wegaos wore, except theirs were tightly strapped to their right legs by wide purple straps. The holsters were of a molded material Moddax couldn’t identify; these too were coloured purple. Both men wore extra-wide sage green duty belts around their mid-sections, from which their purple holsters hung. While they were both young and fit, the wide belts provided solid coverage across their

Tellarian midriiffs none-the-less. Moddax studied every detail of their uniforms. He couldn't determine if the guards were wearing simple two-tone jumpsuits, or if they were in two separate garments – most Tellarites preferred overalls to pants.

The shuttle pulled away from Ganymede at speed and soon Moddax realized they were heading into open space. Wegaos said nothing. He was busy punching selections into his replicator. The battered sage green TMC shuttle arced to port just then and a glimmer of light from Sol penetrated the overhead viewports and flashed off something on the silent warriors' uniforms.

Once the shuttle corrected her course, Moddax focused on the silver material stretched tightly across the young men's chests where he saw two silver bars bearing three red hash marks. It was obvious Wegaos was not taking him back to K3. Moddax shifted slightly in his seat and tried to reason out what was going on. Neither of the young men made a sound. The great tusks, jutting up from their lower jaws, were still white and unblemished – another indication of their relative youth, but Moddax noted that both had had their tusks capped in silver. They both wore tight-fitting sage green helmets as well, which appeared to clamp over and completely cover their ears.

"Glev glov Nansh, Thayer Moddax... *snort*..." The old man boomed.

"Excuse me?" Moddax was just noting how one guard was indistinguishable from the other when Wegaos had stopped playing with his replicator long enough to bark a little word salad his way. Cautiously, he turned his head to face the great old boar, reclined and gnawing on some purple and blue doughy cubes.

"Bah! Enough excuses from you! Glev glov Nansh! The most fearsome and elite warriors Tellar has ever produced. In service to Section Command, of course." Wegaos' mean yellow eyes were barely visible behind the heavy folds of thick skin his posture was pulling out of place on his fat face.

"I see... and they are your, bodyguards?"

"Bah-ha! Thayer Moddax, you human so obtuse, you amuse me. No! Glev glov Nansh are warriors. Not *bodyguards*. Bodyguards for cowards! I am no coward, I am Wegaos Skeffef!" A half-chewed chunk of blue dough dribbled from Wegaos' mouth and plopped to the floor with a dull thud. It sunk into the thick gold shag.

"Warriors. I can see that. You said we were to talk, Wegaos Skeffef, about our futures?" Moddax didn't point out that Wegaos hadn't in fact said the two silent Gliv-glov-whatevers weren't his bodyguards.

"Glev glov Nansh are deafened at birth, Thayer Moddax, then trained to use their other senses to be intuitive, unflinching assassins and warriors! Only one in twenty thousand males born a year are selected. Bah! Of that, less than half are successful in their training to see service in their twentieth season." Wegaos popped a purple cube into his maw.

"I'm sure they're wonderful warriors, Wegaos. We were going to talk, yes?" Moddax could feel the intense gaze of both warriors boring into him from the front of the cabin.

Wegaos swallowed the mess that was in his mouth and popped his jaw. "Bah! Glev glov Nansh are deaf. Frevrir Grorn is not."

"I hear you speak of me Wegaos Skeffef!" Came the angry sounding voice of the pilot sitting just beyond the open hatch at the front of the cabin.

"Frevrir Gorn fly my shuttle with care or find yourself floating home!"

"Bah!" came the pilot's only reply.

"Four centuries ago, on Tellar Prime, Thayer Moddax. Miner Vantag Nansh deafened by burrow charges. Many miners crippled and killed by charges back times. Nansh though... Nansh organized the first Miners Guild on all Tellar. Deaf, still demanded change from Mine Company Owners Associations! Safer made the toil for miners. More percentage to miners too. Eight years after he go deaf, four associated Miners Guilds established, Owners too change, organize the beginnings of the Consortium. Nansh was a *remarkable* male." Wegaos snorted to emphasise the importance of this, before turning his attention back to the replicator.

"I see... and this Nansh was the inspiration for these warriors, then?" Moddax turned to look at the two men still stoically standing guard. Neither had moved.

"Inspiration? Bah! Nansh slaughtered in the street on way to organize strike. Control Force Glev troopers from Capitol contracted to the Consortium easily ambushed Nansh and followers. Use micro charges, like from the excavation pits, to bomb the strike organizers! Many troopers made deaf by own munitions, fought-on anyway. Relentless. Not able to hear commands to desist. Value in having warriors who don't hear 'quit' ... *snort.*"

Moddax could think of nothing to say to that piece of Tellarite history. "If you want to talk, Wegaos Skeffef, then we need to do it now. They'll be missing me on K3."

"Bah! You not missed. You do nothing since play-act for female..." Wegaos slowly sat himself upright in his recliner and focused his beady yellow eyes on the human perched on the red sofa. "Where is the female now, huh?"

"The Admiral? She's overseeing the shakedown of N12, but I'm sure you are aware of that already, Wegaos Skeffef." Moddax had had enough of whatever this was. He wanted off this shuttle and back to his quarters on K3.

"Yes, Thayer Moddax... the Teague fixed N12, just as she said he would, and in just seven weeks?" The thunderous volume was suddenly gone from Wegaos Skeffef's voice. He growled this towards his human guest in a menacing low tone.

"Eight weeks... it took him eight weeks to get the damned thing operational..." Moddax had always prided himself on superior situational awareness; the fact that he'd walked into what was looking more and more like a trap, galled him.

"Eight weeks, yes..." Wegaos nodded slowly and exhaled just forcibly enough to ensure his rank breath found its way to the little dark human's nostrils.

Thayer Moddax sat as still as he could, trying to give nothing away, but his mind raced for some way out and the unfamiliar pangs of panic began registering deep within. If Wegaos wanted him dead, surely... but if not dead, then what could the old pig have in mind?

"We'll talk soon, Thayer Moddax. *Hors d'oeuvre fineberg?*" Wegaos offered Moddax a blue cube and smiled.

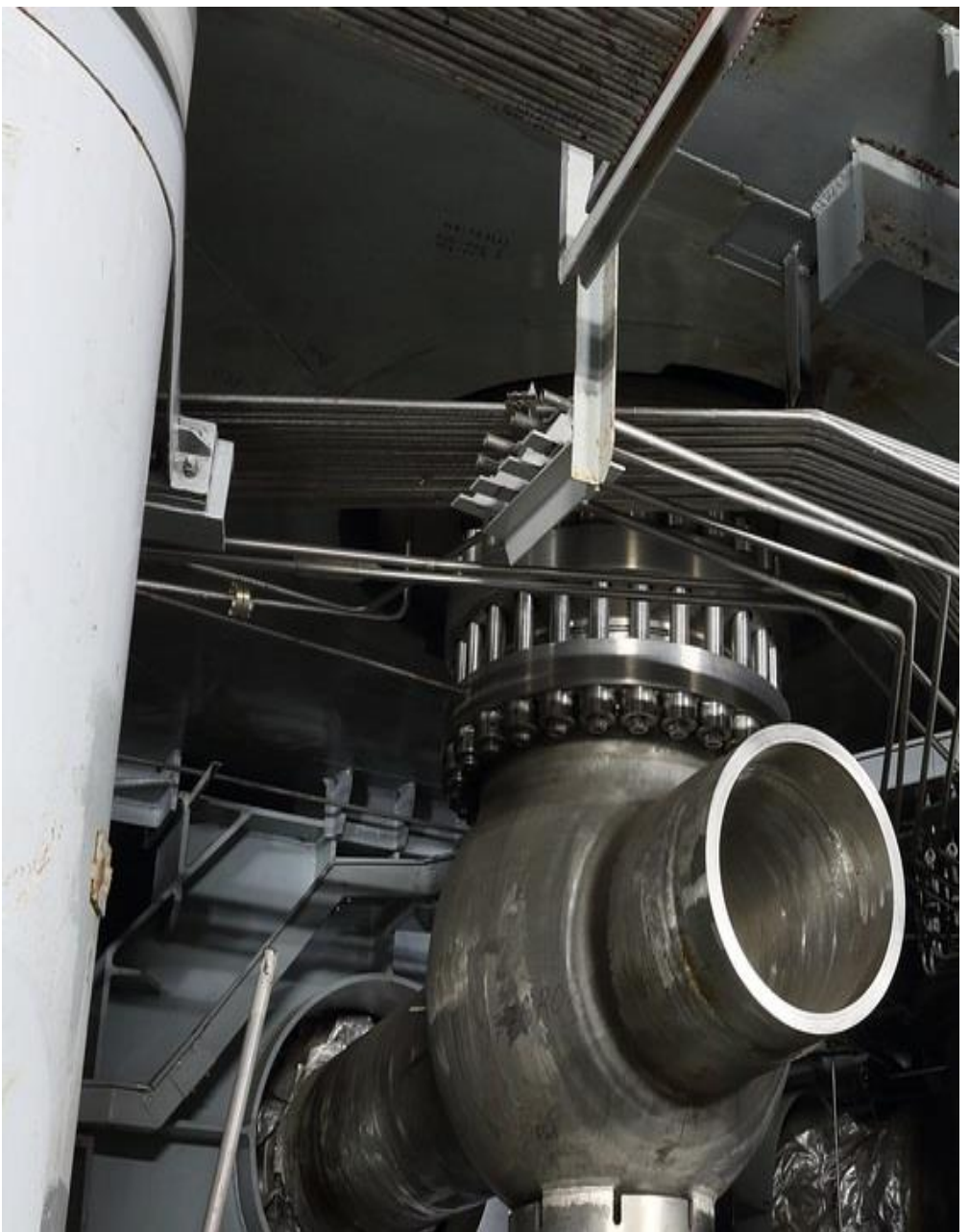


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21. Fury & Sacrifice, Two Weeks Ago

“First Engineer report!” Acting Commander Seb Sh’Ezaorath stood over the open hatch leading down to the *Thytaal’s* reactor room.

