GLENN G MAITLAND

COR COROLI

Cor Coroli

Book Two

A Work of Star Trek Fan Fiction

BY: GLENN G G MAITLAND

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Table of Contents

C	or Coroli	2
	Aftermath: The Battle of the Umoth Nebula	8
	1. 20 Steps	.14
	2. San Francisco	.17
	3. Fury	.19
	4. Shanghaied	.21
	5. Kreke Disac	.26
	6. Rescue	.29
	7. One Alpha – Zero	.31
	8. Underway	.33
	9. Bonsho	.34
	10. Space Dock 17	.37
	11. Rondac III	.41
	12. Rendezvous	.44
	13. Marooned	.45
	14. En Route	.48
	15. Damage Control	.52
	16. Conservator	.54
	17. Observations	.55
	18. RA 8h 37m 14.6s Dec -5* 22'	.57
	19. Detenu	.60
	20. Apprehension	.62
	21. Post Conventum, Paris	.65
	22. Revelations	.68
	23. Talbot	.70

25. Rue Saint-Dominique	75
26. Discovery	77
27. Groundwork	80
28. Disclosure	83
29. Preliminary	85
30. Badlands	87
31. Diuturno Metu	90
32. Hall of Justice	92
33. Call to Order	94
34. Day Six	96
35. Alpha 441	98
36. Delictum	99
37. Rage	101
38. Resignation	102
39. Blind Devotion	105
40. Salon d'Observation	108
41. Proditor	112
42. Countdown	115
43. Price of Duty	119
44. Secundum Crimen	121
45. Renuntiatio	123
46. Parisian Dispatches	127
47. Crux	130
48. Begin	134
49. Kanzei	137
Cor Coroli: Convergence	141

24. Retek City73

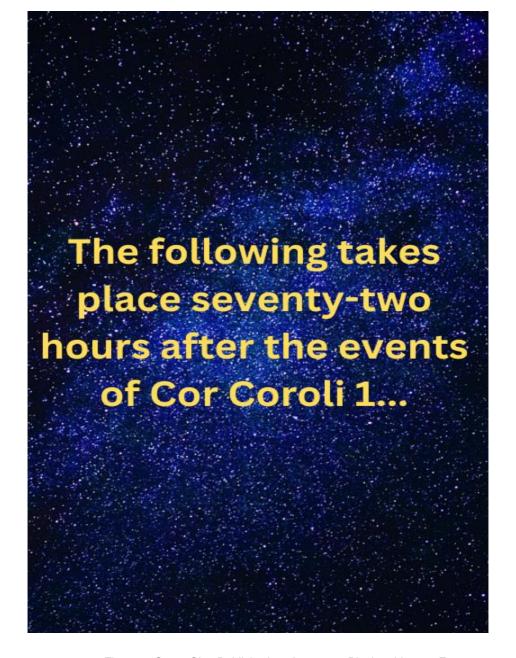


Figure 1: Starry Sky. Published 23 Aug. 2017 Pixabay License Free

"Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win."

Sun Tzu

Aftermath: The Battle of the Umoth Nebula.

They'd found nothing. No sign of *Isadore*. No sign of the General. They had pushed the N12's rebuilt engine-plant to its limit to reach the edge of Federation space along the Umoth Nebula in search of the *Isadore* with enough time to back-track and make their rendezvous in the Sol System, but there was nothing.

Feedback from Umoth's radioactive clouds was quickly overcome by the N12's unique sensor array, though high energy readings inconsistent with the nebula's natural radiation garbled returns. An intense sensor scattering field was active and working to blind the dark starship as she probed for either *Isadore*, or the Andorian ship, *Shrar*.

"Sir, detecting debris scattered throughout the region...deuterium, tritanium. Fragments of what look like hull plates..."

Captain Xillion turned to look at Admiral Bautlin. The admiral had spent most of the voyage sealed away in the Ready Room. She stood now just behind the command chair. Maureen remained silent, but she met his gaze with strained eyes. He could see the worry flare across her face.

"Science, any sign of *Isadore*?" Xillion slowly returned his focus to his operative.

"There's a lot of interference, Captain." Marsk Nav continued to modulate his sensors to try and clean up his readings.

The helmsman flatly stated that the window to make their rendezvous in the Sol System had closed. Xillion gripped the arms of his chair and forced himself to remain seated. Their official mission was to rendezvous with a VIP and ferry a small company to coordinates yet to be revealed.

"Mr. Nav, have we got anything?"

Xillion watched as the young redhaired boy switched over from standard interstellar sensor configurations to short-range wide-spectrum planetary sensors.

"Contact at 119 by 34, sir!"

"On screen." The view was choppy and static-heavy. "Can we clean this up?" asked Xillion.

"Sorry, sir. There's heavy interference scrambling all returns." The young operative assigned to Ops worked feverishly at her controls but to no avail.

On the screen a blurry blue speck flickered sharply between waves of static. Maureen stepped forward and leaned against the back of Xillion's chair. "That's *Isadore*." she croaked flatly.

"Helm, time to intercept?" asked the captain.

"At full impulse, we can be there in just under an hour, sir," came the response.

"Warp power?"

"I wouldn't recommend risking warp speed through the scattering field." answered the helmsman.

Xillion looked at the screen as Bautlin moved out from behind him. He ordered the helmsman to lay in a course at maximum impulse. Soundlessly, the black starship accelerated towards the distant glinting object they were certain must be the *USS Isadore*.

Maureen moved alongside Xillion's chair. She kept her eyes fixed on the viewscreen and her voice low... "By doing this you've put us at least T + two hours for our rendezvous."

Xillion drew a shallow breath and settled back into his chair. "We came here to investigate why General U'Chtuklli called for *Isadore* and to render aid if necessary." The stalky man kept his big brown eyes focused on his bridge crew as he spoke.

Maureen smiled.

Forty-eight minutes later a new contact off N12's starboard bow registered.

"Sizeable contact, 45 by 209. Approximately eight thousand kilometers off our starboard bow."

"On screen."

There, flickering on the screen, was the unmistakable dull yellow hull of a Cardassian warship. Tactical raised shields and energized the N12's defensive screens while her sensor beams groped through the radioactive interference to assess the Cardassian's threat potential.

"Tactical report."

"Captain, I can't cut through the interference. It's definitely Cardassian. Looks like a *Terok-*class battleship. Dual phaser emitters and a standard torpedo tube fore, one tube aft... no lifesigns. She's completely decompressed."

Nav spoke up just then. "Captain! I can confirm that ship is the source of the scattering field we're struggling with."

Xillion didn't waste a moment. "Photon torpedo; target that ship and fire."

A crimson ball of light streaked towards the drifting *Trerratt*. Targeting beams were only able to get a general lock on the center mass of the dead vessel. As the bridge crew aboard the N12 watched the distant Cardassian ship break apart, sensors slowly began registering more detailed returns. The scattering field quickly dissipated.

"Sir, receiving telemetry from *Isadore...* and further off her bow, an Andorian Battle Cruiser. It's the *Shrar*, Captain!"

"Report." Xillion focused on Nav as the rest of the bridge crew began tuning their own instruments now that the scattering field had been dealt with.

"Isadore's adrift, sir. Negative life-support. Her reactor appears to be intact but has been locked down. Structural damage to multiple decks and her port nacelle is completely burnt out. Her emergency distress beacon appears to have been activated, but it's not cutting through the nebula's interference."

Maureen couldn't help herself and spoke up from beside Xillion. "Negative life-support? Clarify, Mr. Nav."

"Ma'am, none of *Isadore's* life-support systems appear to have power, numerous hull breaches detected. Indications of significant bio-organic matter are also negative. There doesn't appear to be anyone aboard."

Xillion rose from his chair and called for sensors to focus on the distant Andorian Battle Cruiser. "Admiral, the Andorians...?"

"The Shrar, yes." Maureen almost croaked out the words and was taken aback by how affected she'd become by the situation.

Marsk expertly worked the controls at his station and happily called out: "We've got them, sir! They're aboard the Andorian vessel. All huddled in the shuttle bay and cargo decks!"

N12 slowly crept closer to the drifting *Shrar* to assess her status. Scans indicated the Guardsmen manning the stricken ship had no way of detecting the N12, or any other approaching vessel. While repair efforts were underway, the likelihood of the *Shrar* restoring communications or engines was dubious at best.

"Captain Xillion, scan for Ekohl U'Chtuklli's identification tag." Maureen was now standing in front of the main viewer, taking in the wreck.

"No returns on General U'Chtuklli's tag, ma'am." Xillion knew what Maureen was thinking—U'Chtuklli would have been on the bridge and now there was no bridge.

"Sir, we have a return on a Starfleet tag."

"Captain Ch'ornithon?" asked Maureen, turning from the view screen to face Xillion and the young redheaded man at the science station.

"Yes ma'am, in a secondary chamber off the *Shrar's* main cargo hold." "Is he alone?"

Nav shook his head and informed the Admiral that the signal was in a sealed room with four life signs—an Andorian, two humans and a Vulcan. Without hesitation Admiral Bautlin ordered all four be transported directly to one of N12's refurbished drone hangars and held with no access to the rest of the ship. Xillion repeated the Admiral's orders.

"We're late enough. Whatever happened, *Isadore's* logs will tell. Captain Xillion, relay the *Isadore's* distress call to the *Fury* on a secure channel. If I know Grant Baker, he'll come hell-bent-for-leather to help." Maureen watched as Xillion relayed the order.

"What about *Isadore*? *Fury* can't tractor the *Shrar* and the *Isadore* out of what is now apparently Cardassian space," said Xillion after confirming the transmission had been sent as ordered.

"No, she can't. *Isadore* is dead. We don't dare let the Cardassians get their hands on her corpse." The admiral tugged at her black tunic and withdrew to the Ready Room.

As she left the bridge, Maureen listened to Xillion order Ops to call-up *Isadore's* prefixed codes. *Isadore's* reactor was rigged to overload and the N12 used her tractor beam to push the once beautiful *Excelsior-*class starship deep into the radioactive clouds.

The N12 slipped away from the fringes of the angry nebula and jumped to warp. They were nearly twelve hours behind schedule for their rendezvous. The mystery of what Ekohl was doing so far from his theater of operations and why he'd summoned Shorh to join him would have to wait.

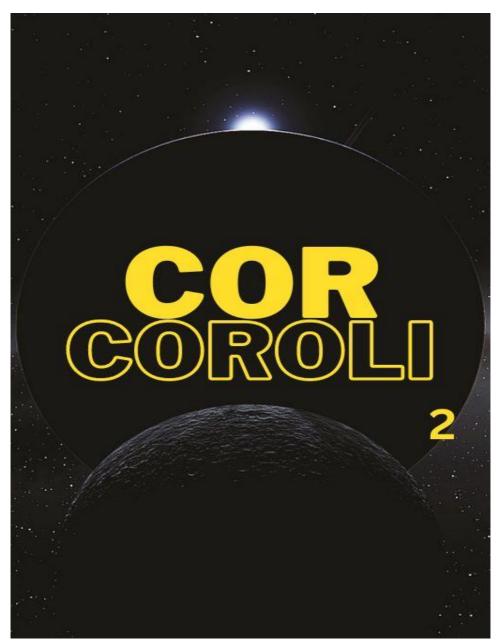
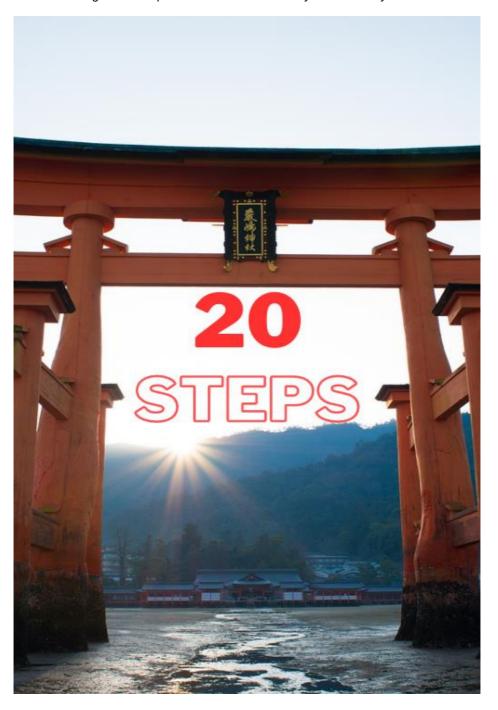


Figure 2: Alternate Cover. Published 13 Sep. 2016 Pixabay License Free

Figure 3: Temple Home. Published 15 May 2016 Pixabay License Free



1. 20 Steps

It had rained just before sunrise that morning. Wayward petals from the cherry blossoms on the plains above speckled the sloping cliffs and foothills running up and away from the angry sea. The rain had been harsh, spurred on by the warm, intense winds of Spring. Sadly, it had done nothing to cool the humid air clinging to the land. Henry and Thom walked side-by-side in silence as the long procession slowly ascended the narrow steps up to the burial site.

Ahead of the Starfleet Commander-in-Chief and the Head of Starfleet Operations was the Presidential party, following the surviving grandchildren and a great nephew who respectfully followed the Shinto Priest and the pall bearers. On foot, the ascent to the first plateau above the modest home would normally take twenty minutes for the average person. So far, the long procession had been climbing for close to fifteen minutes and they were still less than halfway up the narrow path. The surviving family members were all octogenarians. Henry Wallace cleared his throat as quietly as he could manage as the haunting sounds of the temple bonsho bell above echoed down the craggy steps. Perspiration was starting to stand out on his forehead. He was not comfortable.

From the sea the funeral procession looked like a long crawling snake winding its way up the cliff. The coffin was held high by six young, strong, uniformed corpsmen. They were all members of the greater Honour Guard who'd been selected specifically to ferry the remains of the recently deceased to his final resting place. The solid muscles of their arms and their bulging shoulders and broad backs strained against the confines of the immaculate dress uniforms they all wore. The polished black coffin they easily carried reflected the red sun which had burned away the morning's rain clouds hours before.

Immediately behind the pallbearers marched four more corpsmen. A young woman carried a ceremonial katana, which had recently been resting at the side of the deceased during the *makura naoshinno gi* before the corpse had been lovingly placed within the black coffin at the time of *nokan no gi*. Beside her, in lockstep, was a young Bolian solemnly carrying a fluttering *nobori* emblazed with the family crest. He was the only non-human selected for the Honour Guard and he was deeply touched. Another young man followed carrying the blue banner of the United Federation of Planets specially tailored to appear as a traditional Japanese *nobori*. A final corpsman toted the Starfleet banner, also fitted-out as a *nobori*.

As the bonsho rang out again, the Shinto Priest following the pallbearers and Honour Guard chanted quiet prayers. Dressed in dazzling white robes, the little old Priest and the collection of ancient familial mourners following close behind presented as stark a contrast to the hulking youths leading the procession as could be imagined.