A handful of emergency lights flickered in the hazy gloom. Young trainees were quietly trying to restore the dark Raider’s systems as though they were participating in a normal exercise – some simulation of a life-or-death scenario they were expected to pass. Two bodies lay beneath survival blankets strapped to the aft decking by the viewing port. Artificial gravity was functioning at less than fifty percent of normal and the corpses of the Weapons Officer and Communications Officer had to be secured to keep them from drifting amongst the survivors hard at work in the darkness.

“The reactor is stable, Commander!” called up Ses Ch’Thollon, the *Thytaal’s* First Engineer. He’d had to resort to using the battery powered EV palm scanners to assess the status of the crippled Raider’s powerful warp reactor.

“Then where’s my power?!” Seb was unable to keep the anxiety and stress out of his voice. He was the most senior trainee aboard the *Thytaal* and as such had been granted Acting Commander’s status for the recovery mission. Captain Th’Ashryriq himself had charged him with overseeing the safety and well being of the Imperial Raider and her crew of children.

“I’m checking the relay corridors now... Ashrobath is manually resetting the flow-regulators, Commander!”

Seb sighed and took a bouncing step back towards the Operations Station where Isivih Zh’Rylror, the only female member of the *Thytaal’s* crew, and long the unrequited love-interest of Acting Commander Sh’Ezaorath, was trying to bring internal sensors back online. Bosseth, their now deceased Weapons Officer, had stocked the Raider with six EV Kits prior to their departure to recover the *Shrov*. All six kits had been torn open, their palm scanners, torches, survival blankets and ration packs were all being used and consumed as Seb and his nine surviving charges drifted deeper into the Umoth Nebula, blind and alone.

Commander Sh’Ezaorath braced himself against the back of his command chair and watched Isivih work in the light of her small torch. Her smooth, light blue skin was very nearly luminescent in the halo of the inadequate light she held in her teeth. Only a vague silhouette of her lithe supple body could be seen in the near darkness of the Raider. Seb’s heart skipped a beat as he quietly watched her fumble beneath the Ops console.

“Status, Isivih?” he managed to say into the darkness between them before they were all blown into space...

*

“Direct hit, Dal Bin. Target destroyed!” cried the young trooper manning *Terratt’s* Weapons Post.

Bin, sitting bolt upright in his command chair, glowered at the young man and shamed him into silence. Gul D’gad had tasked them with hunting down and destroying the Andorian that was making way for Gisgak’s *Khintic*. Coming across the other crippled Raider was simply a fortuitous happenstance. Of the four *Terok*-class warships comprising the

squadron, *Trerratt* was the newest and best equipped; the fact that they had easily dispatched a drifting can of Andorian garbage was hardly something worth celebrating.

"Do we have our target on sensors?" asked the prim and proper Bin.

"Sir, Andorian Raider at 32 mark 264. She appears to be maneuvering on thrusters alone," came the response from the senior trooper on deck.

"Helm, set your course for intercept and execute, attack speed. Weapons, if you can restrain your jubilation, prime phaser emitters, and prepare to engage." Both Posts repeated their orders back to Dal Bin.

Trerratt pulled away from the ever-expanding debris field which only a few seconds earlier had been the Imperial Guard Raider *Thylaal* and poured on speed as she pointed her nose towards the distant *Bihr*...

"Dal Bin, orders from the *Kreke Disac*!" cried the trooper manning the Communications Pit below and behind Dal Bin's command chair.

"Let's have them." Bin used the intercom built into the left armrest of his chair to speak directly to Trooper Emal in the Pit.

"*Asga* and *Khintic* have engaged Primary. Wave Two, commit."

Bin took a long slow breath. The contemptable Mr. Ligan had been thorough in his instructions. The aging *Asga* and Gul Gisgak's *Khintic* were to harass and engage the Andorians at close range while the *Trerratt* delivered her concussive charges along with the *Banot*. Bin and Dal Ghadett were then to join the others in strafing the enemy in preparation for the final wave of attack.

"Helm, correct course to intercept primary Andorian contact, full impulse. Weapons, prepare fly-by volleys for that Raider and ready forward and aft tubes. Commit."

Trerratt adjusted her heading and engaged her impulse drive. From deeper within the rolling clouds of dust and radiation, Dal Ghadett's *Banot* set her course and readied weapons.

*

"Sir, we've dropped out of warp ½ AU from the origin point of that plasma discharge," Ensign Dirlo reported as she secured her post at the Helm and Navigation console aboard *Isadore*.

"Viewer ahead, tactical report." Shohr leaned forward in his seat and studied the swirling mass of the Umoth Nebula. The viewscreen was blurry and glitched erratically with static.

"Long-range tactical beams having trouble with ambient radiation, sir. Switching to short-range sensors..." Lieutenant Ayr worked feverishly at his controls.

As Ayr swiftly and methodically indexed various search algorithms into the tactical computer, Commander Yeal brought the *Isadore*'s planetary sensor array online. P'nom reported that subspace frequencies were garbled. Yeal quickly confirmed that a scattering field was active in their operational area.

"Captain Ch'orithron, I'd recommend falling back to our previous coordinates and advising Starfleet of our situation..." Nigel was studying the returns from the wide-spectrum sensor array *Isadore* had been equipped with to survey planetary bodies from orbit. The

array was accurate for only a short range but returned clear enough readings of the ambient particle make up around the ship to confirm the scattering field was artificial in nature.

“Got it!” shouted a suddenly excited young Ayr. He couldn’t stop himself from pumping his large right fist in the air in triumph.

“Yes, Mr. Ayr?” Shohr turned away from Yeal, seated at the Science Station, and watched the young Martian flail his muscular arm about. As much as he admired the young human for his prowess at Tactical, Shohr found his only too human immaturity to be taxing at times.

“Captain, contact bearing 118 by 45...” Ayr had managed to piggyback the long-range directional beams along the short-range spectral array, in effect creating an over-powered radar beam. It was too broad to return specific results, but it was able to ping off large metallic forms and provide Ayr’s targeting computer with coordinates.

“Let’s see it.” Shohr leaned back in his seat and watched as the viewer glitched and then flickered to Ayr’s co-ordinates.

“Captain, regulations state that prior to engaging...”

“Magnify!” Shohr completely ignored Nigel. The man was right, of course...

...and there she was. A beautiful sight to be sure, the *Shrar*. She was maneuvering in tight turns and discharging her phasers seemingly at random. The screen flickered wildly, and static obscured the scene. Shohr roared at his crew to reacquire the picture. Commander Yeal left his post and was standing at Captain Ch’orithron’s side pleading with him to send word to Starfleet. Shohr ordered Ensign Dirlo to set an intercept course, maximum impulse.

“Ayr, tactical report!” Shohr rose from his chair and nearly knocked over Yeal. “Commander, return to your post.”

Nigel stumbled slightly. “Captain, I formally protest!”

Then the screen lit-up with a bright flash.

“Captain, the Andorian ship is engaged with a least two or possibly more Cardassian warships. Heavy phaser fire,” reported Lt. Ayr as he honed his makeshift sensor beams.

“RED ALERT! Ensign Dirlo, go!” roared Shohr.

The alert tone began ringing throughout the ship signalling all aboard to man their action stations. Sickbay prepared for casualties. Engineering set redundant stabilizers and secured the reactor. Chief Rhupp dispatched his damage control teams to their predetermined response stations. Yeoman Tracy, newly assigned to fire suppression, donned her white radiation suit and red collar along with the nine specialists comprising the fire team. Phasers were brought to power and both *Isadore’s* main torpedo bays began loading live warheads.

“Captain, new contact... bearing 115 by 43! It looks like another Cardassian warship coming at the Andorian from within the nebula.” Ayr had tuned his sensors to the point where they were returning about as much information as he could hope for.

Shohr looked at Nigel, standing irate almost in the middle of the bridge. The man was seething. Shohr knew his First Officer was right about calling for backup, but there was no time... as Ayr, Dirlo, P’nom and all the others worked like the well-trained unit, Shohr had pushed them to be he also knew that right or not, Yeal had no backup himself.

“Station, First Officer.”

Nigel looked around with wild eyes. He was flushing a bright red; he was so angry... It was obvious the crew were autonomically falling inline with their training and following Ch’orithron. Commander Yeal drew a steadying breath – they all had to know this was wrong... “Sir, I will be noting this in my personal log and making a formal report to Starfleet Command as soon as is practical.”

Shohr saw an intense rage in the doughy human’s eyes that gave him pause. He’d gone too far, and he knew it. Worse, he’d taken advantage of the loyalty of his crew and dragged them right along... “Station.”

Isadore swept through wisps of radioactive dust towards the battle. She was deaf and dumb in the scattering field, unable to raise either the Andorians, or Starfleet.

*

“Sensors restored Captain Th’Ashryriq!” called up Second Engineer Ch’Thorhat from the primary junction bank beneath the *Bihr*’s computer core.

“Well done, Ros! Well done!” Th’Ashryriq took his seat and ordered the helmsman to lay in a course for the *Shrar*, best possible speed.

Th’Ashryriq and his crew were all long-serving veterans of the Imperial Guard. To have been caught unawares as they had been, was shameful. The *Toth* and the *Thylaal* had been ships crewed by children just starting their careers, but the *Bihr* was a ship-of-the-line, a battle-ready Raider crewed by men. Shameful.