The Presidential party followed respectfully behind in a palette of greys and blacks. Admirals Wallace and Knot came next. Then a collection of ambassadors and Daystrom administrators. Finally, Hibiki Masaru, the founder of Theoretical Propulsion Dynamics and his wife rounded out the bulk of the VIP mourners. Peter Kirk and his wife followed on the heels of the Masarus and the procession of friends, contemporaries (many of whom were quite elderly and wore outdated Starfleet dress uniforms from decades past) and close neighbours shuffled on and on in a silent column behind the black coffin.

There were twenty steps in a Shinto funeral. As Henry scuffed his left boot heel on an uneven step and bounced slightly into Thom, he tried to reason out what step they were now on. Thom cleared his throat and cast a quick sideways glance at the C-in-C but continued his silent trudge up the uneven steps. They had just completed the *shinsosai* and had delivered their eulogies. The Priest had tactfully explained that the *kokobetsu shiki* and *hakkyu sai no gi* were going to be modified in accordance with the wishes of the deceased and that the *soretsu*, or funeral procession, would be more in keeping with Western tradition.

Below the slowly snaking line of mourners and VIPs the home where the deceased had lived nearly his entire one hundred and nineteen years was being ritually cleansed by the family's servants in accordance with the hakkyu-go batsujo nogi. The mollescent tone of the bonsho sang out again. Henry focused on keeping pace with Thom and not stepping on the heels of the Special Service Agent ahead of him on the narrow path. How the hulking young men selected to be pallbearers had managed to navigate the cliffside two abreast whilst hoisting a coffin was a wonder.

The eulogies had been painfully long. The President had been given the honour of speaking first and her remarks were respectfully brief. She had only met Heihachiro once during her first term and limited her talking points to the man's extensive service record and dedication to duty not only to Starfleet, but to the United Federation of Planets as a whole. Heihachiro's great nephew then spoke for nearly an hour about his love for his great uncle and how Heihachiro was a father to all who knew him. The nephew was eighty-nine years old himself and had gotten lost a few times during his eulogy.

Henry had followed. He'd taken care to be sure to acknowledge Heihachiro as a mentor and a friend but held back a portion of his prepared remarks dealing with service and duty as the President had touched on those points and the morning was starting to get away from them. Hibiki spoke eloquently, as did an elderly neighbour Heihachiro had apparently spent the last twenty odd years in a pitched battle of *shogi* with.

The most moving eulogy came from Peter Kirk. Heihachiro had been a lifelong friend to the Kirk family. Peter spoke about losing his siblings as a child and of the tragedy at the Deneva colony which claimed his father and mother. Heihachiro had taken Peter in after his Uncle Jim had battled to save what was left of the colony. Peter went on to praise Heihachiro's humanity and kindness in the years following the tragedy and credited Heihachiro for guiding him to a life of meaning and fulfillment. Many knew of the family connection between Noguras and the Kirks, but few knew how deep that connection ran. Peter had spoken at his uncle's memorial sixteen years earlier and had made James Kirk out to be the bigger-than-life figure the entire Federation believed him to be. Today though, Peter spoke about Heihachiro Nogura as a beloved, flawed, yet adored father figure.

Henry had caught Thom wiping away an errant tear as Mr. Kirk concluded his remarks.

Again, the bonsho rang out. The *maisosai* was next. Then the *kotsuage*, though Admiral Nogura was to be interred, not cremated—so Henry was unsure if the *kotsuage* would be observed. After that, the *kika sai* procession to the Nogura family shrine back at the house, but this was apparently to be limited to the family.

2. San Francisco

The central control and monitoring room at Starfleet's main command center hummed with a low-key energy unique to the heart of all Planetary and Fleet operations. Months earlier the system-wide net of security sensors installed during the arduous Upgrade program had been successfully brought on-line. The sensors ringed Earth, the moon, and the planet Mars. The network stretched out from Earth out past Jupiter and provided unparalleled coverage of the entire Sol System. With the new sensors came sweeping changes to the once bustling command center; nearly half of the required operators who'd once been essential to the day-to-day operations in San Francisco had been reassigned. The cavernous room now hummed along with a subdued, almost relaxed atmosphere of professional bureaucracy.

It was 2035 hours on a Tuesday evening. As the collection of officers and techs worked at their assigned monitoring stations, Lieutenant Commander U'brun stood at the panoramic windows looking out over San Francisco Bay. It was late spring, and the glow of the warm sun still illuminated the evening sky. U'brun would be going off-duty at 2100 hours, and he was looking forward to meeting up with friends at the Repulse Room.

"Commander U'brun, sir you may want to have a look at this."

U'brun turned away from his view of the Golden Gate Bridge and found himself face to face with a young Deltan Junior Lieutenant. The young officer extended his hand and held a pad out for U'brun's scrutiny.

"Lieutenant...?" U'brun took the pad and looked into the younger man's light green eyes.

"Ciroa, sir."

U'brun smiled and set about investigating the pad he'd been handed. Lt. Ciroa was on-station at one of the communications panels. The pad had a priority report sent from Commodore Tiran Pept, the flag officer responsible for Fleet operations in the Sierra Sector. Commander U'brun read the report twice before handing the pad back to the young Lieutenant.

"Have you sent that up to Admiral Cahill, yet?"

Rear Admiral Cahill had been temporarily assigned to HQ from her post at the Martian Tactical Institute. As both the C-in-C and Admiral Knot, the head of Starfleet Operations were attending a State Funeral in Japan, Admiral Cahill had assumed temporary charge of the command center.

"Not yet sir, Admiral Knot's standing orders concerning any reports relating to *USS Isadore* are clear. In the Admiral's absence any such report is to be shared first with the designated Deck Officer – which is you, sir."

Ciroa shifted uneasily on his feet. He understood the orders, but as he relayed them out loud, he noted, not for the first time, how odd they sounded.

Commodore Pept had reported that *Isadore* had apparently abandoned her assigned patrol route around Morikin VII. The delegations from Boslic IX and Galvin V had noticed *Isadore's* absence and had threatened to withdraw from the Federation brokered Peace Talks unless an explanation was provided.

"Copy that report to Admiral Knot's alert file. Then alert Admiral Cahill."

"Aye, sir." Ciroa nodded and breathed a sigh of relief. He returned to his station and did as Lieutenant Commander U'brun had ordered.

U'brun watched the slim, bald lieutenant return to his station and did some quick math in his head. If it was 2040 hours San Francisco time, it would be 1240 hours Wednesday afternoon in Okinawa. The admirals were not expected back from the service for Admiral Nogura for another two and a half hours, or so. For the sake of two hours, there didn't seem to be any pressing need to interrupt Admiral Knot.

U'brun turned back towards the view of the Bay just as the last of the day's warm sunlight began to fade to twilight. Eldredge would be coming onduty at 2100 hours. Admiral Knot had handpicked the Deck Officers during his absence. Both U'brun and Eldredge had served on the Admiral's personal detail for years and outside of Admiral Wallace, there were no other officers Admiral Knot trusted more with his personal safety and security. U'brun would brief Eldredge fully on the Commodore's communique before heading over to the Repulse Room.

3. Fury

Captain's personal log, USS Fury, Stardate: 14427.53. We've been in the Volon system for five and a half weeks shaking down our new sensor module and this new ship. The crew, though limited in number, are in high spirits.

Roughly half of the men and women under my command are fledgling engineers working hard at learning the ropes of this new vessel's Avidyne engines. Lt. Commander Kelly tells me he's never seen such a fickle engine plant in his entire career. Of course, he says this with a smile and seems particularly taken with Fury's ability to coast along at warp using only two of her four nacelles at a time.

The other half of my crew of young go-getters are completely immersed in the sensor package and software our unique science module has furnished us with. The engineers at Utopia Planitia did a fine job of explaining how these new Constellation ships will have their choice of plug-and-play mission-specific modules to choose from depending on whatever situation they might be ordered into...

She's a fine ship. Not much to look at, but prim and neat where it counts. Aside from Kelly, only Commander Neevvg and myself remain of the old Drekler—these young people have no idea how spoiled they are having so fine a ship to serve on.

Fury's Science officer, Mr. Syrk is overseeing things and will be submitting a fulsome report to both Starfleet and the Vulcan Science Academy once our eight-week sortie is complete. Mr. Syrk holds the rank of Commander, but is, as stated in previous logs, a graduate of the Science Academy, not Starfleet. It is my understanding that at the end of this shake-down period, upon my retirement, Mr. Syrk will be tapped for promotion and offered command of this vessel.

Mr. Kelly has assured me that he too will be supplying a complete report on Fury's powerplant and engines...free of his usual sarcasm. I had hoped to see him promoted to full Commander before my own retirement, but he informs me that if anyone tries to pin anymore pips or squeaks on him, he'll intentionally overload the warp core and vaporize us all. Neevvg too has threatened to dispatch me if I attempt to raise him up in rank. The foul old Tellarite insists on retiring with

In all...after thirty-eight years, eight engagements with hostiles and the loss of too many comrades, I consider myself the luckiest captain in the fleet to be taking one final cruise on a brand-new ship...with a surly reprobate and a foul space-pig as dear sweet company.

The monotoned chime from the comms panel on the wall caused Captain Baker to look up from his desk where he was recording his log. An amber light flashed on the sleek beige communications console. Grant thumbed the central actuator on his desktop interface and pulled himself up from the plastic chair he'd rooted himself in. Rising to his full height of one and three quarters meters he winced slightly as both knees popped. The comms panel chimed again.

The captain of the Starship *Fury* shuffled quickly towards the wall mounted unit in his socked feet. He reminded himself that he'd been offered a comfortable desk job at Spacedock to ride out his retirement after he'd bid farewell to the *USS Drekler* at the height of the Upgrade, but he'd opted for one last command. Besides the beige comms panel, the main status board prominently showed all conditions aboard *Fury* to be nominal.

Grant reached the panel and thumbed the recessed transmit/receive button. "Bridge, this is Captain Baker, go ahead."

"Captain, apologies for disturbing you."

Grant drew a breath and scratched at his left buttocks. "...cough, cough..lt's fine Mr. Syrk, report?"

"Sir, we have received an automated emergency distress call on Fleet Channel, code: One Alpha - Zero..."

"One Alpha - Zero?! Set Yellow Alert throughout the ship Mr. Syrk!"

Grant closed the channel before the Vulcan Science Officer could reply. He turned from his cabin's comms panel with the speed and grace of a prima ballerina and in two loping strides scooped up his red tunic from where it had been hanging at the end of his bunk and nimbly jumped into his boots. Code One Alpha - Zero was specifically reserved for Starfleet vessels in distress. Someone needed help and this caused Grant to forget that he was in his mid-sixties, carrying too much weight and slowly succumbing to an old wound that should have killed him twenty-five years earlier.

The Captain of the *USS Fury* bounded through the corridor and flew into the main turbolift like a cadet late for a final exam. By the time Grant stepped onto the bridge of his ship he was red-faced and winded, but he'd made it in less than three minutes...

"Report!"

Commander Syrk regarded the captain as he lumbered towards the command chair, tunic hanging open, belly heaving...and cocked his left eyebrow.

4. Shanghaied

A single, amber diode glowed four meters up what appeared to be a sheer metal bulkhead. Its pale-yellow light was the only thing preventing absolute blackness from enveloping the four confused refugees groping at the cold walls of the bizarre chamber. Shorh slowly made his way around the perimeter of the room for what seemed to be the hundredth time. He kept the outside part of his right foot against the cold metal walls and paced methodically in the near black. The further he shuffled from the single, tiny diode, the darker the chamber became.

On the opposite side of the room Chief Rhupp, still dressed in his white radiation suit, was shuffling in kind with Shorh. His light brown eyes and growing black beard made him look like a sooty ghost in the unnatural dim light. So far, he and the captain had managed to confirm that the chamber in which they found themselves was approximately twelve meters wide by ten meters deep. The ceiling was alarmingly slanted and plunged from somewhere high above the diode at the head of the chamber, towards the metal floor.

Shorh closed his eyes and spread the fingers of his right hand wide across the smooth, cold wall so he could guide himself in the darkness. He held his arm high and ahead of his torso so that he could feel for the sloping edge of the ceiling. Ensign Dirlo had hit her head against the unseen ceiling when they first arrived hours ago and had split her forehead open. P'nom was attending to her wound as best she could. The wound seemed serious and spurred the captain and Rhupp on in their attempt to find some means of escape. They'd spent more than ten hours groping in the darkness.

Thwack! Thwack! "Aaargh!"

Shorh stopped in place and turned towards the sound of Tagir's voice. "Mr. Rhupp?!"

"Ten meters, Captain. Aside from the ceiling, we're in a perfect rectangular cuboid...and there's no door!" Rhupp slammed his hand against the black metal wall once again for emphasis.

"As the upper terminus angles downward from an unknown height, we are not in a perfect rectangular cuboid, Mr. Rhupp."

"Well thank-you for that P'nom, so happy to have a Vulcan perspective on this latest shi..."

"Chief! That's enough." Shorh stepped slowly back towards the center of the chamber where P'nom, the *Isadore's* half-human, half-Vulcan Communications Officer was tending Ensign Dirlo's wound.

"I'm sorry, captain. P'nom, I apologize." Tagir Rhupp stepped out of the darkness from the opposite direction of the captain and rung his hands in frustration.

"We have been abducted and deposited in a foreboding alien environment Chief Rhupp. Your emotional imbalance is understandable." P'nom kept her voice as steady as she could, but her human half was screaming out in anxiety and fear.

"I put the rear wall at no more than a meter tall, concur?"

Rhupp looked across the amber din and nodded grimly at his captain. They'd been groping around in the dark for what seemed like a day and all they'd managed to determine were the dimensions of the cage they'd found themselves in. "How's Moira?" Tagir croaked.

"Moira's fine..." came the response from the reposed young woman holding a bloody rag against her forehead.

"Ensign, your wound is still bleeding. Please remain still." P'nom motioned towards the younger woman and then set about tearing another strip of fabric from the lining of Shorh's discarded tunic.

Dirlo's own tunic had been soaked through with blood and lay in a crumpled heap somewhere in the darkness. She lay cradled in P'nom's lap with nothing more than her rib-necked gold hued undershirt to keep her warm aside from P'nom's own, much smaller tunic, which the Vulcan tried to tuck around the injured woman's torso.

One moment the four of them were discussing the ongoing repair efforts aboard the *Shrar*, the next they were groping in the dark.

"Alright, one more time. P'nom, what do you recall immediately before we were brought here?" Shorh looked down at Dirlo laying in the darkness. The ensign may have suffered a concussion and the fact that her wound didn't appear to be clotting put him in mind of his time aboard *Victory*.

"The four of us were in the armory aboard the Battle Cruiser, discussing the challenges Mr. Rhupp and his repair team were having reestablishing a viable link to the secondary subspace transmitter array. Ensign Dirlo was looking for a quiet place to recalibrate her tricorder. You, captain, were expounding on the cultural value Andorians placed on class structures and upon badges of rank..."