Before Captain Th’Ashryriq could lose himself too completely in self-loathing his First Officer, Commander Th’Ozipar, reported an approaching vessel.

“Shields!” bellowed Th’Ashryriq his long-braided hair whipping around his head as he turned to see what Lieutenant Sh’Rhaalner was doing at damage control.

“We have partial shields at thirty percent, Captain,” answered Sh’Rhaalner. Sweat was rolling down his face and his short white hair stuck to the back of his head in ragged clumps.

The short lieutenant in the blue and silver radiation suit had spent every minute since the initial attack trying to reassemble the shield matrix. Sh’Rhaalner had served under Captain Th’Ashryriq aboard the *Bihr* since his graduation from the Imperial Academy eight years earlier. He knew the Raider’s systems better than the men who designed and built her and as he feverishly worked, he doubted if any of them could hope to manage so well.

“They’ll be in weapons range in twelve seconds!” Th’Ozipar yelled.

“Weapons?!”

“Primary energizer still charging, sir... aft phaser cannon primed and ready!” Seti still sported a burr cut like a cadet. He was the youngest member of the *Bihr*’s crew and had only been a sworn Guardsman for two years.

The young man at Weapons sat awkwardly at his station. A heavy yellow brace had been wrapped around his mid-section by the medic. The violent shock of the enemy’s torpedo strike had thrown the young man into the bulkhead and broken several of his ribs. Seti, while hunched over his Weapons console was wholly focused on the returns being displayed through the struggling sensor relays. The other men teased him about his youth, but he’d proven himself a capable tactician.

The *Bihr* shuddered suddenly as a bolt of phased energy darted along her starboard flank.

The *Terratt* had already altered course to intercept the *Shrar*, but she was going to do her best to eliminate the impudent, limping Raider on her way.

“Aft cannon FIRE!” came the command from Captain Th’Ashryrig, his unusual pale green eyes glassy and his overly long antennae erect on his head.

Seti managed to get two blasts off from the aft cannon. The first shot went wide of the *Terratt*, the second ball of plasma impacting the *Terok*-class warship on her forward starboard shield.

The *Terratt* was pulling up and away from the slow-moving Raider when Dal Bin ordered one final volley of fire at the insignificant target.

Bihr’s shields collapsed under the strain of the Cardassian weapon. Sh’Rhaalner tried to spill-off the excess energy to protect the ship, but the power relay he was standing in front of exploded. Seconds later the *Bihr*’s reactor went critical, and the Raider vanished in a blinding white light.

*

“Confirm, three Cardassian warships, sir... it looks like wreckage further down towards the nebula...” Lt. Ayr was relieved to see that his modified sensors worked much better in close proximity to the hostiles and embattled Andorian Battlecruiser, *Isadore* was rushing towards.

“Status of the *Shrar*?” asked Captain Ch’orithron from his command chair.

“*Shrar*, sir?” Ayr couldn’t help but to look back over his shoulder for clarification.

“The Andorian ship!” roared Shohr. He could feel Nigel glaring at him from the Science Station and knew he’d just served his First Officer up another curious piece of information to include in his impending report to Starfleet.

“The Andorian is holding her own for now... minor damage to her secondary hull, shields look to be intact...”

“P’nom, can you break through ship-to-ship?” Shohr flexed his antennae and narrowed his eyes as *Isadore* rapidly closed to within weapons range of the battle.

“No, Captain. All three Cardassian vessels appear to be broadcasting subspace interference creating the scattering field.” Though half human, P’nom lived her life as a Vulcan and made a point of interacting with others in a detached manner many found cold and off-putting, even by Vulcan standards.

“Thirty seconds until we’re in weapons range, sir!”

“Stand by, Mr. Ayr. Mr. Yeal, what do your sensors tell us about that wreckage and explosion we monitored?” Shohr kept his eyes on the view screen knowing the answer already but hoping fat old Nigel would “play ball” as the Earthers liked to say.

Commander Yeal had unfastened his tunic and his light blue bib hung open. They were flying into battle and there was nothing to be done about it... “Sensors detect ambient radioactive readings consistent with a type III warp reactor... and large pieces of debris which would indicate something slightly larger than a scout-class vessel...”

Shohr noted his First Officer’s failure to address him as Captain, but let it go. The pudgy, pink-skinned Earther was going to have him court-martialled anyway. What mattered

was that Yeal had confirmed the Cardassians had already destroyed what was likely an Imperial Raider and murdered at least one crew.

“Weapons range, sir...”

No sooner had Ayr alerted Shohr to *Isadore’s* arrival in the combat zone than several proximity alerts began sounding around the bridge.

On the screen the Andorian was continuing to fire errant phaser blasts at the surprisingly nimble smaller Cardassian warships. It was obvious to Shohr what the Cardassian strategy was. The Cardassians were not as powerful as the *Shrar*, but by keeping in close quarters and striking as they moved with phasers only, they were keeping the large and elegant Battlecruiser from finding the room to target and destroy the smaller vessels. *Unorthodox thinking, not unlike something Brian Harris might have come up with years before*, thought *Shrar*...

“The approaching Cardassian is launching torpedoes!” shouted Ayr.

On screen the streaking warship that had come from the nebula fired a bright yellow ball of plasma which slammed into the Andorian’s long slender nose with a queer sort of impact. Before Shohr could call for Ayr’s readings on what had just happened, a second yellow ball of light erupted from the passing Cardassian’s tail and struck the Andorian ship a second time in nearly the same spot.

“Sir, the Battlecruiser’s shields appear to be destabilized... whatever the Cardassians hit them with has left them almost defenseless!”

“Mr. Ayr, target the nearest Cardassian warship and engage!” yelled Shohr.

Isadore streaked towards the battle and locked on to the *Asga*.

*

“Dal Rorlac, incoming Starfleet warship!”

“What!??” Rorlac pushed himself up from his seat and raced to the Sensor Post. His scarred frons flush with blood.

The *Asga* was so overtaxed with her unremitting attack on the Andorian Battlecruiser that Engineering had pulled power away from long-range sensors to keep the impulse reactors charging. They’d blinded themselves to the incoming threat. Calls were only now coming in from the *Terratt* and *Khintic* warning Rorlac of the massive Starfleet beast bearing down on him.

“Power to aft shields! Come hard about! Signal D’gad!!!” Rorlac spun on his heel and was struck by the panic in his men’s eyes.

An instant later, *Asga* was listing in space. Her primary impulse drive was shattered and the only power the creaking old warship could pull came from her emergency batteries.

Isadore steaked by. Her phasers charged and targeting beams searching for quarry. Her forward torpedo tubes automatically reloading.

*

“Gul Gisgak, *Asga* has been disabled by the Starfleet ship, two direct photon hits!” Called up the trooper from the Communications Pit on the bridge of the *Khintic*.

“Signal the *Banot*, form up with the *Terratt*!” Gisgak consulted the tactical screen on the *Khintic’s* secondary viewer and groaned.

The Andorian's shields were failing, just as Ligan said they would, but with only the *Khintic* and the *Terratt* engaged and a Starfleet warship closing, reinforcements were swiftly needed. Gisgak screamed his command to employ an evasive roll to starboard while maintaining fire on the Andorian. For the moment, thought the experienced Gisgak, the safest place to be until the *Banot* and *Kreke Disac* arrived, was as close to the massive silver Andorian as possible.

Khintic rolled along and up the *Shrar's* port nacelle wing, unloading short phaser bursts as she careened wildly close to the silver skin of the great Battlecruiser. The *Terratt* came sharp about, narrowly avoiding a ball of red plasma flung from the rapidly closing *Isadore's* torpedo bay. Dal Bin could see what Gisgak was doing and ordered his own vessel to continue to attack the Andorian at close quarters. On deck four of the *Terratt* a trooper assigned to relay stoking watched in horror through a tiny viewport as the *Khintic* came into view. She raced along the Andorian, rolling so close that one of her blades sparked off the Battlecruiser's hull. The young soldier dropped his tools at that instant and thought certainly that the *Khintic* was about to smash into their enemy.

*

Isadore swept past the *Shrar* at full impulse. She'd left one Cardassian vessel floating harmlessly in space, having destroyed her impulse engines and crippled her power grid with two torpedoes. Her second target though had managed to peel away from a third torpedo and managed to find cover alongside the *Shrar* herself. Shohr was roaring orders to the Helm and Tactical. Both Ayr and Dirlo were performing well. Even Yeal was being cooperative in the moment, using his planetary sensors to glean tactical information on the enemy ships Mr. Ayr's garbled sensors could not find.

"The warship we passed is adrift, they have life support, but no sub-light engines..." Nigel was now leaning over the scope built into his science console. This was all wrong.

"Pity," spat Shohr, before ordering Ensign Dirlo to bring *Isadore* around for another run.

Ayr was preparing to engage the fast-moving warships circumnavigating the distressed Andorian Battlecruiser when Commander Yeal yelled out that a fourth Cardassian warship had just entered his limited sensor range and was fast approaching. A quick sweep with the navigational sensors alerted Dirlo that the incoming warship was on a collision course.

"Helm, evasive package three! Sound Collision Alert!" ordered Shohr as he braced himself.

*

The *Banot* blasted fourth like a demon from the dark clouds of the Umoth and headed directly towards the underbelly of blue/silver Starfleet warship. Dal Ghadett was supposed to have delivered the death knell for the Andorian Battlecruiser, but now his *Banot* was going to collide with a mighty Starfleet menace instead.