Shorh felt his right antenna flex; his left antenna stood immobile, splinted and wrapped by an Andorian medical officer after the surviving crew of *Isadore* had been evacuated to the *Shrar*. Immediately upon arriving in their dark prison it was apparent that they'd been transported away from the *Shrar* - but 'why?' and by 'whom?' remained frustratingly elusive. It had just been the four of them as far as Shorh could tell...

"This metallurgy doesn't particularly scream Cardassian to me." volunteered Chief Rhupp suddenly.

"No...I don't think any of this is Cardassian either..." whispered Moira Dirlo. She felt nauseous and lay as still as she could, cradled in P'nom's lap.

Shorh looked down at the young woman. "Any particular reason you feel this isn't a Cardassian ship of some kind, ensign?"

Moira closed her eyes. Tried to smile and then suddenly, as the latent image of the amber diode faded from her retina, a feeling of déjà vu stirred within her. She gently shook her head to indicate she wasn't quite sure.

"It is curious though, Captain..."

Shorh leaned back on his haunches and tried to focus on the milky white face of his Communications Officer. "What is, P'nom?"

"While all four of us have been transported from the *Shrar* to wherever we are, you are the only one of our group to have arrived with an accessory."

Rhupp let himself fall back to lay on the floor and stretched. "What are you taking about, P'nom?"

"While all four of us were in the armory each of us had various accessories in our possession. Ensign Dirlo was in possession of a Type III tricorder; I was studying redundant conduit schematics on several Starfleet and Andorian digital pads. Mr. Rhupp, you were complaining about the Andorian trident-spanner you were expected to reroute communication relays with..."

"P'nom, your point please?" Shorh gingerly touched the base of his injured antenna. Not for the first time he began wondering how long their captors, whoever they were, were going to keep them in the dark with no food, water, or medical supplies; Dirlo looked terrible.

"You were lamenting that if it wasn't for the gold captain's pin on your tunic, the Guardsmen aboard the *Shrar* wouldn't acknowledge your authority as you do not hail from the appropriate Andorian caste."

Shorh let his hand fall away from his head and looked P'nom in the eyes. She wasn't wrong. He had waxed a great deal about too personal an issue in front of people who needed to see him as strong. "What's your point, Lt. P'nom?"

"Your tunic, captain."

"Pardon me?"

"You had removed your tunic, sir. You were explaining that without the uniform, among other Andorians, you would never be taken seriously."

Rhupp pushed himself off the floor and rejoined the conversation. "Wait a minute, wait a minute..."

Shorh sat back and shook his head. "I don't follow."

"Captain, when we were transported here all four of us arrived as we were. Ensign Dirlo arrived without the tricorder she was working on, Mr. Rhupp had put down his tool and arrived without it and I had placed the pad I was working with down on a gravimetric transition conduit I was using as a table. I arrived here without that pad."

"The bunk. You tossed your tunic on the bunk captain!" Rhupp rose to his feet and ran his hands through his hair.

Shorh drew a breath and tried to remember if he'd tossed his tunic to the bunk or not. Certainly, when they arrived nothing had come with them except the crumpled, dirty tunic Ensign Dirlo had spotted on the floor in the darkness. She'd run to collect it, like a child chasing a ball and slammed her head into the low bulkhead.

"...the shuttle pad..."

Shorh, Rhupp and P'nom all looked down at Moira, still laying perfectly still with her eyes closed.

"That yellow light...the same light's in the recessed receiving bay of the secondary shuttle pad behind the Academy...in my second year I'd go there at night with an upperclassman I was dating...it's the same light..." Chief Rhupp looked up at the amber diode and understanding

washed over his face in a wave. "That's a basic guidance beacon. An alternating IR and amber comms emitter! Starfleet uses them as part of standard shuttle docking relays. We're on a Starfleet vessel of some kind!"

Shorh looked down at Dirlo, then at the torn-up tunic P'nom had been using for bandages. "It would seem you're all here, only because someone wanted me here."

"Captain?" P'nom looked from the amber guidance beacon to the injured Andorian sitting just half a meter away from her.

"A Cardassian dies for the glory of the State. If he dies victorious, he dies well; hold the State strong. If he dies defeated, abandoned; hold the State to ruin."

Ghett Iloja of Prim

5. Kreke Disac

A crippled yellow hulk broke through the radiation-heavy gas clouds of the Umoth Nebula under partial impulse power. The enormous prototype *Galor* Heavy Cruiser listed hard to starboard and trailed a glowing trail of drive plasma and debris in her wake. The *Kreke Disac* hadn't been half a year out of her construction bay in the yards orbiting Cardassia Minor and now she limped back into Cardassian Space, broken, ruined. Her primary stabilizing prongs and sensor pylons at her tail were twisted and black. What was left of her lateral sensor array burned in a confluence of angry orange and red plasma.

On the bridge, Dalin Kom had abandoned the command chair to throw in with the desperate troopers madly working to keep the burning warship tracking towards sanctuary. Since being broad-sided by the Starfleet Battleship there had been no communication with the engineering crew responsible for the impulse plant housed in the starboard blade. Emergency bulkheads had crashed shut all along the *Kreke Disac's* engineering hull and her warp reactor had been scrammed and locked down to avert a fatal overload. Kom had no idea how many crewmen remained alive in the depths of the ship. He only knew the port impulse plant had provided emergency power and his only hope was to nurse the ship to a friendly port.

Clearing the nebula meant Kom could order the injured trooper in the Communications pit, Ellex, to call out for aid. A wave of relief washed over him like a cold sweat when the limited forward sensors registered open space. Only the helm and the secondary sensor terminal at the Science Post remained intact on the bridge. The other monitors and computer stations had been cannibalized for parts to try and triage the burnt-out life-support and critical internal systems. Kom and his troopers struggled to pilot their hulk using only a sliver of basic sensor returns to find their way home, blind to everything going on around them.

In the empty viewing room where Gul D'gad's offensive conference table stood as the only tangible testament to the old bigot's existence aboard the *Disac*, Ligan busied himself collecting his map and strategic markers from where they'd been scattered on the floor. As a member of the Obsidian Order, Ligan was trained to deal with extremely stressful situations. Looking past the hateful bulk of the conference table and the clattered sea of toppled chairs littering the room's metal deck, Ligan paused for a tense moment as the swirling pink and green mists of the Umoth Nebula receded. For the first

time since being thrown to the bulkheads by the Federation attack, Ligan could see open space and stars.

To a man, every breathing Cardassian aboard the *Kreke Disac* felt a quick, odd pulse in the very core of their chests. Kom had been bypassing primary thruster control and dropped his needle-nosed cable cutters when he felt it and looked up in confusion. Ligan pulled himself up from his crouched position using the hateful table for balance and peered out the viewports towards the swirling, angry nebula they'd just cleared.

An unseen pulsating wave rocked the *Disac*. Kom fell back from the open relay terminal he'd been crouching at. Ligan staggered back from the viewports, arms reeling as he tried to balance himself. The red, green, and pink clouds of the Umoth Nebula were consumed, for just an instant, in a bright white flash.

From his precarious position braced against the rear bulkhead of the viewing room on *Disac's* second deck, Ligan caught sight of the silhouette of a small attack shuttle clinging doggedly to the wreckage of the Galor's aft quarter for just a fraction of a second. A perfect black silhouette standing against a pure wall of white light. The unmistakable lines and profile of a *Hirvath*-class shuttlecraft.

Hell erupted one one-hundredth of a second after the flash. The gasses and clouds of the Umoth Nebula sparked and exploded into a hellfire of ignited plasma and blasted the *Disac* savagely. The yellow behemoth was pushed aft over bow and tumbled away on the leading edge of a violent energy wave.

"The asset has been recovered to the secure pens at Simperia, legate."

R'aka took the pad and silently read the status report on the *Disac*. "Are we certain the task force has been, lost?"

"Yes, Legate R'aka. It also appears as though the Andorian warship was disabled, not destroyed." Gul Taro stiffened, preparing to weather Legate R'aka's rage.

Ejan turned back towards the control bunker's primary status screen and growled thoughtfully. The Third Legion was ready and waiting, but their immediate support force was gone. Somehow, the Andorians had thwarted overwhelming odds and the rest of the fleet was still engaged with the Tzenkethi—too far removed to be of use to the Third Legion before they depleted their supplies and either had to starve, or retreat.

It was maddening. Somehow, they'd failed. Even with all the assurances from the Obsidian Order, they'd failed. To pull resources from the line would alert the Andorians and anger the Tzenkethi. To leave the Third in situ would condemn four battalions to a slow, cruel death. Their military daring now had serious political implications; R'aka recalled his lloja. "Who do we have?" R'aka asked while keeping his eyes fixed on his

"Gul D'gad did not survive. We have the first officer en route to Rondac III, sir."

charts.

6. Rescue

Captain Baker moved from the general status screen on the arm of his command chair, to the mission status screen. *Fury* had made better than warp 8.9 the entire way from the Volon System to the origin point of the distress signal they'd received hours earlier. Upon arriving, Mr. Syrk immediately began sweeping the fringes of the Umoth Nebula with *Fury*'s enhanced sensors and discovered the drifting *Shrar*. Two and a half hours later, injured survivors and volatile cargo were being brought aboard *Fury* for attention as the search continued for the ship-in-distress, *USS Isadore*.

No sign of the *Isadore* could be found. Commander Syrk identified multiple contacts drifting throughout the region which Fury's sensor's confirmed were hull fragments and debris from the crippled Andorian Battle Cruiser. Debris from an as yet undetected Federation vessel presumed to be the *Isadore and* fragments whose metallurgy would suggest a Cardassian vessel were also detected. Lt. Drake, *Fury's* Tactical Officer promptly brought his targeting sensors online to join with Commander's Syrk's efforts to search for unseen contacts deeper within the angry nebula.

"Baker to Mr. Neevvg, status?"

Commander Neevvg snorted and turned to face the bulkhead mounted communications panel in *Fury's* main cargo bay. Crewmen jostled by with antigrav units moving equipment and cargo modules brought over from the *Shrar*.

"Captain Baker, status: busy! What is it you want?!" barked the surly old Tellarite as he kept one eye on the young ensign running the cargo bay's industrial transporter.

"Neevvg, how much longer do you need to secure the volatile Andorian components before we can get underway?" Grant had just checked in with Sickbay and confirmed that the casualties brought over from the *Shrar* were being tended to and secured for transport by Dr. Tindal and his staff.

Commander Syrk had continued with his scans in the hopes of finding *Isadore*, while Drake watched for hostiles; however, after nearly three hours nobody had any real hope of finding the lost starship. News of Cardassia's declaration of dominion over the regions around Alpha 441 including the region bordering the Umoth Nebula had reached Baker and his crew only a few days earlier. Operating in what was now allegedly Cardassian space while rendering aid to a crippled Federation ship in the wake of a Cardassian ambush put Grant Baker and his ship in a precarious situation.

"Captain Baker, Corporal Tholev Th'Dane, aboard the *Shrar*—signals the last munitions have been transported off their vessel. Emergency bulkheads are in place, and they are ready to be taken in tow."

Baker acknowledged Lt. Cantos, who was stationed at *Fury's* Communications Station. Corporal Th'Dane was the senior surviving Guardsman aboard the *Shrar* and had been designated as the point of contact for *Fury's* allies aboard the crippled wreck. *Shrar* was in bad shape. She had no command deck, no engines, or comms and only basic deflector shields. Upon approach, *Fury* had no way of even communicating with the drifting Andorians. Contact had finally been made via a surviving crewman from *Isadore's* personal communicator.

Grant looked to his right where Mr. Syrk quietly worked at the primary science station. The serious Vulcan looked up from his screens almost as if he could sense his captain's eyes falling upon him and grimly shook his head. Captain Baker sighed and offered his First Officer a slight nod in acknowledgement. Still no sign of *Isadore*.

"Bridge to Engineering, Mr. Kelly, respond."

"Kelly here, Captain," the voice of his friend perfectly reproduced digitally by *Fury's* internal communication system emanated from the hidden speaker built into the arm of Baker's command chair.

Grant cast his eyes to a spot on the deck. For the moment he was content to hold his gaze on the dark carpeted field of nothing while his mind turned over the events of the last few hours as he reconciled the hard choice he now had to make.

"Chief, are we ready to extend our shields around the *Shrar*? We need to get out of here, while our luck holds."

In engineering Kelly looked over to his team of young crewman. Octavia Mattix, a young specialist newly graduated from the Academy flashed the gruff old engineer a toothy smile and a thumbs-up. The Chief returned the smile and nodded slightly towards the young woman with the strawberry-coloured hair.

"We're ready, Captain. Remember though, with the added strain on our shields and integrity field, I don't recommend exceeding warp 4."

Baker was just about to acknowledge his Chief Engineer when a sudden thump ran through the center of his chest. Grant looked up quickly and could see that his Helmsman and Ops officers had felt the same sensation. He was about to ask Commander Syrk what his sensors had to say about it when a rumbling shudder shook everyone aboard the *Fury* and the *Shrar* simultaneously. Less than a second later the Universe erupted in a brilliant white flash.

7. One Alpha – Zero

Commander Eldredge walked into the control room ten minutes early for his night watch as the Deck Officer in charge of Starfleet Command's central control center. The clean, filtered air of the building's pristine HVAC system struck him as sterile and brought back memories of his time aboard the *USS Pera* fifteen years ago when he began his career. He and Lt. Commander U'brun had been partners on Admiral Knot's personal detail for the last five years and he'd grown used to the fresh air of Earth.

Two armored Security Officers greeted Eldredge outside of the main control room—a final layer of security meant to safeguard the heart of Starfleet and Planetary operations. Eldredge submitted himself for a retina scan while the smaller of the two-armed guards crosschecked the identification package the Commander had been required to submit.

Both Security Officers knew Commander Eldredge on sight, but they treated the tall, thirty-eight-year-old Commander with the blond crewcut with a rigid, professional detachment. The computer terminal molded into the black and silver podium at this final Security Checkpoint chirped happily as it returned a positive identification for retina scan and ID query. Eldredge smiled and thanked the men, before stepping through the reinforced blast doors behind the checkpoint to find and relieve U'brun.

From across the quiet room Lt. Commander U'brun spotted his friend and moved to meet him halfway. He had plans to go for drinks, but he intended to change out of his "reds" before heading over to the Repulse Room. He would share the report from Commodore Pept, before heading down to the executive locker rooms.

"In a hurry?" Roth extended his hand as his friend and partner approached.

With Admiral Knot in Japan, Roth Eldredge had had the chance to enjoy a day by the water without having to worry about his protective and administrative obligations. Though it'd been just one day, it had proved surprisingly refreshing.

"Well, if I'd have just worn any old thing, I wouldn't need to change before heading out to mix with normal people." U'brun said this with a smile as he looked at Roth dressed in a basic black jumpsuit with his faded maroon field jacket from his days aboard the *Pera*.

Taking the graveyard shift in the Admiral's absence apparently led Eldredge to believe he could get away with some informalities. The well-worn jacket still sported the *Pera's* Mission Patch and Starfleet logos on the shoulders, but Eldredge had taken the time to affix his Commander's pin and current ID to the appropriate spots.

Just as U'brun was starting to fill Roth in on the reports of *Isadore* leaving her station without notice, Lt. Ciroa ran over from his station waving a pad at the two Commanders. Eldredge stood back and fell into a relaxed defensive stance as the young man suddenly approached. U'brun turned with a stern questioning expression.

"What is it, Mr. Ciroa?"

"Sirs! One Alpha – Zero! We, we just got word from Captain Baker he's responding to a One Alpha – Zero!" Ciroa held his pad out towards the two Commanders and trembled. Like many of the young officers recently pushed through the Academy and rushed up the promotional ladder during the Upgrade, Ciroa had little practical experience with real-world critical situations.

Eldredge took the pad and quickly read the report from the *USS Fury*. He dismissed Ciroa and handed the pad without comment to U'brun.

"This can't be right..." U'brun waived to get Ciroa's attention as the young officer made his way back to his terminal. When he saw Ciroa was paying attention, U'brun stuck up his thumb and motioned three times with upward thrusts letting the lieutenant know he was to inform Admiral Cahill directly.

"You say you got word from Commodore Pept fifteen minutes ago?" asked Eldredge.

"We got his report fifteen minutes ago. Who knows how long *Isadore* had been gone for before anyone noticed though?" U'brun read the latest dispatch again and unbuckled the bib on his tunic.

"I don't think we have a choice. We've got to notify the admiral—now."

U'brun simply nodded his head. There'd be no time for drinks at the Repulse Room tonight.

8. Underway

Captain Xillion checked the N12's status panel and was content to see all systems aboard the sleek *Nimrod*-class Cruiser were functioning perfectly. They were pressing hard against what Dannar Teague had told them was the dark ship's maximum warp threshold. N12's Chief Engineer was a former Commander in Starfleet who'd spent years at the Theoretical Warp Dynamics and Research Center at Daystrom. He sat at the bridge engineering terminal to Xillion's left. They had pushed their engines to 98% of tolerance. The Chief had been at Teague's side during every second of N12's engine rebuild.

"Captain, we just monitored the *Isadore's* warp core detonating. We will be out of sensor range in three minutes." The operative seated next to the helmsman working the Ops station, kept her eyes on her instruments.

"Thankyou, Ops. Confirm we have *Isadore's* logs downloaded and encrypted, please." Xillion looked up from his panel and waited for confirmation that they'd successfully pulled *Isadore's* data prior to setting her warp core for overload.

"Captain, it appears as though the detonation of the *Isadore's* core has started some sort of thermal reaction within the Umoth Nebula." This time it was the operative manning the Science station reporting.

With a handful of seconds left before N12 was too far from the nebula to get clear readings, Xillion quickly asked for an update on the *USS Fury's* efforts to rescue the survivors aboard the crippled *Shrar*.

"We have the *Fury* on long-range sensors, she has the *Shrar* in tow. They appear to be clear of any serious eddies generated by the explosion."

Every man and woman aboard the N12 represented the Section's best and most qualified personnel. To a soul they had all been meticulously trained to suppress panic, excitement, fear, and other signs of psychological stress. The exchanges between the N12's captain and his crew were curt, professional, and cold. Xillion drew a shallow breath and closed his eyes—quietly thankful that the survivors had been rescued.

"ETA to our rendezvous?"

"At our present speed, project rendezvous in a little over eleven hours, Captain."

"Very good. Maintain course and speed. I'll be with the admiral in the Ready Room. If I'm needed, I'm on comms." Xillion said this as he rose from his chair and turned towards the doors to the spartan Ready Room where Admiral Bautlin had spent most of the mission so far.

9. Bonsho

The early afternoon sun had climbed high above the sea. A humid breeze swept across the plateau, stirring the loose cherry blossoms and rustling the tall decorative topiaries standing around the simple temple overlooking the sea. The bonsho rang out again. The warm breezy stillness was momentarily shattered by the temple bell's deep, hollow chime.

Evengii took a deep breath and arched his back. It was a beautiful afternoon. He'd just checked in with the Agent-in-Charge of the Presidential protective detail and confirmed the secure envelope around the entire site was sound. As the head of the Starfleet Commander-in-Chief's protective detail, Commander Evengii was the second highest ranking security official onsite. The dozen Federation Ambassadors attending the funeral also had representatives of their specific worlds' protective services and militaries represented in the detail spread out around the temple.

Osip was dressed in his best formal uniform even though he was strategically posted behind a tall row of decorative shrubs, so as to remain unseen by the mourners and the VIPs. It was a bittersweet day for him. The fact that they were all present owing to the passing of Admiral Nogura aside; this was to be Evengii's last official duty as the senior member of Admiral Wallace's detail. He'd been tapped to take command of the USS Meni T'Pra, a second-generation Miranda-class starship whose previous captain had retired only weeks earlier. Admiral Wallace himself would be presiding over the ceremony officially promoting Evengii to the rank of captain and turning over the command-and-control codes of the Meni T'Pra at the end of the week.

The Bonsho rang out once more. As its flat tone faded, the sound of the Shinto priest's chanting drifted up to the plateau from the unseen stairway leading down to the Nogura home below. In a moment the pallbearers would be in sight and the funeral procession would slowly wind itself into the ancient temple.

Evengii raised his handheld communicator, anticipating a final check in from AIC Byrn. He looked at the small black and gold unit in his left hand, expecting a call at any second, but was surprised when the specialized communicator he wore on his left wrist began chirping quietly. Keeping hold of his standard communicator he activated his wrist unit to open a channel to his friend and partner, Commander Eldredge.

The small team of commanders assigned to the C-in-C and Chief of Ops shared a closed-circuit subspace comms system, meant to always ensure uninterrupted contact between the two camps. Osip Evengii answered in a hushed tone. Both Admirals Wallace and Knot were in the

security envelope and Osip didn't appreciate the interruption at such a crucial moment. He let any irritation he may have felt drop away though when he heard Eldredge utter one simple phrase: *One Alpha – Zero*.

Five minutes later, after Evengii had cleared his arrival with the Presidential detail, Roth Eldredge found himself standing on a small field receiving pad behind a row of shrubs overlooking the Sea of Japan. Two heavily armed tactical troops from the Presidential protective unit were waiting to escort him directly to where Osip was waiting.

Evengii took one look at his friend rushing towards him in a black jumper and an old field jacket and shook his head thinking: *this had better be good*.

A hollow note chimed to alert Admiral Bautlin that there was somebody at the Ready Room's door. She rose from the little sofa in front of the view port and pulled on her black tunic before calling out: "Come."

Captain Xillion stepped through the bulkhead as the door hushed open and stood at ridged attention when he saw the Admiral. She was buckling the bib on her black tunic and making her way over to the counter height desk kitty-cornered beside the viewport and ahead of the Ready Room's comms panel and replicator. He waited until Maureen had taken up her place behind the table and rested her arms atop the counter to indicate she was ready to listen to his report.

The door to the bridge hushed closed behind the N12's captain. Once the room was sealed, Xillion moved towards the Admiral silently. He'd known her for a number of years and though he'd grown comfortable in her presence, the look of absolute grief and exhaustion on her face was unsettling.

Maureen knew instantly what Xillion must be thinking and felt somewhat embarrassed that she'd not been able to mask her loss. She cleared her throat and absently wondered if her hair was still properly arranged in a tight bun.

"Captain Xillion, report."

"Ma'am, we have four survivors of the *Isadore* secured in drone bay 31."

Maureen nodded her understanding and confirmed that they had indeed managed to pluck Captain Ch'ornithon out of the bowels of the *Shrar*. Xillion confirmed that Shorh was indeed among their *passengers*. He went on to detail how a young ensign among the group had lacerated her head after slamming into the bay's sloped space doors. From sensor readings the

young woman was not critically injured but did appear to have a slight concussion. Xillion was under strict orders to keep N12's brig clear for a high-value prisoner they were to take on board at their rendezvous in the Sol System, thus the refurbished and inaccessible drone bay was the best and most secure option for their *passengers*.

"Do we have confirmation that *Isadore* was destroyed?" Maureen straightened her back and deftly activated the tabletop computer terminal moulded into the standing desk.

"We monitored the detonation just as we were on the edge of sensor range, ma'am. We also confirmed that the *Fury* made it out with the *Shrar* in tow." Xillion watched as a brief wave of what could only be relief swept across the Admiral's face. "I've confirmed that we have all of *Isadore's* logs and critical data. Where are we going to drop off Captain Ch'ornithon and his people?"

Maureen called up the security feed from bay 31 and watched Shorh huddled with his officers, sitting in the dark. She ran her left hand over the grey hair at her temple twice, then switched off her terminal.

"We're going to hold onto them for the time being, Captain. Inform the comms operative I'll need a secure channel to Operative Demby aboard K3. Set course for Dock 17. We'll transport the four of them over to Teague for the time being."

"Ma'am, we're already projecting our arrival at the rendezvous coordinates to be more than eleven hours behind schedule."

Maureen exhaled and looked into Xillion's brown eyes. "Make the necessary course correction, Captain. Transporting four people to the Space Dock on our way to pick-up...on our way to the rendezvous, won't affect our ETA by any more than twenty minutes. I'll wait for that channel to Demby. Dismissed."

"Ma'am." Xillion knew how to read a room. He turned smartly and exited without a word.

Maureen watched the stalky man leave. She'd almost let slip the classified details of their impending rendezvous and she was deeply ashamed of herself. Three digital chimes sounded over the N12's internal speaker system. Maureen moved back to her place on the low sofa by the viewport and reclined gently. 1930 hours ship's time and she was exhausted. In a few moments she'd have to speak with Demby, after that she'd return to her cabin for some much-needed sleep.

10. Space Dock 17

A steady trilling from the room's flush-mounted computer interface filled the darkness with sound. He grunted and stirred beneath the light blue, silky sheets. He'd not set any alarm. He was alone aboard his mother's Space Dock and had no reason to get up before.... Dannar wearily propped himself up on his elbows and blinked his eyes in the near darkness. A soft blue indicator light was flashing on the comms panel. It wasn't an alarm. They were calling him. Dannar sat up in the middle of the king-sized bed he'd had moved from his quarters on the deck below up to the Observation Gallery and let the light sheets fall around him.

"I'm up, you bastards...I'm...up."

A single chirp from the interface acknowledged his voice pattern and a second light illuminated on the interface, this one a solid amber. The dock's AI, "Brain" was online and waiting for instructions.

Dannar slid himself off his bed and shuffled his feet into a pair of warm slippers. He ran his hands through his salt and pepper hair and called for *Brain* to retract the room's shutters. The entire wall at the foot of his bed exploded in vivid oranges, reds, yellows and whites as the shutters retracted and the brilliance of Jupiter illuminated Dannar Teague's small world. The sight still awed.

Dannar walked to the full-length mirror mounted to the bulkhead opposite the Gallery's massive transparent aluminum viewing panel and made sure he was presentable in his maroon silk pajamas, then he walked to the comms panel. Rounding the foot of his bed he noticed *Revere* hanging in space just beyond the Gallery's viewport like a tiny broken piñata. He'd nearly forgotten about the *Hermes*-class Scout that had arrived on its way to being mothballed only two days earlier.

"Brain, open the channel please," croaked the old man.

The computer acknowledged the request with a happy chirp and the trilling stopped. The blue indicator stopped flashing and glowed steadily to indicate an open channel had been established. Almost instantly, the panel sparked to life and the image of the slim, pale-skinned young woman Dannar had come to know simply as "Demby", filled the entire wall-mounted screen.

"Good morning. Sorry to wake you so early Mr. Teague."

Dannar tried to muster a friendly smile but failed. The young woman was attractive enough—Teague thought her light green eyes were particularly striking (nearly as striking as his own brilliant emerald eyes), but her tone was always cold and detached.

"Ms. Demby, what can I do for you at this... Brain?" The dock computer chirped. "Brain, what time is it?"

THE TIME IS 0709 HOURS STATION TIME.

Teague cleared his throat and looked directly at Demby's image: "At this horrendous time in the blessed morning."

Operative Demby waited for the old man to finish with his drama before continuing to relay the information she'd been told to pass on.

"Mr. Teague, I'm calling to tell you that we have shut down all worker bees and the cargo pods for the time being."

Dannar shifted his weight from his left foot to his right. He needed the rest room, but first thing was first. "I need those bees if I'm going to salvage and secure that old wreck for mothballs."

"I understand you're not finished with NCC-595, Mr. Teague. We'll do our best to keep it under your care until such time as we reinitiate the dock's automated worker units." As she spoke to Teague, Demby initiated a transport of materials to Space Dock 17's lower level from the cargo pad aboard K3.

"How long am I expected to just twiddle my thumbs out here then?" The urge to urinate was growing nearly too strong to remain onscreen.

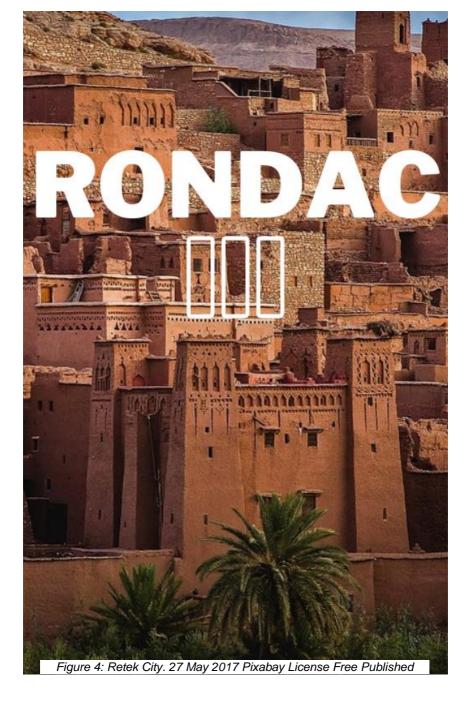
Demby looked directly into her viewer and offered the old man an odd smile. The effect was every bit as amusing as she'd hoped—Teague had never seen her smile before and he was clearly put off. "You'll be entertaining some guests for a while, Mr. Teague. We've seen to it that the lower deck has been supplied with cots, bedding and a medical kit. They'll be staying with you for the next few days. During their stay the bees, pods and transporters aboard will not be functional."

Dannar shook his head in disbelief. Aside from Demby, a handful of black clad goons and Dr. Ploum, Teague hadn't seen another person in over three months.

"From what Dr. Ploum has told me Mr. Teague, you'll be due for a treatment in another three days. I should hope your company will have departed by then. Demby out."

"A scapegoat remains effective as long as we believe in its guilt."

Rene Girard



11. Rondac III

"Makot Kom?"

The inertia dampeners failed.

"Makot Kom?"

What sensors they had been relying upon overloaded and went dark.

"Makot Kom, please wake up. We have a great deal to get through..."