"Starfleet vessel now in range, Dal Ghadett," said the Glinn manning the *Banot's* Weapons Post.

Every man serving aboard the *Banot* was a seasoned, professional soldier. Battle tested – on land and in space. To this point all the Fifth Order had done out here, thought

Ghadett, was cower to a lacky from the Obsidian Order and murder little blue children in old tin boxes. This beast the *Banot* raced towards though, this ugly Starfleet travesty, this was the metal against which Ghadett, his crew, indeed the entire Fifth Order would test their resolve.

“Ready forward torpedo,” Ghadett growled from his command chair.

The Starfleet vessel was beginning to roll on her axis in an attempt to evade the inevitable. Ghadett smiled and wasn’t surprised to find he’d become sexually aroused as they raced towards the bizarre saucer shaped fore-hull of the Starfleet ship.

“Torpedo ready, sir. Approaching minimal safe distance...”

“Hold.”

Isadore, like all *Excelsior*-class Starships was a sleek and graceful vessel. At warp speed, regardless of the failed promise of Transwarp, she was uncatchable. At full impulse she was surprisingly agile. Short of full impulse though, she lumbered somewhat and required a great deal of room to maneuver owing to her immense size.

“Hold.”

Ghadett wasn’t sure how her captain had managed to get reliable sensor readings given the scrambling effect the Cardassian ships were generating, but it pleased him to think the human, or Vulcan or whatever lesser lifeform sitting on that behemoth’s bridge, could see death coming. No ship as large as the Starfleet vessel only seconds ahead of the *Banot* could evade such an attack.

“FIRE!”

*

Aboard the *Kreke Disac* the Communications Officer reported to Dalin Kom that the *Khintic* and *Terratt* had both called for reinforcement. Kom had ordered two troopers to remove Gul D’gad’s body and was now seated on the dais of the great ship. Ligan had resumed his seemingly preferred place just to the right and slightly behind the command chair.

“Well, Dalin Kom, this is interesting. A Starfleet ship suddenly inserted into our operations. What are your thoughts on how we should handle this?” purred Ligan into the young Dalin’s ear.

“Status of the *Asga*?” Kom adjusted himself in D’gad’s chair. He wasn’t ready for this command, but he couldn’t allow the others to sense he wasn’t prepared for such a duty.

“Sir, sensors have the *Asga* adrift. She seems intact, but she doesn’t respond to hails.” The trooper manning the impressive sensor array console had a real-time display of the battle running for Dalin Kom and Mr. Ligan to see.

“I wonder, Dalin... what is the status of our Primary Target?” Ligan whispered this into Kom’s right ear. D’gad actually dying before the sortie was complete was unexpected but having young Kom to manipulate was proving even more effective. The young man didn’t have enough real-world experience to question many of Ligan’s suggestions. In fact, he seemed grateful to have the dark-skinned Agent of the Obsidian Order at his side to help guide him through this somewhat remarkable episode.

“The Andorian? Their status, I mean.” Kom swallowed hard and hoped nobody noticed.

"The Andorian's shields are failing, Dalin. *Khintic* and *Trerratt* continue to engage at extremely close range, *Banot* is attacking the Starfleet ship... *Banot* has hit the Starfleet ship with a concussive torpedo and is proceeding to attack the Andorian Battlecruiser!"

Everyone on the bridge turned to see the tactical readouts for themselves. Dal Ghadett had in fact scored a direct hit on the Starfleet warship and was proceeding to strafe the Andorian with phaser fire.

"You have no choice now, Gul Kom..." whispered Ligan so quietly that had he not almost had his lips to the young man's ear, Kom would never have heard him.

A perverted thrill raced up Kom's back and he could feel his neck ridges begin to flush. *Gul Kom, the Obsidian Order Agent just called me Gul Kom.* He thought to himself. Suddenly he felt as though he'd downed half a bottle of kanar in a single sitting.

"...the time is now. You know the tactics. Lead us to victory." Ligan stood upright and without pausing, or saying another word, quietly slunk away from the bridge. There was an independent transmitter in the viewing room accessible to only Gul D'gad and Ligan himself. He would establish contact with the Order and appraise them of the situation.

"Time to intercept with the invaders?" asked Kom, suddenly full of bravado.

"At maximum impulse..."

"At warp one." Kom grasped the arms of the *Galor's* command chair and allowed himself a wide sneering smile.

"...at warp speed, sir?! We'd be there almost instantaneously," came the shaky response from the helmsman.

"Ready weapons systems. Battle Alert."

*

"Status?" Rorlac pulled himself off the deck and crawled back to his command chair.

Glinn Compar powered up the *Asga's* emergency lighting system and gently pulled the dead trooper from the operations console. Somehow the man had broken his neck. All around in the darkness came the groans and pained calls from the others who'd been violently thrown from their posts to the deck or into bulkheads. The air was acrid and foul-smelling. Somewhere a fire was burning. Compar slapped his meaty hand against the redundant status panel in a pathetic attempt to will it into functionality. The slap must have caused something to connect within the inner workings of the small screen though, as a ruddy yellow light appeared, and a simple ship diagnostic was listed.

"We..."—*cough*—"...we are on battery power only. Impulse control does not register. No shields. No weapons..."—*cough*—"...minimal sensors." Compar looked through the haze to where Rorlac sat, quietly bleeding from a gash above his left temple. Another scar.

"Helm..." Rorlac looked towards the helmsman's seat and saw the trooper was laid-out on the deck, dead, or unconscious. "Compar, take the Helm."

Glinn Compar looked over at the empty seat and found himself moving towards it without actually being aware that he was walking. He hadn't noticed that he too was bleeding badly down the back of his compromised pressure suit – but he knew he didn't feel quite right. Rorlac found he was suddenly very calm. He knew what needed to be done. For Cardassia.

Voices echoed through the *Asga's* groaning frame. Only the most basic life support systems still functioned. The engine compartment had depressurized when the impulse manifolds were destroyed by the Starfleet torpedo and the entire deck had been sealed automatically, trapping all six members of the engineering corps. The fading yellow diagnostic panel on the bridge was beginning to blink. As the air became increasingly acrid, Rorlac knew it was the batteries themselves that were burning.

"Screen?" Rorlac reached up and touched a finger to the gash over his left eye, then pulled off his ridiculous tubular helmet. Twice now the stupid thing had failed to protect him.

"...tactical only..." Compar replied in a weak rasp, and he called up the rudimentary tactical display.

They weren't so terribly far away from the fighting. The Starfleet devils appeared to be listing themselves. A seeping kind of pain began creeping into Rorlac's temple as he studied the colours and shapes displayed in low resolution ahead of him. Maybe I should have kept the helmet on, he thought to himself.

"Thrusters?" His voice sounded odd in his own head. Rorlac wondered if Compar heard any difference.

Glinn Compar felt oddly warm. He worked the mostly dark controls at the Helm and verified the readings the *Asga's* dying computer could relay. "...maneuvering thrusters only, but all..."—cough—"...fully fueled..."

The two men watched as an orange and yellow Imperial Emblem swept up and over the blue triangle... Rorlac grunted. *If that was the Banot...she just loosed her aft torpedo on the Andorian...* Thought Dalin Rorlac as the pain in his head grew and grew and his vision began to fade.

"Set course...213, no...218 by 76. Lock nav beams, all thrusters... fire..." Rorlac slumped out of his seat and landed ass-flat on the deck. He jerked and seized violently for a few seconds, then collapsed in a heap.

"...218 by 76...commit..."—cough.

The *Asga's* six solid fuel thrusters fired perfectly. Her navigational computer held the coordinates and the slowly dying vessel rocketed back into the fray.

22. Pyrrhic Victory

Shohr picked himself up off the hard decking in the center of *Isadore's* bridge. Memories of a similar situation aboard the *Victory* years earlier flooded his mind. He'd been thrown backwards, almost over the top of the command chair by the Cardassian attack – then *Isadore's* inertial dampeners over-compensated and threw him sprawling forward. His head screamed in agony and his left knee felt spongy as he dragged himself back into his command chair.

“Report!” Shohr clawed at the clasp on his tunic and tore the bib on his red uniform jacket open more violently than he intended. His head felt like it was on fire.

“Sir... fire control teams responding to EPS overloads on decks 9, 11 and 13... primary shield emitters offline, rerouting through secondary conduit feeds, attempting to reinitialize...” Ayr sounded pained and he cradled his left arm to his chest as he jabbed at his status board.

Slowly, the rest of the bridge crew began pulling themselves back to their stations. Commander Yeal had managed to hold fast at his science station but had dislocated his right shoulder in the tumult. “...the hostile has engaged the Andorians with the other two Cardassians...” Yeal managed through his pain.

“Ayr, get me shields. Ensign Dirlo, hard about full impulse!” Shohr pulled at the collar of his turtleneck, which suddenly seemed too tight around his throat. Not for the first time, Shohr recalled his time with poor dead Brian Harris.

“egghh... shields up, sir. Weapons online.” Ayr winced and tried to swallow the pain from his broken left wrist.

“We’re closing on the hostiles, Captain Ch’orithron,” Dirlo reported.

“Viewer forward...” Shohr took a deep breath and tried to center himself. On the screen before him he could easily make out the three Cardassian hostiles strafing the *Shrar* repeatedly.

“The Andorians have no active shielding, captain...” croaked Yeal. He was still furious at Ch’orithron, but for the moment he had no choice but to rely on the militant Andorian to get them through this chaos.

“Mr. Ayr, do your targeting beams still function?!” Yeal giving him tactical updates from the Science Station was irrationally angering Shohr.

“Aye, sir... it’s about all I can do now.”