Artificial gravity failed and the lighting on the bridge went out. One of the young troopers was thrown into the viewscreen as the entire ship pitched and rolled on its Y axis...

"Makot Kom!"

Kom winced as the clouds began to part in his mind's eye. He remembered being slammed into a bulkhead, but after that...nothing.

"Kom!"

The last memories of what he'd been doing on the bridge of the *Kreke Disac* before the universe exploded, fell away like dry leaves from a phanak tree. Kom let his head roll to the left and fluttered his eyelids. He was cold.

"Ah, Makot Kom. How nice to see you coming around."

Kom slowly pushed himself up from a thin orange plasticized mattress. His head throbbed and his left arm was numb. He opened his eyes expecting to find himself in an onboard infirmary, or some aid station. What he saw were four dark metal walls and a dim lighting element mounted high in the middle of a vaulted metal ceiling. He drew a long breath and slowly looked around himself a second time. He was in a holding cell.

"Where am I?" Kom gripped the smooth metal edge of the ledge he found himself on. His eyes adjusted to the light. He could see the cell's singular hatch which presumably led to freedom. It appeared to be sealed.

"I am Tavor G'aro, your nestor."

Kom pulled his eyes off the hatch and took in the sight of the portly old man standing in the corner of the cell opposite the commode. He was dressed in civilian clothing but wore the insignia of the Sixth Order on his breast.

"I....wh...what are you talking about, nestor? Where's my ship?" Kom wanted to stand and walk out of the dark cell, but he didn't trust his legs.

"Ah, yes...your ship. Well, let me start by stating categorically that we will not discuss your ship, any assignment you may or may not have been attending to, or any details related to your last posting. Am I clear?"

Kom looked at the older man and for just a second, thought he saw Gul D'gad standing in the dim cell. He shook his head and took another long breath. It was cold.

"As your nestor, Makot, I am here to advise you prior to your trial before the Superior Military Tribunal in two days. Shall we get started?" Tavor G'aro took a cautious step away from the cell wall towards his young charge.

"I want to speak with Gul Turro at Central Command." Kom slowly leaned back and rested against the wall. His arm and left shoulder were stiff, but the throbbing in his head was perhaps improving.

"Gul Turro? No, no Makot. You misunderstand. We're not on Cardassia Prime. This is the holding facility in Retek City on Rondac III."

"Rondac III?"

The older man had moved close enough for Kom to get a good look at him now. He was far fatter than D'gad and his hair was thinning badly to the point where his puckered scalp could be seen clearly. The man's skin was mottled with age spots which raced up his neck ridges towards his flabby jowls, making him look as though he were part Trill.

"Yes, Makot. Legate V'eka of the Fifth Order has convened this Military Tribunal here, on Rondac III. Owing to the sensitive nature of your offences you will not be required to appear before the general population. A loss for the State of course, but for you personally, I think it's something of a situational kindness." Tavor slowly moved to sit next to Makot Kom on the cell's sleeping ledge. Too much standing was taxing for the old man.

"I don't suppose you can tell me what I'm...guilty of?" Kom closed his eyes. He didn't like the fat stranger sitting so close to him, but he didn't have the strength to do anything about it.

"Of course not, Makot. You and your conservator will learn that once the Tribunal convenes."

"Who, may I ask is my conservator?"

"Oh, I'm not privy to that information, Makot. I'm here to help you prepare your remarks to suitably acknowledge your guilt and accept your sentence...which, honestly won't take too long as this will be a closed Military affair, as I've said."

"Dalin." Kom said flatly.

"Pardon me?" Tavor had produced a small pad from the inner pocket of his jacket to begin taking dictation for Makot Kom's confession. As the man's appointed nestor, Tavor was expected to assist with such niceties.

"I prefer Dalin Kom, if you don't mind, Nestor G'aro. I was promoted by Gul D'gad himself...only recently." Kom tried to recall what had happened after the rumbling waves and sudden darkness, but there was nothing.

"I'm afraid not, Makot. Your rank and position with the Fifth Order have been stripped away." Tavor said this cautiously. From long experience he knew nothing wounded a Cardassian soldier more than losing his status.

Kom kept his eyes closed and gently thumped his head against the cold, metal wall. He could recall nothing after the lights going out. Nothing. "If you prefer, I could call you Mr. Kom?"

Kom exhaled slowly and turned to regard the fat old man sitting next

to him. His headache had returned with a vengeance. "You're Sixth Order?" Tavor bristled and couldn't help puffing out his chest. "Dal Second Class, retired. Legate V'eka wanted to ensure you had a completely impartial nestor to aid you in this matter."

"Of course." Kom grunted.

12. Rendezvous

"Captain Xillion, we have the shuttle on short-range monitors," reported Ops.

"Thank you. Helm, hold at three thousand kilometers. Transporter, stand ready. Comms, transmit greeting and encoded challenge." Xillion sat confidently in his command chair. The admiral had supplied him with more details of their rendezvous after the survivors of the *Isadore* were deposited at Space Dock 17.

Admiral Bautlin stepped onto N12's bridge just as the Communications operative was confirming the battered little shuttle's successful response to their challenge.

"Captain Xillion, the shuttle requests their VIP be transported directly to guarters." The operative turned to face Xillion.

Xillion faced the young man posted to the Comms array to ask for 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 mysterious VIP brought aboard. A moment later, as per the admiral's direction, a second unidentified individual was transported 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.

"Well done, Captain. Please input the code from file B79 in the information packet I gave you, to decrypt our final coordinates. Then engage at maximum warp." Maureen had managed close to six hours of actual sleep, but still felt exhausted. The loss of Ekohl U'Chtuklli had affected her far more deeply than she could ever have anticipated.

Xillion acknowledged the Admiral's command and quickly accessed the isolinear data disk she'd given him after depositing Shorh Ch'ornithon and the others at the clandestine spacedock orbiting Jupiter. He opened the file and found a single set of spatial coordinates which he called out to the Helm.

In a blinding flash of light, the sleek, black starship jumped to warp and was gone without a trace; en route to answer their summons.

13. Marooned

P'nom looked down at Dirlo and saw that the makeshift dressing she'd applied to the younger woman's lacerated forehead had soaked through with blood. The words of Captain Ch'ornithon hung in the air, begging for further extrapolation. She'd prompted him for clarification, but he'd fallen silent. P'nom prioritized her wounded comrade over her need to get the captain to explain his curious statement.

In the murky darkness nobody spoke. The sound of P'nom tearing another long strip of fabric from the lining of the captain's tunic filled the nothingness.

"It would seem you're all here, only because someone wanted me here."

Gently wrapping a fresh dressing over the sodden mass of improvised bandages; P'nom turned Captain Ch'ornithon's words over and over in her mind. Her years of logic exercises at the Vulcan Preparatory Academy had trained her to avoid speculation. An explanation was required.

Dirlo grunted as P'nom applied yet another layer of bandages. She'd been conscious the entire time, but her vision was blurred. She realized that all the signs of a concussion were present. As helpless as she felt though, she too was wondering what the captain had meant by what he'd just said...

The dim chamber brightened. A silvery blue light began to grow from the center of the little group of refugees huddled protectively in the dark around their injured fellow. None of the group spoke. None of them needed to. The light and sudden tingling sensation coursing through each of them was as familiar as the feel of falling rain, or a cool breeze blowing against bare skin. Each of them realized they were caught in a transporter beam...to where, was the question.

Two and half seconds later the group found themselves squatting in the middle of a large rectangular storeroom of some kind.

"Where the hell are we now?" Tagir said as he quickly got to his feet.

"Everyone stays calm." Shorh was up in time with Chief Rhupp and was quickly surveying the well-lit room they'd suddenly materialized in.

Moira stirred and tried to sit up. P'nom managed to push herself to one side just in time to avoid the torrent of vomit and bile the injured ensign spewed from her mouth.

"Stay still, ensign!" P'nom sat up and moved back in position to stabilize Moira.

"This, this is familiar..." Shorh had satisfied himself that the four of them were alone in the bright room.

"Sir, look."

Shorh turned and watched as Rhupp held up a Starfleet medkit he'd apparently found sitting on a standard cadet cot. He nodded at Tagir and instructed him to hand the kit over to P'nom.

The walls and floor were bare, though it looked like there had once been industrial carpeting of some sort laid down. A collection of cargo containers was stacked neatly against a long bulkhead. They appeared to contain a mishmash of clerical supplies, spare parts and odds and ends...nothing volatile. A layer of dust lay atop the containers. The room felt like it had been abandoned for quite some time, except for the four pristine cots arranged neatly in a group opposite the wall of containers.

Chief Rhupp and Lt. P'nom gently helped Ensign Dirlo off the floor and settled her onto the closest cot. The ruined dressings P'nom had applied to Moira's forehead were left in a bloody pile on the floor and the half-Vulcan was expertly using a dermal regenerator found in the medkit to close the gash above Dirlo's right eye.

"Is this a Starfleet installation?" asked Rhupp as he stepped around the pool of vomit to join Shorh, who was watching P'nom administer proper first aid to his injured ensign.

"It certainly looks like it...but what sort of installation, and where?"

P'nom finished with the regenerator and administered an antiinflammatory to help bring the swelling down. Moira kept her eyes fixed on a spot on the ceiling. She badly wanted to get cleaned up and hide away. She was mortified for having vomited.

"Captain, though the cargo containers and general state of this room would indicate nothing here has been touched in some time; this medkit and its contents, appear to be brand new." P'nom said this as she settled Moira into the recovery position upon the cot.

"P'nom's on to something, sir. Those four cots and their mattresses look like they've been lifted right out of the Academy, and each one has a complete set of bedding—look." Tagir pointed to the neat stack of crisp white sheets and the thick blue blanket piled neatly next to Dirlo's feet.

"So, it would seem someone was expecting us." Shorh noted that while the cots and mattresses looked comfortable enough, the walls were bare and there didn't appear to be any replicator, comms panel or computer access anywhere.

As his eyes swept the perimeter of the odd room for a second more thorough survey, Shorh noticed a recessed single-paneled door. Tagir spotted the door at nearly the same moment and both men moved to investigate. The door was nearly the same colour as the room's walls, which explained how they'd missed it at first glance. Doors, hatches and access

ports in most Starfleet facilities were labelled, but if there had been a sign denoting where this door led, it had been removed long ago.

Shorh ran his hands up and down the bulkhead either side of the door, but there were no controls concealed within the walls. Rhupp waved his hands at the panel above the recessed hatch in an effort to trigger motion sensors but had no luck. Shorh stepped back and let his Chief Specialist have full access to what appeared to be the only way out of their newest prison cell.

"Lt. P'nom I don't suppose there's a medical tricorder in that medkit?" Shorh was already sure of the answer, but it didn't hurt to ask.

P'nom had been using a standard biohazard degeneration actuator to emulsify the blood and vomit from the floor. She looked up and raised her left eyebrow slightly. "No sir, a standard triage kit, dermal regenerator, hypospray and this actuator."

"So, just what we required to treat Ensign Dirlo's specific injury."

"Indeed."

"Arrgh! Come give me a hand with this!"

Shorh turned and saw Rhupp attempting to force the room's only door open. Without a word both the captain and P'nom moved to help Tagir apply pressure to the solid door panel. It they were in fact being held in some brig; the door would be locked. If they were trying to force a pressurized hatch or airlock; the door would be magnetically sealed. Rhupp grunted again and brought all his weight to bear as Shorh and the remarkably strong female Vulcan strained to secure purchase.

Slowly at first, the panel slid a fraction of a millimeter. Shorh's good antennae curled like a tiny fist as he strained with all his strength. P'nom actually began growling and dug her heels into the deck as she pulled with all her might. The panel squealed and shuddered along its track and vanished into the bulkhead.

14. En Route

Maureen checked herself over in the mirror for a third time. She had showered and taken the time to put on a fresh uniform. She was in no mood to kowtow to anyone, but duty was duty and throwing herself into the work could be a balm against the sting of U'Chtuklli's death. On a whim she'd had the grooming unit "bob" her long, grey hair. As she looked at herself in the fresh black uniform with its admiral's cluster subtly embroidered in the fabric above the shiny black clasp holding her bib closed, she turned her head to the left and then to the right. She wasn't sure if she liked the short haircut.

A soft trilling from the status panel in her quarters pulled Bautlin's attention away from her mirror. Section Controller Skeffef had not been pleased with the N12's tardy arrival at the rendezvous. Even by Tellarite standards his displeasure had been palpable, and he'd demanded to be transported directly to the quarters which had been prepared for him on Deck 4. He'd been very clear that he wasn't to be disturbed for a least an hour. Maureen had allowed him a full ninety minutes of privacy, but now it was time to find out where she was leading Captain Xillion and the crew of the N12.

Wegaos Skeffef had materialized in the center of N12's designated VIP cabin, as requested. He found the furnishings, amenities, and general ambience of the suite to be typically bland—well in keeping with Starfleet aesthetics. More importantly he found the suite's head well-appointed with a double-wide sonic shower and surprisingly comfortable commode. The old Tellarite popped his jaw repeatedly as he stripped off his soiled trousers and wrinkled tunic. The odor of his own urine was sharp and repellant. The clothes were thrown directly into the reclamator. Then Wegaos Skeffef waddled his enormous posterior into the sonic shower.

Though Dannar Teague had successfully revived the mysterious engine plant aboard the only surviving *Nimrod*-class Heavy Cruiser left over from the black fleet, the N12 was still precariously understaffed. Aside from main engineering and the primary hangar deck, only decks one through three were populated. The ship had been designed to operate with a minimal crew, but to even call the twenty-three operatives (including Captain Xillion and Maureen herself) a "skeleton crew" was to be generous. Deck 4 was nearly completely empty except for a few rooms in the aft section used for the fire-response team, so Wegaos had the entire deck to himself, which was good as Skeffef's identity as a Section Controller was to remain unknown all.

Maureen walked slowly along the dimly lit corridor from the turbolift. She had spent most of the journey on the bridge and in the Ready Room where the din of the operatives attending to their duties and the various alerts, tones, hums, and pings from the ship's computer provided her with a

kind of white noise. Walking along the carpeted corridor towards the VIP cabin was an eerie experience. Aside from her own breathing and muffled footfalls, the universe was silent. Before long she found herself standing at the door to cabin 4FS-001. Admiral Bautlin drew a long slow breath and selected the door chime.

"ENTER!" boomed a voice just beyond the doors.

Maureen stepped into the suite and took in the sight of Wegaos Skeffef, in a wide-legged stance posing like some sort of superhero in the middle of the suite's reception lounge. The enormous Tellarite was wearing a pair of billowing purple pants, secured at the ponderous waist by a broad, yellow belt and a silken green blouse replete with a row of ruffled orange embellishments pouring from its collar like an absurd spray of beastly chest hair. The site would have been humorous if not for the severe, nearly homicidal look the large Tellarite wore on his face.

"HA! Never seen a man as splendid as Wegaos Skeffef, have you, human?!" Wegaos popped his jaw and tried not to breathe too heavily.