Shohr caught sight of the young man’s twisted hand and swallowed the stinging rebuke he was about to unleash. “Target torpedoes on the hostile drawing aft of the *Shrar*, fire when ready.”

As *Isadore* reengaged, two red streaking balls of light belched from her silver/blue skin either side of her large blue deflector dish. The first torpedo slammed into the *Banot's* dorsal plates and brought down her shields – Dal Ghadett had ordered forward shields reenforced for the *Banot's* run on the Andorian, which left the dorsal and aft shields operating at minimal levels. The second torpedo caught the *Banot* on her starboard blade. The explosion was unimpressive, but as momentum carried the yellow Cardassian up and

away from the *Shrar*, hot plasma spilled out of the ragged hole *Isadore's* torpedo had blown through the blade.

*

"The Starfleet ship has reengaged General!" cried Ch'Atynnirh at his tactical panel.

U'Chtukilli grunted and quickly consulted the status panel mounted at his command chair. The Cardassians had hit them again with their mysterious, destabilizing torpedoes. He was ruefully thankful that *Isadore* had been successfully lured into responding; the fact *Shrar* required reinforcement, even from Starfleet, was hateful to Ekol.

Commander Siriav was helping coordinate damage control teams while yelling at the Survey Station to start sweeping the space around the ship with the planetary sensors – *Shrar* was still struggling in the midst of the Cardassian scattering field.

"Shields are gone, sir!" shouted Siriav over his shoulder.

"Ch'Atynnirh, target the nearest Cardassian and destroy it!" U'Chtukilli roared.

"Targeting beams are..."

"ENOUGH! We are members of the Imperial Guard! Not mewling children! DESTROY THOSE SHIPS!" Ekol pushed himself up and forward like a man possessed. How had this happened? How had the mightiest ship ever constructed in the history of the Andorian Empire been so completely bested by lowly Cardassians?

The chatter on the *Shrar's* bridge died down to next to nothing. Siriav stepped away from the status panels and began barking orders to the helmsman as Ch'Atynnirh manually searched for a target. They were all shamed in the presence of the old bald warrior seething in their midst.

The *Banot* had spun off somewhere astern of the *Shrar* after being struck down by two photon torpedoes fired from the approaching Starfleet Heavy Cruiser. Two Cardassian warships remained. One of the hostile vessels was strafing the port side stabilizing pylon, moving fore to aft – Ch'Atynnirh knew this simply because the damage control teams responding, coordinated their updates with the internal sensor returns flashing along the bottom of the general status screens located at every station on the bridge. The second hostile had just hit the portside impulse manifold and appeared to be moving forward along *Shrar's* dorsal plates.

Commander Siriav ordered the Helm to trigger the reverse thrusters and elevate the *Shrar's* long nose. He too had noted the pattern of damage the Cardassians were inflicting on their ship and hoped by making some clearance and lifting the nose, Ch'Atynnirh might gain a clean shot at one of their attackers.

*

Gul Gisgak was about to order the *Khintic* to dive beneath the Battlecruiser and commence yet another strafing run along the Andorian's ventral panels when the massive silver ship began pulling away from them. Before Gisgak, or anyone aboard the racing *Khintic* could react, their target had slipped back and beneath them and in a shattering second of light and fury... the icy blackness of space and death snuffed them out of existence.

*

Isadore's viewscreen flashed and went blank for a second. Where there had just been two actively hostile Cardassian warships marauding along the Andorian ship's bulkheads, there was now only one.

"Hells..."

"Sir?" Ayr was focused on his targeting screen. Working with one hand meant he couldn't take his eyes off his instruments for a second.

"The Andorians have destroyed one of the Cardassian warships, sir..." Yeal volunteered.

Isadore was closing rapidly on the hostiles, waiting to draw close enough to establish a reliable phaser lock, when the embattled Andorian Battlecruiser maneuvered herself into position to deliver a deadly photon attack. The explosion was blinding and the Andorian had been far too close to the detonation of her own torpedoes.

Shohr took a breath as he watched the *Shrarr* continue a slow arching spin through the flaming plasma cloud that had just seconds before been a Cardassian warship. *Hells*, had just seemed appropriate. Several piercing proximity alarms drew Shohr's attention away from the viewscreen... "Report."

"Collision alert, captain..." responded Nigel from the Science Station.

Shohr turned to look at his estranged First Officer and noticed for the first time that the man's arm was hanging at an unnatural angle. From the look on Yeal's face, Shohr gathered he too looked the worst for wear.

"Not us, Captain Ch'orithron, the Ando... the *Shrarr*." Yeal used his good arm to switch the viewer to a fresh angle. One of Captain Ch'orithron's antennae was limply hanging against his forehead. The sight was nauseating to Nigel.

Another Cardassian warship appeared on the main viewer. The dark yellow hulk appeared to be lifeless, but it was travelling on a clear trajectory towards the listing *Shrarr*.

"That's the hostile we disabled!" exclaimed Lt. Ayr.

"Not so disabled, then. Dirlo, intercept oncoming hostile. Ayr, standby on phasers..." Shohr was aware that there was another active Cardassian stalking the *Shrarr*, but the approaching wreck needed to be eliminated before it could strike the Battlecruiser.

Ensign Dirlo brought the *Isadore* around sharply and maintained nearly full impulse. Just as Lt. Ayr was about to lock on the *Isadore's* primary phasers another more urgent proximity alert sounded.

*

"Dalín Kom, Starfleet vessel in range, 224 by 128," came the call.

Kom wasted no time. "Fire!"

A trio of photons erupted from the *Kreke Disac's* forward tubes and slammed against the shields of the surprised Starfleet Heavy Cruiser. The silver/blue ship rolled heavily to starboard and blue luminescent plasma spilled from her port nacelle.

The *Kreke Disac* had dropped out of warp at barely minimal safe distance from their Starfleet target. The maneuver was ill-advised and extremely dangerous, but Kom had gambled and had won. The Starfleet crew likely had no idea what had just happened.

Kom thrust himself out of the command chair and struck a heroic pose on the daises... "Arm primary emitter and target the Andorians, signal Ready Three to standby, we'll take care of the Starfleet scum afterwards!"

*

"Report!" screamed U'Chtukilli from where he lay on the deck behind the command chair. The viewscreen was shattered. Only a handful of Guardsmen had managed to remain at their stations after the torpedo strike.

"Multiple contacts, General! Readings make no sense!"

Ekol tried to move but couldn't. It was young Ch'Atynnirh speaking. There was no sign of Siriav. "FIND A TARGET AND FIRE!"

Ch'Atynnirh slapped at his console and pulled himself back up to his stool. All that was left were the manual targeting beams. There was no Helm, no sensors...just basic targeting returns pinging off the directional sensors tied to the primary bank of phase emitters in the portside wing. Blindly trusting the blurry returns the *Shrar's* most primitive sensors showed him were in fact, hostiles and not sensor ghosts, or worse, their Starfleet allies, Ch'Atynnirh fired.

Three of the four phaser emitters in the *Shrar's* port bank flared and discharged their deadly white-hot bursts of energy. One of the bolts of phased energy passed by the creeping *Terratt*. The other two bolts tore through the *Terok-class* Cruiser's hull like a hot knife through kregan-butter. Dal Bin and his entire crew were dead almost instantly as the *Terratt* crumpled and decompressed.

Neither young Ch'Atynnirh, nor old General U'Chtukilli had any way of knowing they'd successfully destroyed a second Cardassian warship. *Shrar's* bridge was dark.

The *Isadore* rolled comically off the *Shrar's* far portside. The mighty *Kreke Disac* was bearing down on the crippled Andorian, diverting her power to the ridiculously large phaser emitter recessed in the center of the yellow monster's deflector array...

The *Asga*, set on her final course before losing all power, began sliding by the listing *Shrar*. Had Ch'Atynnirh not triggered the primary phasers and caused the *Shrar* to slide into a slightly different spin trajectory because of the recoil, perhaps the *Asga* would have drifted harmlessly by. As it was, *Shrar's* nose, fronted by the command deck and bridge, impacted with the tip of *Asga's* starboard blade. As the *Asga* continued on slowly falling into the depths of the Umoth Nebula, a trail of sparkling shards of duranium, transparent aluminum and debris was pulled along from the long gash left where U'Chtukilli's bridge had been.

*

"RECOVER! RECOVER!" Shohr gripped both arms of his command chair as alarms blared, and lights flashed.

"Where the hell did they come from!??" shouted Nigel Yeal at his science station.

"Energizers overloading! Inertia dampeners failing in the secondary hull! I have thruster control only!" Ensign Dirlo frantically fired and released the various maneuvering thrusters positioned around the outer hull to stop *Isadore* from rolling wildly.

"Ayr, target that ship with everything we have!" Shohr felt nauseous. He had no idea where the yellow Cardassian craft had come from, but he knew completely where he intended to send it.

Aboard the *Kreke Disac*, Dalin Kom had just watched Dal Rorlac's *Asga* collide with the Andorian Battlecruiser. The sensors aboard the *Galor*-class Cruiser functioned just fine. The network of sensor drones deployed throughout the nebula eliminated any interference the Cardassians might otherwise expect. They understood there no life signs aboard *Asga* as she smeared the Andorian's nose into a ragged mess. Dal Rorlac had died a true son of Cardassia. Kom stated on the record that he personally would be recommending Rorlac for the Order of Cardassian Honour upon the completion of their mission.

The entire bridge crew of the *Kreke Disac* were on their feet, solemnly watching the *Asga* fade into the radioactive clouds. Even Mr. Ligan had returned to the bridge to see the final sacrifice for himself.

"It's inspiring, such sacrifice."

Dalin Kom didn't respond to Ligan's observation. Obviously, it was inspiring.

"Dalin Kom?" The trooper manning the Tactical Post spoke in a subdued tone, not wanting to appear disrespectful at this exact moment.

"Tactical, report." Kom watched *Asga* sink into obscurity and slowly took his seat in Gul D'gad's command chair.

"Sir, primary emitter charged to sixty percent. Permission to fire?"

Kom looked around at the men manning their stations and felt the patriotic fervor coursing through them. Their mission from the outset was clear. Lure the Andorian Battlecruiser into a trap, engage it with overwhelming unorthodox tactics and destroy it. Safeguard the borders of the Empire and send a clear message to the Imperial Guard and the member systems of the hated Federation that Cardassia is not to be tested.

After glancing at the situational boards and seeing the Starfleet vessel was still adrift, Kom decided to take another tactical gamble...

"Bring the primary emitter to maximum charge, trooper. I want to obliterate that hateful Andorian monstrosity."

"Sir?"

"Is there a problem, trooper?" Kom sat back in his seat and struck an authoritative pose as he could.

"To get the emitter to maximum charge, I'd have to cycle in power from shields and screens..."

"Then you'd better be quick about it."

Ligan, who'd been standing just beside and below Dalin Kom, looked up and almost warned the young man off his course of action, but stopped himself short. Each man leading the squadron had been specially selected for a reason. The Dals and Guls were now all dead. All Ligan had to work with was this jumped up Glinn – but better young Kom than nobody. D'gad, though dying, had been chosen to hold the four commanders and the entire united force together during this odd little adventure. D'gad had served his purpose. Now, with the final blow at hand, Ligan had to rely on Kom to keep the crew of the *Kreke Disac* on task.

"Yes, sir. Bringing primary emitter to *full power*." The trooper turned to his board and siphoned power from the shields and lateral sensor arrays.

The *Kreke Disac* and her sister ships were prototypes. They were heavily armed, well equipped state-of-the-art mechanisms of war – which still relied largely upon power plants, reactors, and distribution systems from proven, smaller vessels. The projected trial period for the seven *Galors* was to last at least a decade. After this time the vessels would be recalled, the data collected on all their systems would be collated and adjustments would be made to correct whatever shortcomings the class experienced to ensure a successful run of generational vessels going forward. The entire process would see the first run of production *Galors* enter wide-spread service in fifteen to twenty years.

The primary emitter was designed to counter the suspected Andorian advances in large-scale phaser bank groupings. Building a heavy emitter had not been an issue for the Yards orbiting Cardassia Minor; finding a way to power such a large emitter properly and consistently had been an issue. The crew of *Kreke Disac* had been taught the only way to fully charge this new weapon was to reroute power from the reactors and energizers which normally ran the vessel's defensive shields and sensors housed in the *Galor's* lateral arrays. To bring the primary weapon to strength meant blinding the ship to potential predators and leaving her unshielded.

*

"I've stabilized the ship, sir. Bringing her about to 48 by 132."

"Well done, Ensign. Mr. Ayr, lock weapons." Shohr scanned the view screen for any sign of the *Shrar*, or the enormous Cardassian Warship that had very nearly dropped out of warp on top of them.

Lt. Ayr was struggling at his console. Damage control teams were working throughout the ship and Sickbay had reported a stream of severely injured crewmen coming off station for treatment. There was no one to relieve the bridge crew. Yeal had collapsed at the Science Station during the ship's long, uncontrolled roll. He was writhing in agony on the deck – something more than just his shoulder had been broken. P'nom, still unable to make any use of her Communications Station owing to the Cardassian scattering field, had taken up Yeal's duties.

Slowly, *Isadore* turned her bow up and over to where the hideous looking yellow warship hung like some lithe hooded snake waiting to strike. As the yellow ship crawled across the view screen, Shohr grunted and swallowed the agony that was thundering around his own head.

"Time to intercept?"

"Impulse reactors are down, Captain Ch'orithron...we've got maneuvering thrusters only at the moment." P'nom still wore her earpiece as she worked at Yeal's sensor console. Her jet-black bobbed haircut was a mess and her red uniform tunic had been ripped along the seam at her left arm. As she ran scans of the Cardassian hostile, she also listened to the various reports streaming up to the bridge from throughout the ship.

"Weapons?"

"Mmmph... forward tubes armed and ready... phasers charged and standing-by... eight seconds to weapons range." An oily sheen of sweat had broken out on Ayr's forehead.

"Captain, reading a massive buildup energy at the enemy's bow... if these returns are correct, the Cardassian's shields are down, and they have no active sensor lock on us..."

P'nom checked her readings twice more before turning to face Shohr, slumping slowly in his chair.

“They think we’re dead... Mr. Ayr?”

“Locking phasers... targeting torpedoes... three seconds...”

“Sir, the energy readings at the Cardassian’s bow are starting to plateau...”

“Mr. Ayr, fire NOW!”

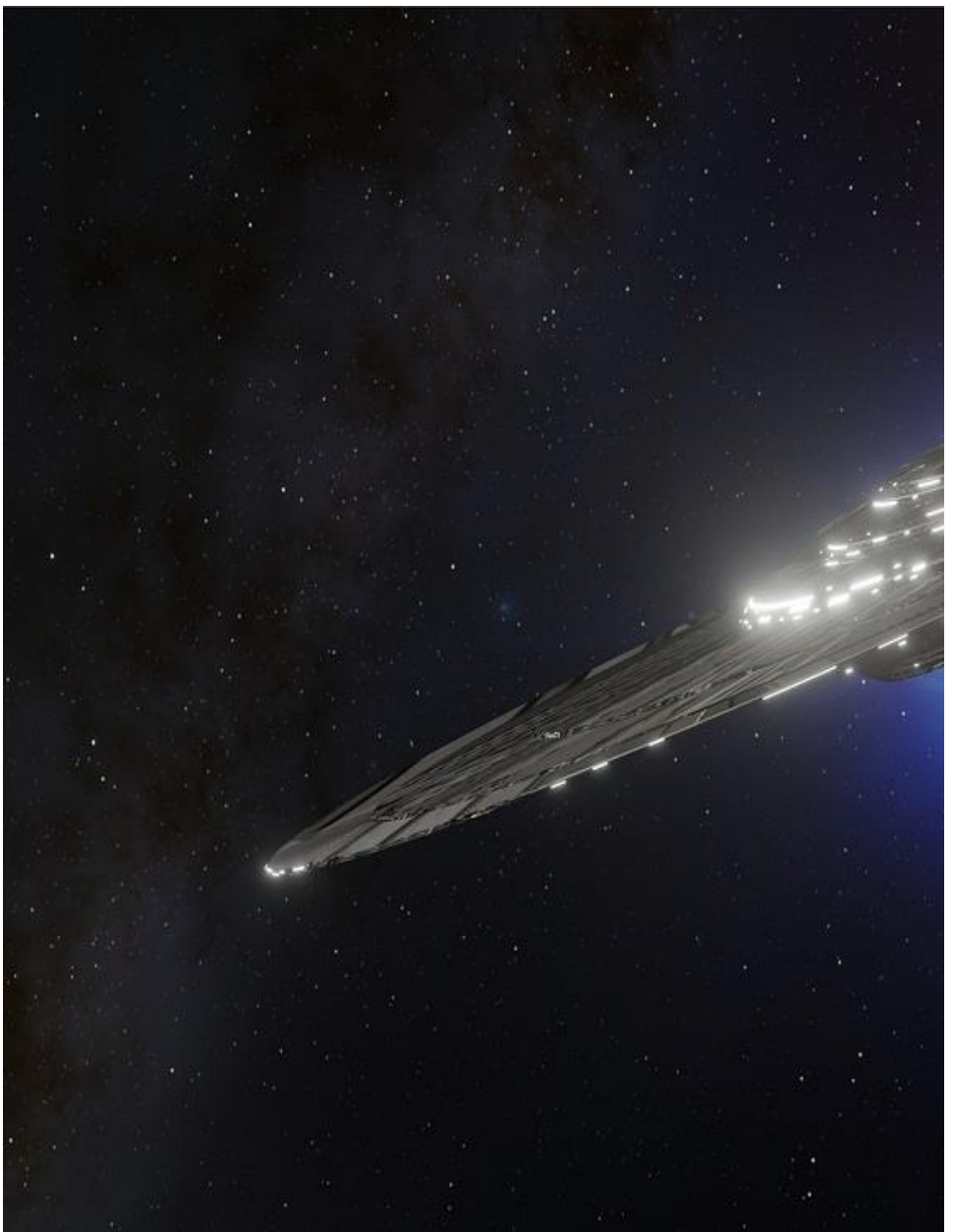


Figure 8:N12. Published 23 Oct. 2021 Pixabay Licence Free

23. N12, Six Days Ago

The enormous *Nimrod* Heavy Cruiser skimmed along at a brisk warp 8.8. Her black hull barely a blur against the inky vacuum. Maureen Bautlin sat quietly in the N12's spartan Ready Room gazing out the viewport as the nothingness blurred by. They'd set out from Jupiter in something of a hurry when Operative Demby had picked up an open-loop subspace transmission on the Epsilon Network originating from the Hakton VII installation. Such transmissions were used by Section Agents to signal for assistance in extreme emergency situations under the guise of sending along benign information. Once the transmission was decoded and Maureen saw that someone was sending the USS *Isadore* new deployment orders, she had no choice but to muster a response.

The door from the bridge chimed pleasantly. Maureen rose from the perch she'd taken on the single low leather sofa and quickly adjusted her uniform. She still technically held the rank of Admiral, though she hadn't worn a Starfleet uniform since her last trip to Paris.