"I...I'm honoured to welcome you aboard, Controller Skeffef." Maureen almost guffawed, but she managed to recover herself.

"Bah! Woman, you should be." Wegaos popped his jaw again and carefully moved to take a seat in the largest, most reliable chair the room had to offer. His ordeal in the shuttle, though brief, had left him weary and sore.

Maureen had never met Wegaos Skeffef. Ekohl U'Chtuklli had always been her contact for direction. U'Chtuklli had warned her that he knew only one of the eight Section Controllers; the others had to remain anonymous. Wegaos had been Ekohl's Controller and only through present circumstances did Maureen know who the fat Tellarite even was. She waited for Skeffef to settle himself before taking a seat on a firm leather sofa opposite.

"Twelve hours! I wait twelve hours for you, Admiral. Bah! Have you any idea how close I come to killing Moddax myself?!" Wegaos had no intention of sharing the embarrassing details of his altercation.

"I can only apologize so many times, Controller Skeffef. As you were informed, we had responded to a situation concerning..."

Wegaos popped his jaw loudly. He'd read the report this human woman had left for him on the secure ship's server. While he'd never been fond of U'Chtuklli, Wegaos was aware of the bond the devious old Andorian and this human female shared and he chose to show respect for the dead, if not sensitivity to the living.

"Maureen Bautlin, I am aggrieved by the loss of Ekohl U'Chtuklli. He, Ekohl, was valuable to the Section. It is unfortunate you did not succeed in preserving his life."

Maureen was stunned for a moment. She didn't know for certain what had happened aboard Skeffef's shuttle with Mr. Moddax, but the Tellarite's demand to be transported directly to quarters along with the registered replicator use for a new set of clothes gave her some idea that a personal indignity of some kind had been suffered. Tellarites as a rule did not suffer personal indignity well. The fat old man's comments were remarkably empathetic for a Tellarite, especially given the circumstances.

"I'm humbled by your words, Wegaos Skeffef. Thank you."

Wegaos shifted in his seat. He missed the recliner aboard his shuttle. On to business, he thought to himself before snorting quietly and leaning forward slightly. "My pilot, Frevrir Grorn and the Glev glov Nansh?"

"They are all being attended to in the pilot's lounge on the hangar deck, Controller Skeffef. Your shuttle is being serviced and cleaned as well."

Wegaos popped his jaw. "Moddax?"

"In the brig. Completely alone. No one will have any contact with him until we reach the coordinates you supplied us...which leads me to my own question, Controller Skeffef. Where are we going?"

"Your report -snort- your report said you retrieved the captain and some crew from Isadore?" Wegaos had been magnanimous in showing empathy for this woman and the loss of the hated Andorian, but he wasn't about to let himself be interrogated.

"Yes, Captain Ch'ornithon and a handful of his people." Shields up, thought Maureen to herself.

"The brig was to be..."

"Controller Skeffef, your orders were followed to the letter. The individuals taken from the *Isadore* were kept in one of our sealed drone bays. Nobody but Mr. Moddax has been in our brig, I assure you." Maureen hoped she hadn't overplayed her hand by cutting off the old Tellarite, but she needed to establish some standing if she was going to get any answers from the man.

Wegaos was thoughtful for a moment. He badly wanted to get some sleep. "Were kept -snort- in drone bay? Where are they now?"

"Secured at Jupiter."

Wegaos was quiet for a moment. His beady yellow eyes peering out from behind the wrinkled folds of pink skin drooping from his bushy eyebrows. "Bah! We are en route?"

"Maximum warp."

"How long?"

"Our ETA is fifteen hours." Maureen watched as the bile and anger drained away from the old man. Whatever had gone on between he and Moddax had left Skeffef perhaps more tired than angry after all.

Wegaos popped his jaw softly. All that Moddax had shared about the woman was running through his head, but he was suddenly exhausted, and his sides ached. "Cor Coroli, Admiral Bautlin. We go, Cor Coroli..."

Maureen couldn't help herself from inhaling sharply.

"Bah! You've heard of Cor Coroli, then?"

"Whispers..."

"Hmmph...whispers, yes? Indeed -snort- whispers, indeed. You, Maureen Bautlin and I, Wegaos Skeffef, we have much to discuss." He could feel pins and needles begin to tingle in his massive feet and knew he needed to get out of the uncomfortable chair soon.

"Of course, Controller Skeffef. I'm at your disposal."

"Not now. See that Frevrir Grorn and my men are taken care of. Inform me when we arrive at -snort- Cor Coroli."

Maureen found her way back to her own cabin on Deck 2. She let her black tunic fall to the floor and eagerly sought out her own bunk. The last twenty-four hours had been draining and the mention of Cor Coroli by no less than a Section Controller, filled her with wonder and dread. In all the years she'd been an operative for Ekohl, he'd only dared mention Cor Coroli once and had immediately sworn her to secrecy under penalty of death afterwards.

15. Damage Control

Henry Wallace, Starfleet Commander-in-Chief, stood at the head of the short active status module resting in the center of the command room's floor. The long module stood at table height and offered an easy overview of the primary status boards Headquarters continuously monitored. It was never intended to serve as a conference table, but in times of distress it often became the focal point for the most well connected "war room" anywhere in the Federation. The screen in the center of the table displayed the latest report transmitted by Captain Baker.

Beside Henry was Admiral Thomas Knot, Chief of Starfleet Operations. Both he and Wallace were still wearing their dress uniforms from the funeral. Admiral Cahill, a heavy-set blond woman of advancing years, stood at the far end of the module opposite Wallace. While away from her regular posting at the Mars Tactical Institute, Cahill had been on duty while Wallace and Knot were in Japan. She'd dealt with the initial reports from Commodore Pept, and then the One Alpha – Zero reported by Captain Baker.

Finally, beside Admiral Knot, was Commander Sileia the auxiliary Deck Officer. She was a slim and stern-looking Vulcan female. Cold and professional, she wore her red tunic proudly and displayed a small vertical decoration beneath her delta shield denoting the Vulcan trinity of Rata, Tafar and Tapan. Sileia had made no effort to conceal her desire to attain Kolinahr once her current posting was over. With the C-in-C and Chief of Ops back, their protective details resumed their primary duties.

"Where is the Fury now?" asked Admiral Wallace.

"Captain Baker reported crossing into Federation territory an hour ago, Admiral."

Commander Sileia had a fresh shift of communications operators reaching out to Fleet assets between Hakton VII and Alpha 441. Baker had the *Shrar* in tow and was doubtlessly dealing with more immediate concerns than reporting every agonizing moment of his journey.

"Any sign of Cardassian activity?" growled Knot. He hated not being on-station when things went sideways. He hated that Cahill had been the one to take the reins.

"Our listening posts at Hakton VII haven't picked up anything, though there is a lot of interference around Alpha 441. Whatever is happening in the Umoth Nebula; it's destabilizing our ability to conduct long-range sweeps," volunteered Admiral Cahill, who wanted nothing more than to return to her office on Mars.

"The Andorians have dispatched a relief convoy to rendezvous with *Fury* and *Shrar* at Hakton VII, but they're diverting those vessels from Juhrya.

What forces they have on-station at Hakton are apparently trainees and cadets in obsolete Raiders." Henry looked from Cahill to where his friend, Thom, stood simmering.

"I would point out Admiral Wallace, that the Vulcan Embassy has unofficially expressed a great deal of concern about the fact that the *Shrar* was operating so far from the Tzenkethi border," injected Commander Sileia.

"I imagine they have. The High Command was never overly comfortable with the Imperial Guard building Heavy Battle Cruisers to begin with. Have the Andorians responded?" Henry looked from Thom, then back to Sileia.

"The Andorian consulate here in San Francisco has simply thanked Starfleet for the assistance rendered in salvaging the *Shrar* and her survivors. Officially, the Vulcan Ambassadors both here on Earth and at the Vulcan Embassy on Andor Prime have only expressed condolences on the loss of so many Imperial Guardsmen." Sileia spoke coldly, betraying no emotion whatsoever.

"Well, that's one mess we don't have to deal with yet," said Admiral Cahill. The ramifications of Cardassia's sudden claim to vast amounts of new territory would not be brought up here.

"The situation on Morikin VII? We need to get a starship back on show to keep the Boslics and Galvins talking. Thom?" Henry let the long-standing tension between Andor and Vulcan lie and moved on.

"Admiral Cahill rerouted the *Banting* to show the flag. She's an *Oberth*-class Science vessel, but it's not likely either the Boslics or Galvins will be able to tell right away. I'm dispatching the *Ferocious* from Starbase Actium, she's only halfway through a maintenance cycle, but she's big and scary."

Henry began planning support runs to assist those posts left short. Thom stood quietly. Neither Cahill, nor Sileia speculated as to why *Isadore* had abandoned her post, or how she came to be lost in the Umoth Nebula. Thom had his suspicions, but talk of Contemporaneous Affairs, Bautlin, or any of *her* officers was strictly taboo. For now, all Thom could do was keep quiet. An emergency Select Council Meeting was going to be convened.

16. Conservator

"Not to be impolite nestor, but shouldn't my conservator be the one meeting with me at this time?" Kom forced his eyes open.

Tavor G'aro shook his ponderous jowls back and forth slightly and suppressed a chuckle. "Mr. Kom, I can't make it any clearer to you how important this Tribunal is."

"You can't make anything clear, apparently." Kom still felt numb down his left side, but his head was finally starting to clear.

The cell wasn't as large as he'd first believed. His accommodations were only four-square-meters in diameter. Neither was the chamber as sinister as he'd first thought. With his head slowly clearing, he could make out the mottled specks of oxygenated rust marring the coppery finish on the cell's ancient metal walls. He began to bring the reality of his situation into focus. He needed information.

Suddenly a deafening squeal bounced off the rotting metal walls as the hatch shuddered and was pulled open. A bright white light flooded the cell. Kom instinctively shut his eyes and the fat old nestor seated next to him rose from the mattress with some urgency.

"Gul Kovor?!" G'aro spat the name out in an exasperated sputter.

Kom turned his head towards the direction of the cell's hatch. The pain returned as he allowed the harsh light from the outside world to flood his eyes. At first all he saw was a broad silhouette standing above him.

"Conservator Kovor, nestor," boomed a deep, gravelly voice.

"You're my conservator?" Kom asked weakly, shielding his eyes with his right hand as he looked up towards the thick-necked older man towering above him.

"You are Makot Kom, identity confirmed through dental records. I am your conservator. I am here to inform you and your nestor that your trial has been postponed for ten days." The remarkably muscular older man turned on his heel and was about to leave.

"Wait! My sentence!? What is my sentence?"

"There'll be time for that later. I'll leave you in the good company of your...nestor." Eket Kovor ducked through the hatch and was gone.

17. Observations

Shorh and the others stood back from the bulkhead once the door panel had been pushed as far as possible into the slotted recess in the wall. Rhupp was breathing heavily after applying all the strength he could against the panel, while P'nom didn't show any signs of exertion whatsoever. Shorh motioned for both of them to step back from the door. None of them had known what to expect. Another chamber, or a turbolift...

The track in the floor, where the door panel had been dragged along in a shuttering clanging retreat, stood out like a border on a map. Shorh was fixated on the tiny valley. On his side of the track, the floor was bare metal showing odd traces of a carpet removed in haste. On the other side of the track a sea of thick grey industrial carpeting spilled across a two meter-square alcove—wrapped around a single black metal column of free-floating stairs spiraling up towards some other chamber. Shorh looked from the track to the carpet, the staircase, then back again. He knew where they were. It wasn't possible, but he knew.

"Chief, stay with Dirlo. P'nom, grab my tunic please. You're with me."

Tagir wasn't happy being told to hang fire, but he realized the captain was asking him to protect Moira as she lay helpless recovering on the cot behind them. P'nom simply nodded her understanding and fell in behind her Andorian captain as he slipped into his ragged tunic and slowly stepped through the bulkhead and ascended the spiral staircase.

He climbed slowly. His good antennae flexed and relaxed as he strained to listen for some sign of life in an effort to assess potential threats. He was still trying to understand how he and his people had come to be...

"Is this a space dock, captain?"

Shorh took the last two steps and walked up into the Observation Gallery where he had first been given command of the *Isadore*. P'nom was four steps behind, her head peeking up from the deck below.

"Space Dock 17." Shorh swept the room, looking for threats. The swirling angry red and orange face of Jupiter filled the Gallery's massive viewport, illuminating everything in vacillating waves of ochre and gold.

"Space Dock 17 was decommissioned and removed during the Upgrade, Captain," P'nom said as she ascended the last few steps to join Shorh on the carpeted deck. "Apparently, removed to a dangerously close orbit to what appears to be the gas giant, Jupiter."

Shorh let his mouth curl into a subtle smirk. P'nom was brilliant and as far as he could tell, far more Vulcan than human; still, it was amusing to hear uncertainty and surprise in her voice. "Keep alert, Lieutenant."

The Gallery was crammed with virtual drafting tables, stand-alone computer servers and several stasis vaults. P'nom motioned towards the far end of the Gallery (where Shorh remembered boarding *Isadore* for the first time) and pointed to the corner where a large comms panel and a replicator were located. Shorh nodded. Oddly there was a king-sized bed nestled there.

"What is going on here?" Shorh whispered to himself as he turned and walked slowly towards the corner P'nom had indicated.

"Captain, look!"

Shorh turned to see his Vulcan lieutenant now pointing out towards the greater dock. At first, he thought she was indicating the swirling storms of the planet beyond—then he saw the dark grey hulk hanging near the top of the dock. It was an ancient *Hermes*-class scout. He joined P'nom and gazed up at the small ship. She looked dead.

"Captain, is it?" came a strange, unseen voice.

Shorh spun away from the wall of transparent aluminum and swept his eyes over the far end of the Gallery where he remembered there had been a service bay of some kind. P'nom sidestepped away from Shorh and fell into a defensive Suus Mahna stance. The voice had come from the far end of the space. For a long painful second neither Andorian, nor Vulcan, could pick out the stranger lurking in the gloom.

"Captain Shorh Ch'ornithon, of the USS Isadore. Show yourself!"

"The *Isadore!*? The *Isadore*, my word..." Dannar stepped out from behind a stack of freight containers and into the light. "Sorry about the door. They cut power to the secondary relays before I could get it open."

Shorh watched the tall human approach from the far end of the gallery.

He was wearing a blue or purple suit with a tall orange collar and wide, orange embellishments at the sleeves. He appeared well groomed and Shorh would guess his age to be somewhere around sixty to sixty-five years. He had a head of salt and peppered hair cropped short at the sides and swept back at the top. Somehow, he seemed very familiar.

18. RA 8h 37m 14.6s Dec -5* 22'

Captain Xillion, we're coming up on the specified coordinates."

Xillion leaned forward in his command chair and studied the navigational overlay projected between the panels of transparent aluminum which served as a forward viewport and screen for the bridge crew. Little information had been supplied by Admiral Bautlin concerning this part of N12's first foray into deep space since its resurrection at the hands of Dannar Teague. Aside from the scrolling navigational chyron, there was only blackness. There was no way to even know they were at warp other than the engine readings relayed to the Ops terminal.

"Prepare to drop to sub-light speed and set..."

"Captain!" The operative manning the Helm began frantically tapping her control panel and Xillion could see her twice hit the override actuator to no effect.

"What is it? Operative, what's wrong?!"

"The ship's dropping out of warp on its own! I'm dead stick!"

Xillion rose from his chair and took three long strides towards the Helm Station. Operative Tessa Cedeno had been a crack atmospheric transport pilot on Rigel VI before she was recruited; Xillion chose to ignore her jargon. As he approached from her right, Tessa tried for a third time to activate the override emergency systems to no effect. The captain of the N12 stood hunched over, studying her board, completely baffled. Everything had gone blank. There were no active controls whatsoever.

Xillion gripped the back of Cedeno's chair and turned towards the operative sitting at the station beside her. "Ops, status!?"

"Sir, I've...I've got nothing! No external readings, no sensors!"

"Showing all stop, sir."

Xillion turned back towards Cedeno and immediately swept his eyes over her panels—there was nothing displayed. If the N12 had indeed come to a stop, she was hanging in a black nothingness. None of the display features were functioning. There was no viewscreen to utilize, only a clear window looking out into an all-consuming darkness...a glimmer...

"Look!" shouted Cedeno.

"Science, readings!" called Xillion, but as with Ops and the Helm, the operative at the primary Science post reported no external telemetry whatsoever.

A faint point of murky light appeared. The point unfurled and grew into a narrow sliver of arcing radiance. The bridge crew were silent—awed by the unknown. The sliver curved along the silhouette of what appeared to be an unseen planetoid...Xillion looked away from the looming ghost of a world

his ship appeared to be hovering over and glanced around his bridge. Only the internal monitors and status boards appeared to be operating.

A sudden flash and a markedly increased level of ambient light from the view port drew Xillion's attention back to what was transpiring beyond the hull. Blackness surrounded the small planet N12 had mysteriously come to orbit. A single, distant star burned a pale yellow/white beyond. Then a second dark, larger planetoid was silhouetted; hanging above the first mysterious dark world N12 orbited.

"Where are we?" whispered Baen Bechtel, the young blue-haired Nobanian operative at Ops.

"HA!"

Every set of eyes on the bridge spun away from the viewport to the turbolift doors where an enormous Tellarite dressed in garish clothes stood, arms propped on broad hips, legs wide, tremendous belly thrust forward. The man looked like something out of a wild, silly dream. Standing beside him was a somber-looking Admiral Bautlin. Xillion released operative Cedeno's chair and took a slow step towards the admiral and who, the N12's captain could only assume was their VIP.

"We've lost external..."

"Bah! You lose nothing, Captain Xillion!" roared Wegaos as he popped his jaw and made a show of jutting his tusks out.

Xillion simply stood, dumbfounded.

"Captain Xillion, have the individual presently housed in the brig transported to the surface immediately, please." Maureen was stone-faced. As ridiculous as Wegaos Skeffef might look, he was a Section Controller and Maureen wanted to send a clear message to Xillion and his crew that the man was not to be insulted.

"May I...?"

"The coordinates are preset in the central passive particle frequency buffer, Captain." Bautlin nodded towards the stout man and urged him to give the appropriate orders.

Wegaos remained posed in his heroic stance, but he slowly cast his beady little eyes from operative to operative, station to station, taking everything in.

Over internal comms the Transporter Chief reported a successful transfer of the lifeform in the brig to the unknown set of coordinates he'd discovered waiting in the ship's primary transport circuits. Xillion looked to Admiral Bautlin for direction.

"Confirm that nobody has had any contact with the individual previously held in your brig, Captain Xillion." Maureen kept her voice serious.

She knew Xillion had made sure nobody had even ventured onto the same deck as the brig, but it was important for Wegaos to hear it.

"Confirmed, ma'am. As per your orders, no one has been anywhere near the brig since before we left Jupiter."

"-snort- Bah!" Wegaos cast one final look around the bridge then made a show of turning with a flourish and stomped back towards the waiting turbolift.

"Have the recovered shuttle made ready. We'll be departing for the surface presently." Maureen let a relieved smirk cross her face.

"I...of course ma'am. Ops, Bechtel call down to the hangar and arrange it."

"Aye, sir."

Xillion suddenly found the power to walk again and took two steps towards the admiral. Where were they? What about the external systems?

"Thank you, captain. You'll remain here until my return. External sensors and systems will remain offline." Behind her, Wegaos was snorting in agitation. "The ship will be perfectly safe. Long-range communications won't work, neither will planetary sensors."

Xillion nodded. What else could he do? He watched as Admiral Bautlin moved to join the obese Tellarite in the turbolift. As the lift's doors hushed closed, Xillion could see Maureen hand the old pig a heavy black robe.

19. Detenu

The freight containers the old human had been attending were full of Starfleet MREs (meals ready to eat). Space Dock 17 had a state-of-the-art replicator but it, the transporters (both the personnel unit and the two freight units), worker bees and transit pods had all been taken offline for the duration of Shorh and his people's stay aboard.

P'nom carried three MREs down the spiraled staircase to the lower lever where Chief Rhupp and Ensign Dirlo were situated. Shorh elected to remain on the Gallery level for the time being. P'nom would feed and update the others of their situation. Shorh had found the old man to be helpful, if not overly pleasant. Dannar had explained that *they* had shut down the dock's systems to keep Shorh and the others isolated and contained. *They* had also supplied ample food and water for the indeterminant duration of the *Isadore's* survivors stay aboard. Dannar had also rooted out a medical tricorder for P'nom to take back downstairs and properly assess Dirlo's condition.

"When I was last here that lower level was a conference room," Shorh said before taking a bite of redbat stew from the MRE sitting in front of him. He was seated at an overturned stembolt crate near the airlock for the maintenance and loading umbilicals.

"Hmm, well over the years we've repurposed the lower deck a hundred times. They'd been using the whole space to store all kinds of trash up until a few days ago," replied Dannar, who'd taken his own hot tray to a small table set beside the panoramic viewport.

"Uh, huh...and, who are *they*, exactly?" asked Shorh casually looking down at the now empty MRE container. He hadn't realized how hungry he'd been.

Dannar lowered his utensils. He swallowed the mouthful of chicken parmesan he'd been chewing and deftly wiped his mouth with a silky black napkin. "Captain of the *Isadore*. I remember the last time she departed this facility. The day you were named captain."

"I'm sorry, I don't recall seeing you at the ceremony, Dannar...?" Shorh kept his seat. It was just the two of them.

"You didn't say much once the Vice Admiral transferred command. Jakkob used to call such officers, *men of action*."

"Jakkob?"

"An old friend. Was your meal alright? Personally, I can barely stomach the rot that comes out of these little packages." Dannar rose with purpose and deposited his tray into the reclamator unit beside the useless replicator.

"There were a lot of people there, here...that day. I'd appreciate a straight answer to my question though: who are *they*? Mister...?" Shorh rose slowly and carried his own tray across the Gallery, navigating the workstations and drafting tables, taking note of a small pile of data discs like the ones he'd discovered aboard the *Shrar*.

Dannar watched the Andorian deposit his refuse and slowly take up a relaxed stance leaning against the handrail which ran along the length of the Gallery's transparent bulkhead. The young Vulcan had retired below to feed her comrades. She'd recognized him. Dannar had seen it in her eyes. Introducing himself simply as "Dannar" to the pair and quickly suggesting the lieutenant go and see to her friends had bought him some time to remain anonymous.

"Mann, Dannar Mann. I was an engineer with a design firm on Earth. Now, like you, I work for *them*." Dannar leaned back in his chair. He was already feeling weak from his condition and didn't particularly want to play host to a bunch of Starfleet rejects.

"Alright, Mr. Mann. Who are they?"

"You're here, so I think my good captain, you already know."

Shorh bristled. He had a good idea, but he needed to hear it from somebody else. "I've lost my ship and too many of my crew. I've been taken from where I should be working to save those men and women who survived and brought here. Tell me."

Dannar cleared his throat. The injured Andorian standing before him wasn't belligerent, or hostile, but the rage in his voice was alarming. "Fine. If you need to hear it, fine. *They* are Section 31. The Black Badges. Command Acquisitions..."

"Deployment Resources," whispered Shorh.

"Sure. Deployment Resources. Whatever *they* want to call themselves. That's who *they* are."

Shorh turned it over in his mind. General U'Chtuklli had all but admitted as much months ago. He looked at the old human, then down at his tattered tunic. He wasn't sure if he was angry, or guilty, or sad; but he did feel used. He looked over to the drafting table where he'd seen the curious stack of discs.

"What are those, Mr. Mann?"

20. Apprehension

Kom stretched his left arm high above his head and flexed his hand a dozen times. He still felt numb from his shoulder down. He'd counted his meals and felt confident that two days had passed since he first awoke to find himself in the cramped little cell. He was grateful that his head had finally stopped pounding and his ability to focus had returned. Still, he was only able to recall bits and pieces of the conversation he'd had with the fat old man who'd said he was his nestor. It was proving difficult to suppress the anxiety churning within.

He lowered his arm and began to perform the calisthenics he'd first been introduced to as a raw trooper a lifetime ago. Aside from his left arm, his back was tender, and his legs ached. The mattress supplied was nearly wafer-thin. Kom reached up towards the cell's single light, then down to his toes, then up to the light...

The deafening squeal of the cell's door swinging open on its rusty hinges bounced off the rotting metal walls and Kom quickly stood still, not knowing what to expect.

"Ah, Makot Kom. Feeling better I see."

Kom watched as a tall, thick-necked man dressed in a brown suit stepped into his cell. He was an older man, but his upper body and arms were heavily muscled. Kom remembered him from before—he was his conservator. One of the young troopers on guard duty ducked into the cell behind the hulking conservator and placed a heavy metal chair on the floor before exiting again and slowly sealing the hatch.

"Sit, Makot."

Kom slowly seated himself at the foot of his bed and watched the big man come to rest in the metal chair.

"You're my conservator?"

The older man smiled and absently brushed away some unseen dust, or lint from his beautiful suit. Kom looked down at the plain brown raglan garment he'd been given to wear and felt inferior.

"Yes, I'm Eket Kovor. Special Conservator to the Superior Military Tribunal."

"The other day, the nestor called you...Gul?"

"Most recently Gul Kovor of the Third Order. G'aro served under me as a Glinn, when I was a Gul in the Sixth Order. Of course, that's not why we're here, is it?"

Kom self-consciously ran his right hand through his hair and tried to tidy his appearance. He knew the man's reputation, if not his visage. He

was awed to be in the presence of the Conqueror of Draygo IV. "I...I'm honoured to be in your presence Gul Kovor."

"Conservator Kovor, for the time being. Now, your trial will take place in eight days. Transmission issues with the Umoth. Nestor G'aro reports that you were not overly helpful to him. It was hoped the gentle advice of a sage and learned nestor might help ease you to a positive acceptance of guilt; so that we can all get on with matters of far greater importance. I'm not scheduled to meet with you until the night before the Tribunal, but I thought an unofficial visit might help."

Kom looked at the great man who, for all he had thus far achieved for Cardassia, was likely to be named Legate. Though he felt stronger and more clear-headed, Kom still could not recall what happened aboard the *Kreke Disac* following the...the...

"I won't share the specific charges you've been found guilty of before the trial begins of course, but you asked to know your sentence the last time I was here."

"Yes, my sentence...you said I was expelled from the military?"

"I did, and you have been. Are you still interested in knowing the full details of the sentence imposed, based on your crimes? Or are you prepared to make a confession, now? I can take your statement here and date it appropriately, a courtesy to a former soldier. To do so now would give you some time to rehearse your confession before standing before the Superior Archon."

Kom sat in silence for a few seconds before shaking his head.

Kovor sighed. "Very well. In ten days, you will be executed before the elite troopers of the Third, Fifth and Sixth Orders at the forward operations depot on Alpha 441. That will occur after you repeat the full confession you'll have given at your trial, of course."

The conservator's words hit Kom like a cold bucket of water. He couldn't think of anything he'd ever done in his entire life that might warrant such a sentence. He slumped over in stunned silence.

Kovor rose and knocked twice on the cell's hatch. "They reattached your left arm, Kom. Seems they did good work with what remained; they could have left you a cripple were it not for a certain fortitude of duty. Do you have the fortitude to see to the last piece of duty that remains to you?"

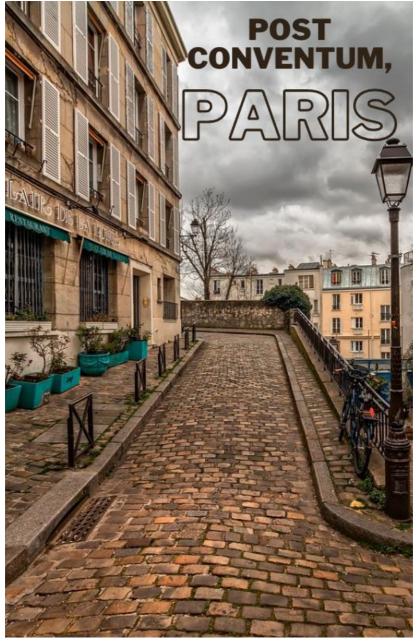


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21. Post Conventum, Paris

Henry rose from his seat as the President and her entourage exited the Council Chamber. Admiral Knot stood quietly at his side. The special meeting of the United Federation of Planets' Select Council had been called within hours of the reports concerning the loss of *Isadore* and the status of the *Shrar*. Politically, the first concern was the state of relations between the Andorians and the Vulcans. Assurances were given that the High Command were prepared to wait for official findings of the various investigations being undertaken, before formally responding to the Imperial Guard operating in the Actium Sector.

The President, once satisfied that she wouldn't need to put down renewed Vulcan/Andorian hostilities, took nearly twenty-five minutes to break down all the pertinent information concerning the Cardassian annexations. Aside from the initial transmission from the Central Command there had been nothing further. Long-range Starfleet listening posts had provided terabytes of raw telemetry to Starfleet Science; where data streams, subspace pings and astrological anomalies were being poured over. Starfleet Security were collecting every report, corroborated or not, of Cardassian activity from the frontier worlds along the boundaries between Federation and unaligned space to work up their probability studies.

A general assembly meeting of the full Council was scheduled for the end of the week. It was expected Starfleet would have some meaningful intelligence to share by then. The purpose for today's meeting was to ensure solidarity between two of the four founding worlds of the Federation. The Andorians, who'd lost a Battle Cruiser and the Vulcans, who'd only consented to the Andorians having said ship if they agreed to limit operations to Council approved Sectors, were old foes. The Tellarites had been invited to serve (if necessary) as intermediaries between the two factions. Before seeking consensus on a course of action from the Federation Council proper, the President had to be certain that she first had consensus amongst the founding members.