"Enter."

The door hushed open, and the newly promoted Captain Xillion stepped into the room. He wore the standard black close-fitting jumpsuit all Section Operatives were issued. The tight-knit material accentuated the stalky man's broad shoulders and the four subtle Captain's strips stitched into the fabric of his right shoulder were a mark of pride for the man.

"Captain Xillion, have we arrived?" Maureen's hair had turned an iron grey and she wore it back in a loose bun. The stresses of the last two years had taken a toll.

"ETA forty-five minutes, Admiral. We just intercepted a priority communique from the Central Command on Cardassia Prime to the Federation Council." Xillion handed the Admiral a pad and gave her a moment to review the decoded message.

"They've declared their official borders in the unaligned space along the Actium and Delta Sectors now encompass everything from Athos IV to well past Veloz Prime..."

"Yes, ma'am. They've also declared a claim on Alpha 441, Panora, Bryma and Solosos III." Xillion stood at attention. N12 was to be his ship, by the grace of Admiral Bautlin. He was willing to go above and beyond for the Admiral to demonstrate his gratitude for both his promotion and the impressive Starship he was given to command.

"Has the Federation Council responded?"

"Not yet, Admiral. The Cardassians did withdraw their ambassadors from Veloz Prime earlier, but the concern was a possible Cardassian alliance with the Tzenkethi..."

"Yes... our friend, General U'Chtukilli was addressing that concern along with the Imperial Guard." Maureen handed Captain Xillion back his pad.

She had little doubt that U'Chtukilli had been behind the transmission. Why he had sought to reach out to *Isadore* had been a mystery, but if the true Cardassian threat was at Alpha 441 in the Actium Sector and not along the Tzenkethi border in the Gamma Sector...

"I've alerted the crew to be ready for an engagement upon arrival, Admiral. Mr. Teague has seemingly done a marvellous job with our engine plant, and all weapons stand ready; however, we're still just one vessel."

Xillion kept his voice calm, but his expressive eyes let Maureen know what her young Captain was really trying to say. She tugged at her own black uniform, cut in the style of the standard Starfleet “reds”, but void of any decoration. “We didn’t work this hard to get N12 up and running just to have her torn apart in a firefight, Captain Xillion.”

“No, ma’am.” Xillion offered Admiral Bautlin a curt nod and turned to leave her with her thoughts.

Maureen waited for the Ready Room door to seal before turning back to the viewport. She wondered if she should have brought Teague along, just in case they ran into trouble. For that matter she thought, why hadn’t she brought 93 along for back-up? U’Chtukilli had called for help. That’s all she knew. Whether it had been her duty or not as the head of Section Operations, she would have come looking for him... this new piece of the puzzle though, worried her. She wouldn’t have a lot of time to investigate or linger. Section Command had served her with a summons that needed answering as well. Barring interstellar war, Maureen had to get from the Terran to the Actium Sector and back again in a handful of days.

*

Shohr Ch’orithron’s personal log:

It has been a week since the USS Isadore and her crew came into conflict with a swarm of four Cardassian warships and a Heavy Cruiser unlike anything ever attributed to the Cardassian Empire.

The official ship’s log details in earnest the events leading Isadore to this place, including a copy of the dispatch orders received while on station in the Sierra Sector. Orders which I now suspect were somehow faked.

I wish to make clear for the record that I am prepared to answer for my actions and those of my ship, regardless of the consequences. Commander Nigel Yeal, my First Officer, intended to... report me for violating protocol and endangering the ship when I committed Isadore to an engagement in what we all felt was likely a hostile area of operations without first contacting Starfleet Command. Mr. Yeal was correct in this. I failed in my duty as Isadore’s captain to safeguard both my ship and crew by adhering to regulations.

Mr. Yeal performed his duties diligently throughout. Remained at his post and served his ship in the finest Starfleet tradition. He succumbed to internal injuries suffered during our engagement with Cardassians at 0930 hours this morning in the Infirmary aboard the IGC Shrar. As his commanding officer, I would recommend Commander Yeal for consideration of the Distinguished Service Award. He was no warrior, but he was a far better man than I.

All told, I lost forty-six people in under an hour. Meritorious Service Ribbons are humbly recommended for all.

Among my dead... Yeoman Danelle Tracy. Assigned to Fire Suppression Damage Control – lost her life attempting to quell a burn-out on Deck 11 when the secondary EPS conduits overloaded following a Cardassian attack which used some sort of seismic, or concussive explosive device meant to destabilize Isadore’s shields.

Danelle had dreams of returning to the Academy to earn... To serve as an officer in the Engineering Division. Special recommendation for consideration of a posthumous induction into the Academy's Engineering Roll.

Isadore is adrift.

We managed to recover from a surprise attack by the unidentified Cardassian Warship described in greater technical detail in the official logs. Through the unremitting courage of the crew, we disabled that horrendous vessel with two direct torpedo strikes and three volleys of phaser fire. At the time, we believed Isadore could be recovered and the Andorian Battlecruiser tractored to safety; however, we were then set upon by three modified Cardassian shuttles, each carrying the same seismic weapons which had nearly rendered Isadore defenseless earlier. Two of these shuttles delivered their weapons in tandem along the aft quarter of Isadore's engineering hull, the third hostile crashed into our starboard nacelle.

The whereabouts of the two surviving hostiles is not known.

Isadore's reactor has been secured, but her impulse drive is irreparably damaged, and her life-support systems are destroyed. There is no way to recover the ship.

I have ordered Isadore evacuated and we've relocated our survivors and wounded aboard the IGC Shrar, which is herself badly damaged as a result of this Cardassian aggression. My Chief Engineer and most of his staff perished when Isadore's emergency bulkheads failed to engage after the second seismic weapon deployed by the attacking shuttles caused Deck 12 to decompress.

My Chief of Operations, Mr. Rhupp is assisting the Andorian crew with retrofitting an auxiliary control point from which to re-establish control over their vessel. Their command deck and commanding officers have been destroyed.

I had the opportunity yesterday to survey the Andorian commander's quarters while examining the remains of the command deck with several Imperial Guard techs to try and regain some system controls. The Lieutenant who accompanied me on this sortie had to provide me with an EV suit as most of the bridge has been torn open to space and is completely ruined.

General U'Chtukilli's quarters had been located on the command deck of the Shrar. I met the man shortly before being given command of Isadore... in fact it was Admiral U'Chtukilli who informed me of my promotion to Captain and my assignment to Isadore. I mention that because...

Doesn't matter.

I retrieved a collection of data discs from a terminal in the General's quarters. Neither the discs, nor the terminal are Andorian tech. Owing to the fact I have strong personal reservations concerning the General himself, I've decided to keep the discs until I can turn them over to Starfleet security or find a way to review them myself. I won't record what I suspect about former Admiral U'Chtukilli here, but I will offer sworn testimony when the time comes...

In addition to being a failure as a captain, I suppose you can add thief to my list of inadequacies.

Sensors remain offline on the Shrar. Before leaving Isadore for the last time, my acting Science Officer, Lieutenant P'nom noted that the drifting Cardassian Heavy Cruiser, while disabled, was still emitting energy signatures. It is our... fear, that the Cardassians can recover their vessel and resume their attack before we are able to find our way back to friendly space.

I have hope that the surviving crew of Isadore are successful in assisting their Andorian counterparts in restoring engines and navigation.

I will remain in command until the souls aboard this vessel are saved, after which time I intend to surrender my commission and submit to any court martial or civilian authority which seeks to prosecute me.

This log ends.

24. Cor Coroli

Moddax took a shallow breath and tried not to move too much as he strained to hold his bladder. They'd been floating motionless in space for nearly eleven hours after charging away from Ganymede at maximum warp for three hours in a blind rush not to be late for some rendezvous. The *Giv-glove-Days*, or whatever Wegaos had called the two deaf soldiers posted to the head of the shuttle's cabin, hadn't moved from their posts, but Moddax could see the two fit Tellarites starting to wiggle in place. The over-shagged, gawdy shuttle seemed to have every amenity – except a head.

Wegaos exploded into yet another shouting tirade with the shuttle's pilot about missing their connection because of the younger man's ineptness at the conn. The pilot, a Tellarite much younger than Wegaos, named Frevrir Grorn, vehemently argued back that it was not he who was to blame. It was the failing of whomever they were waiting on for not being at the designated coordinates at the specified time. Frevrir Grorn was apparently, according to himself anyway, a most excellent pilot and he'd managed to get them to the rendezvous two hours ahead of time.

Moddax watched as the great boar shifted himself uncomfortably in his recliner and fumbled to unstrap the deadly pistol he'd had resting on his great belly.

"Bah! I need to take a piss, Frevrir Grorn!" Wegaos snarled.

"We all need to piss, Wegaos Skeffef! They are not showing! I will set course for Durmon's Asteroid" –*snort*– "at warp three; we can be there in half an hour!" replied the maligned pilot from beyond the purple and gold shagged cabin.

"Frevrir Grorn you will hold this position and hold your bladder!" roared Wegaos from his great chair.

Moddax was now in a great deal of discomfort. He desperately wanted off the shuttle and away from the increasingly irritable Wegaos Skeffef. None of the Tellarites aboard would share with him just who, or what it was they intended to rendezvous with.

What could Wegaos want to talk about? Moddax had been meticulous in his dealings with the old Tellarite – cautious to a fault not to jeopardize his connection to the great man. He'd been equally cautious not to ever let old Wegaos get a sniff of the other activities he engaged in. *What might smooth things over and convince Skeffef to return him to K3?*

"He's dying you know!"

Wegaos stopped his griping with Frevrir up front and looked at Thayer Moddax with his dull yellow eyes wide behind the thick folds of skin ringing them. Even the two deaf guards seemed to be taken by surprise at Moddax's sudden gesticulations and sudden outburst.

"Teague, I mean. She didn't tell U'Chtukilli that when he came to audit us months ago..." Moddax began to accept that it was only a matter of *when* and not *if* he was going to void his bladder all over Wegaos Skeffef's lovely red leather couch and gold shag carpet.

"What?!" Wegaos managed with a subtle jaw-pop.

“That amped-up pattern buffer she installed on 74. It shredded Teague’s mitochondrial DNA... she told you Dr. Ploum stabilized him, but she didn’t tell you that his condition is chronic...”

Wegaos shifted his girth subtly. He was ready to burst. “What does it matter?! Teague fixed N12. Bautlin achieved her mission goal. U’Chtukilli cleared her! Bah!”

Moddax couldn’t help himself from shaking his head and dropping his dark, dark eyes to his feet at that moment. They were all so willing to overlook Bautlin’s failings. Before Mr. Moddax could correct himself, Wegaos was on his broad feet snarling. The old pig had thrown himself up and out his chair so fast that he’d sent his own disruptor flying across the cabin towards Thayer – who only then realized he’d just given a nearly unforgivable offence by breaking eye contact and looking to the ground.

The disruptor thudded to the floor by Moddax’s left foot, its ridiculously large grip had even landed facing the black robed human.

Wegaos had been incensed and acted without thinking.

Moddax caught a whiff of foul-smelling urine and realized Wegaos Skeffef no longer needed the head. He eyed the weapon laying at his feet and –

The Glev glov Nansh closest to Moddax reacted like a jungle cat and flew from his spot at the head of the cabin into the human’s torso. Thayer Moddax was sent spinning off the red sofa and slammed into the rear bulkhead like a sack of wheat to land painfully, face-down in the shag.

Perversely, Moddax was proud that he’d not wet himself. He had no intention of picking up the pistol! What good would it have done him?

Wegaos was raging. Angry at Moddax for disrespecting him so completely and embarrassed by his wet pants. On the floor, Moddax prepared himself for the beating or execution he imagined was about to follow.

*

“Captain Xillion, we have the shuttle on short-range monitors,” reported the Operative stationed at N12’s Ops Console.

“Thank you. Helm, hold at three thousand kilometers. Transporter, stand ready. Comms, transmit greeting and encoded challenge.” Xillion sat confidently in his command chair on the bridge of N12 and watched as the Operatives around him executed his orders without question.

Admiral Bautlin stepped onto N12’s bridge just as the Communications Operative was confirming the battered little shuttle’s successful answer to their challenge.

“Captain Xillion, the shuttle requests Section Controller Skeffef be transported directly to his quarters.”

Xillion turned to face the young man posted to the Comms Array to ask the Operative to get clarification, but he caught sight of Admiral Bautlin subtly nodding at him from just outside the Ready Room. He took the sign to mean *leave it alone* and had the Transporter Chief lock onto Controller Skeffef’s personal tracer and beam him directly to quarters. A moment later, as per the Admiral’s direction, Mr. Moddax was beamed directly into N12’s brig. The battered and worn green shuttle, complete with its pilot and two Glev glov Nansh soldiers, was pulled into N12’s docking bay and secured.

In a blinding flash of light, the sleek black Starship jumped to warp and was gone without a trace; *en route* to answer Section Command's summons.

*

"Wegaos Skeffef!" shouted the shuttle's pilot as the great boar raged and the Glev glov Nansh recovered themselves and primed their weapons.

"WHAT!!?" roared Wegaos in reply. He was on the edge of losing all control. Summons or no summons he was prepared to end Thayer Moddax here and now.

"They here, Wegaos Skeffef! Receiving challenge now."

Moddax recovered himself somewhat, but remained on the deck, submissive. He cursed himself for breaking eye contact the way he had. It was a stupid, reckless mistake.

Wegaos breathed heavily for a second. The man who'd so explosively floored Thayer Moddax had retrieved the loose disruptor and secured it. That threat was neutralized.

"Transmitting answer to challenge..." called Frevrir Grorn back to Wegaos from the cockpit.

Skeffef took two steps backwards. He still didn't trust himself not to kill the treacherous human where he lay. The smell of his own urine filled his nostrils, and he knew he dare not resume his comfortable seat less he ruin his shuttle's wonderful recliner.

"Response accepted!" –snort– "Wegaos Skeffef, we drop screens for transfer, then dock, yes?" Frevrir stuck his head around the open hatch from the cockpit and popped his jaw.

"Frevrir Grorn, first have them transport me, Section Controller Skeffef, directly to my quarters! I won't be seen like... this." Wegaos sneered at Thayer.

"Wegaos... Wegaos, wait!" Moddax felt a tear escape his right eye. The young soldier hadn't really hurt him, but the pain in his groin and guts was intolerable.

"What?!"

Moddax had no doubt that his relationship with Wegaos Skeffef was well and truly over now. The only thing worse than belittling and disrespecting a Tellarite the way he had just done, was causing them public humiliation. Wegaos would never forgive *Thayer Moddax* for making him piss his trousers in front of these other space pigs...

Space pigs... Moddax almost smiled at that, but quickly stopped himself. A smile right now would mean death. "Wegaos, where... where are you taking me?"

Before Wegaos Skeffef, pissy pants and all, dematerialized in what looked to Moddax like an old-style Starfleet transporter beam the angry boar sneered and growled...

"Bah! Stupid human. You going to Cor Coroli. You end on Cor Coroli."

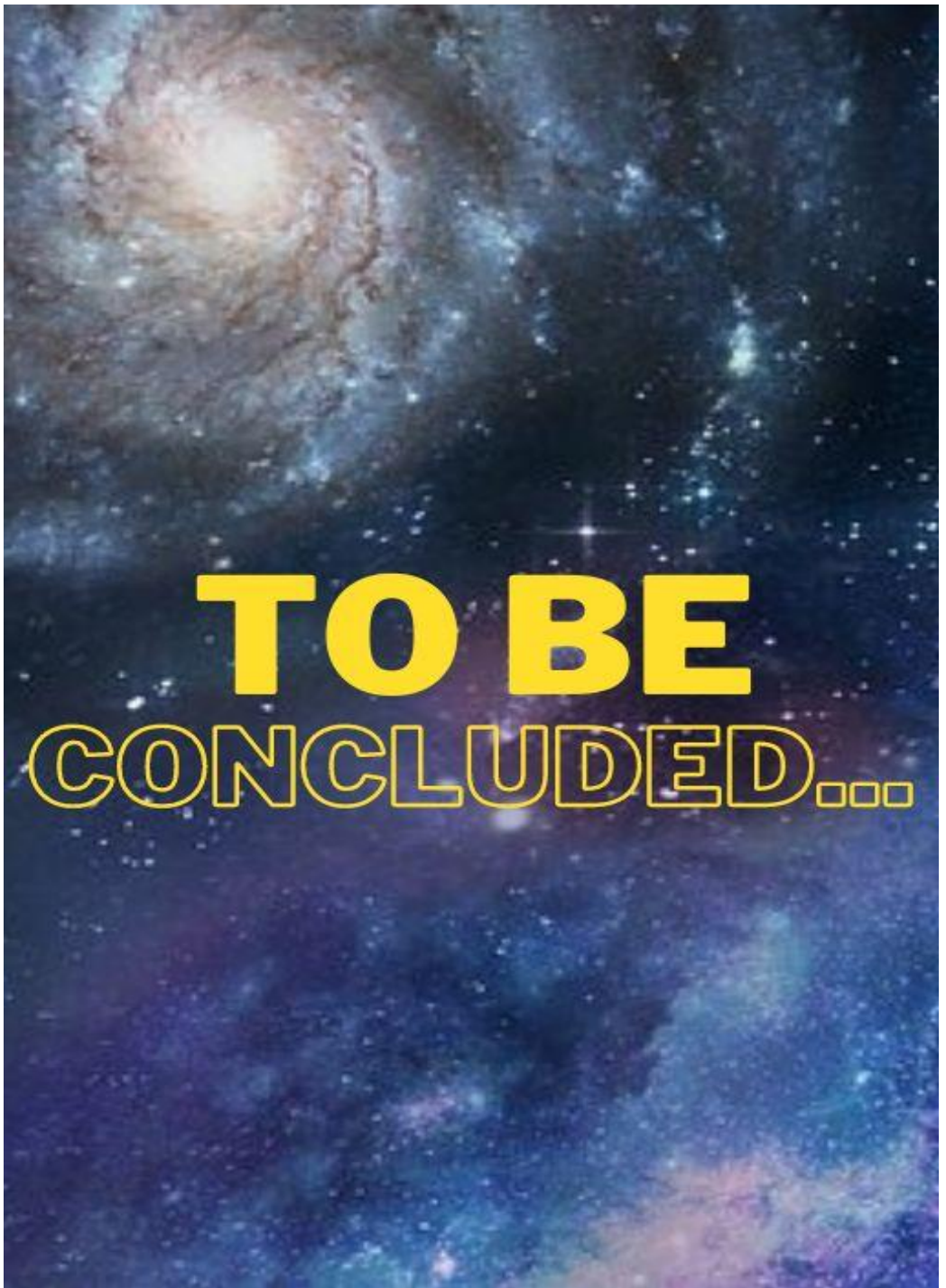


Figure 9: Cosmic Backdrop. Published 28 Aug. 2019 Pixabay Licence Free