The moment the doors to the Executive Annex were secured and the President was out of the Council Chamber, the Vulcan and Andorian Ambassadors collected themselves in silence and quickly left from opposite ends of the building. The Tellarite Ambassador and his attendants took their time packing up and seemed to be in no great rush.

"That went better than I thought it would," said Thom, slumping to his chair.

Henry remained on his feet for a moment longer, watching as the Vulcans and Andorians disappeared. The C-in-C glanced over to where the Tellarites were still packing up and guietly clenched his jaw. "How's that?"

Thom looked up from a pad he'd been powering down. Henry was still gazing across the empty chamber. "Pardon?"

"How did you think it would go?" The Tellarite delegation began waddling up a steep concourse on their way out. Henry drew a breath and slowly took his seat next to his friend.

"Well, for one thing the Vulcans didn't declare war on the Andorians."

Henry shook his head slightly. "That's not funny."

"It wasn't meant to be. Now that Sarek's back in the saddle, I gave the Andorians fifty/fifty at best. His feelings about the blue meanies are no secret." Thom continued packing up.

"Ambassador Sarek's feelings towards the Tellarites are well known too, but thankfully his actions are tempered by logic and duty." Henry closed his mouth and consciously willed himself to stop speaking, less his temper get the better of him.

Thom drew a short breath and let some silence fall into the space between himself and Henry. He lifted his silver attaché case to the table and slowly began loading the briefing materials he'd brought along.

"I'm sorry, Thom. That didn't come across the way I intended."

"Well, we're all stressed." Admiral Knot secured the lid of his case and slowly rose. "I noticed you briefed the President and Ambassadors on the status of Captain Ch'ornithon by simply saying he was 'missing'."

Henry retrieved his own attaché case, a matte black affair with dermal security scan locks. "As per Captain Baker's official reports, Captain Ch'ornithon is missing. Until *Fury* is safely back at Starbase where everyone can be properly debriefed, we'll stick to the bare facts."

Thom stood respectfully silent as his friend and superior officer secured his own briefing materials. He very much had wanted to air his concerns about Ch'ornithon, U'Chtuklli, Contemporaneous Affairs and the very much absent Admiral Maureen Bautlin, but Henry had warned him off any public mention of Section 31.

Henry placed his last pad within the black case and turned to look into Thom's tired eyes. Not for the first time he was unsettled by the marks of time and signs of age his younger friend wore on his face. "I appreciate you holding back on your opinions concerning Ch'ornithon's suspected connections to Admiral Bautlin."

The last of the Tellarites had left the chamber.

"Suspected connections?! Do you hear yourself Henry? He was her First Officer, promoted by U'Chtuklli—who was last seen in command of the

Shrar, who we both suspect had a hand in fast-tracking *her*, to take over for him, at *Deployment Resources*!" Thom tried to keep calm, but he spat the last three words at his friend like venom.

Henry secured his case. "It's not lost on me that we're now down two ships and hundreds of lives possibly because of..."

"Possibly?! Henry, Brian Harris was her tactical officer. We know he went to see U'Chtuklli at Deployment Resources the same day Shorh Ch'ornithon was made captain, and that *someone* took great pains to erase any evidence of him ever being there."

"I'm not having this argument with you again, Thom. Nobody has agonized over the *Sheaffe* more than I have. Now, have you given any more thought as to how you're going to bolster the expeditionary force heading to Alpha 441?"

Knot waited silently until the C-in-C was ready to get underway, trying to calm himself, before repeating the most salient portion of his earlier briefing to the Select Council.

"I've dispatched the Second Division of the Third fleet from Argelius II to Hakton VII; two new *Constellations* and three *Mirandas*. They were holding back in case the Andorians ran into trouble with the Tzenkethi, but our blue friends have beefed up their presence in the Gamma Sector, so we can spare them. I suppose we're not talking about the Cardi force massing on 441?"

Henry nodded as the Starfleet Chief of Operations assured him the small fleet of five starships would be arriving in the Actium Sector directly. Five ships were hardly enough to thwart an invasion, but so far, they were sending the right messages to all concerned parties...and there would be no discussion about suspected Cardassian movements on Alpha 441, for now.

"Come on Thom, it's stopped raining, I'll buy you a drink. We don't need to rush back just yet."

22. Revelations

Shorh listened to the old man they'd found living aboard Space Dock 17 (a facility which was supposed to have been scrapped more than a year earlier during the Upgrade) as he explained how the curious isolinear discs improved immensely on the processing power of standard duotronic circuitry. As the tall human with the salt and peppered hair expounded on *his* revolutionary advancement, Shorh sat and wondered how these odd discs had found their way into the possession of General U'Chtuklli aboard the *Shrar*. Shorh reached inside his open tunic to find the disc he'd retrieved from what had been U'Chtuklli's cabin but found his pocket had been torn away with most of the garment's lining.

Dannar Mann was seated next to Shorh at one of the immense drafting tables elaborating on how his discs could be arranged in columns and thereby have their processing power amplified. Shorh watched as Dannar placed one of his discs into a reader in the table and a holographic schematic of an oddly oversized shuttlecraft suddenly appeared above the workspace.

"So, you see, Captain, the data storage capacity of just one of my isolinear discs is exponentially superior compared to even the most modern..."

"Mr. Mann, excuse me. How is this..."

"Mr. Mann?!" P'nom had just rounded the final steps from the lower deck. She was bringing the empty MRE trays up for reclamation and couldn't help overhearing the old man's diatribe.

Dannar fell silent and both he and Shorh turned to regard the young woman standing at the top of the spiral staircase, dirty trays in hand.

"Lieutenant, how is Ensign Dirlo?" Shorh stood up and turned to face his half-Vulcan, half-human Communications Officer.

"I administered a coagulant. She'll require 3CCs of suspended retronucleic acid when and if we get to a proper medical facility." P'nom proceeded to walk the trays across the Observation Gallery to deposit them in the appropriate receptacle.

Shorh stepped away from the drafting table where Dannar *Mann* sat with an almost annoyed look on his face.

"Retro-nucleic acid? Explain."

"Sir, Ensign Dirlo was born with the genetic deficiency, hemophilia. A condition for which she underwent approved genetic therapy at the age of five. For reasons yet unknown, that deficiency has returned at some point prior to her recent injury."

"Which would explain why you had such a hard time getting her bleeding to stop." Shorh watched P'nom dispose of the garbage.

"It would seem so. I've also discovered that Mr. Rhupp, too has experienced a curious reversion to a previously corrected genetic deficiency." P'nom looked past her captain to the old man sitting at the drafting table. She could plainly see that he was experiencing some anxiety.

"What's wrong with Chief Rhupp?" Shorh didn't notice P'nom assessing *Mann*.

"He's colour blind, captain. Red/Green deficiency. Again, he was treated with retinox 3 as an adolescent to have this condition rectified, but for some reason he too has reverted to his previous state." P'nom pulled the medical tricorder Dannar had supplied her with earlier and proceeded to scan Shorh.

"What, what did you mean when you came up here just now, Lieutenant?" Shorh looked from his young officer back to Mr. *Mann*, still sitting at the drafting table.

"I think, Captain Ch'ornithon...the young woman was about to expose me." Dannar slowly pulled himself up and away from the table where he'd lost himself in extolling the genius of his data discs.

"Excuse me?" Shorh pulled his tattered tunic closed and fumbled with fastening his shoulder clasp, not daring to take his eyes off the tall human.

P'nom spoke up: "Captain, this is Dannar Teague. Former head of the Newport News Engineering Consortium. The great grandson of the man responsible for designing the first generation of *Constitution*-class Heavy Cruisers."

Shorh glanced to P'nom incredulously, then back towards Mann.

"It's true captain, I'm sorry. "Mann" is an alias I use when I want to be inconspicuous. I'm afraid being inconspicuous has become something of a habit for me." Dannar cleared his throat and watched as recognition slowly dawned on the hard-looking Andorian's face.

"That explains those remarkable discs then."

"Yes, well perhaps I can offer some insights into your crewmen's genetic issues as well. Your *Ms. P'nom* is welcome to join us."

23. Talbot

Maureen stood in the concourse beyond the hangar bay where Wegaos Skeffef's colourful little shuttle had put down. Wegaos, flanked by his two Glev glov Nansh thugs, had left her alone in the empty chamber as he headed through a secure doorway to disappear into the bowels of the mysterious facility. The passageway to the hangar was sealed by two enormous orange blast doors, recessed into flat, light grey walls of duranium. Maureen could see no signs of a control panel or access terminal anywhere. The smaller single door Section Controller Wegaos had used was the same orange as the hangar bay doors. There was no evidence of any exterior control ports around the smaller, orange door either.

The lighting was bright enough to dispel any gloom and Admiral Bautlin found the entire chamber sterile. She ran her hand along the cold, grey wall closest to her and shuddered slightly. There was no sound whatsoever, but she could feel an unusual pressure in her eardrums. It was as if she were standing in a sealed airlock.

Pfffttt...

Maureen turned sharply at the sudden blast of air and watched as the orange door Wegaos had just used slowly peeled back to disappear into the grey bulkhead. A slight, black-robed figure was standing in the doorframe. Maureen tugged at the bottom of her black tunic and braced herself. The figure took three steps to clear the doorway and then slowly moved towards her. She could see that while this figure was a fraction of the size of the ponderous Tellarite she'd arrived with, it was wearing a nearly identical robe as the one Wegaos had donned prior to disembarking N12.

"Admiral Maureen Bautlin, a sincere pleasure."

The dark figure stood less than two meters away and the warm, slightly accented voice purring forth from the dark hood seemed oddly familiar.

"Thank-you...Section Controller?"

In a smooth fluid motion, both black clad arms swept up from the figure's sides and drew back the hood to reveal a kind, but weathered face. A human face.

"Sinjin Talbot, admiral." A crooked smile lit the older man's visage and deep smile lines appeared around his mouth, brow and nose. His fine hair was grey/blond and a little too long to be fashionable, his nose slightly crooked.

Again, a vague sense of familiarity washed over Maureen. "Talbot?" Tal...not St. John Talbot?"

"It's pronounced Sinjin, admiral. I'm afraid so. Shall we?"

Maureen followed the one-time Federation Ambassador through the open door and down a long white hallway. Talbot had been infamous twenty or so years earlier when he'd been swept up in an interstellar incident out on Nimbus III. Bautlin remembered reading his brief as a line officer patrolling the Klingon border. Kirk had been involved in it all somehow. Talbot led her along the hallway and the orange door they'd passed through closed and sealed itself as she tried to recall what she knew about the incident.

"Here we are, this way please." *Sinjin* stopped next to a section of gleaming white wall and swept his right arm to his side with a flourish.

Maureen couldn't help from stepping back in shock as a doorway suddenly opened in what she thought was a solid white wall. Talbot offered her his crooked smile and ushered her into a small warm room where a grey fabric sofa stood opposite the mysterious door. Cautiously she stepped through the remarkable portico. Once inside she noticed that there were two more sofas abutting the left and right walls of the chamber to form a kind of horseshoe arrangement.

Talbot left the passageway to the white hall open after following her inside. With some effort the old man shrugged off the black robe he'd been wearing and carefully lay it over the arm of the closest sofa before taking a seat.

"Bloody thing is heavy. Please have a seat Admiral Bautlin, you won't be going up for another hour at least."

Maureen glanced around the room quickly before making her way to the sofa facing the opening. These walls were an institutional beige, smooth and unadorned. There were no windows, viewports, or comms panels anywhere. She slowly lowered herself onto the sofa to sit kitty-cornered to Talbot.

"I must apologize, Admiral. You should have been briefed months ago."

"Briefed?" Maureen noticed that the complete silence, odd pressure and sensation of being in an airlock had disappeared.

"Yes, Ekohl spoke so very highly of you that when it was time for him to move on, the recommendation to elevate you to head of Deployment Resources passed nearly unopposed."

"Contemporaneous Affairs." Maureen didn't know why she felt the need to correct the man just at that moment; she felt her cheeks flush.

"Quite. Well, what with the need to enact Section Order 5 and the sudden interest in our affairs from the Commander-in-Chief and his rather overzealous Chief of Operations, we had to leave you somewhat on your own. To be certain though, Maureen, you've performed admirably."

"I'm sorry Ambassa...Section Controller Talbot, but Ekohl U'Chtuklli led me to believe that..."

Sinjin raised a hand and offered Maureen his crooked smile. "Ekohl

had a lot of leeway with what and when he shared information with you, Admiral. What you must know is there are eight of us constituting Section Command. Two members from each of the original founding worlds of the Federation. There is a ninth individual we can turn to in order to resolve any deadlocks we might find ourselves in. Then there is you, Admiral."

"Admiral U'Chtuklli never..."

"Yes, I know. You are now the head of Section Operations, Admiral. Ekohl was supposed to assume a place as a Controller himself, at which time he planned to go over all of this with you. Sadly, as you know..."

"Ekohl is dead."

"Yes. Shortly you'll be called to do your duty in a hearing concerning..."

"Mr. Moddax, yes I gathered as much." Maureen had suspected something like this when she was contacted by Section Controller Skeffef only a few weeks earlier.

"Do allow me to finish a sentence or two though, won't you? You'll be thrown into the fire somewhat I'm afraid. You'll no doubt hear some hard truths and I hope to prepare you for that. If your fortitude is anything like Ekohl spent the years boasting about, you'll come through alright, I think."

"I don't understand, am I on trial?"

"Heavens no. Operative Moddax is to answer for a great deal though. Much of it will, I am grieved to say, cut rather close." *Sinjin* scratched his chin. He badly wanted a smoke.

"So, this is some sort of pre-trial conference, then?"

"No Admiral, no. I need to talk with you about one of your earlier assignments concerning Ambassador Nanclus's former adjunct...Nompol, I think the name was."

24. Retek City

Kom leaned against his right forearm while gazing through the narrow window looking out onto the slums of Retek City. Angry storm clouds obscured Rondac III's three suns and a warm rain drove a hundred different streams of mud and sludge along the narrow street the small prison's common area looked out upon. Retek City was the largest settlement on the planet the Cardassians had colonized four generations earlier and it was a wilted, rotting ruin. Kom watched as a small boy picked his way across the street, trying to keep from being swept off his feet. The child was in rags and his thin brown shirt clung to his skeletal torso in the rain. Kom thumbed the frons in the center of his forehead and tried not to weep as he watched the starving boy struggle alone in the alleyway between the prison and some non-descript rotting brown building.

"Oh, I am so very happy you've come around to accepting your guilt Makot. Conservator Kovor will be very impressed indeed." Nestor G'aro sat precariously on one of the polished metal stools welded to the simple octagonal table in the center of the common room. He was reviewing the notes he'd taken.

Kom grunted. The boy was standing in the middle of the street beyond. He was trapped between two fast-flowing torrents of rainwater.

"I think, if we can somehow get you to work in a sincere lament about duty being the only road to salvation, or honour, or personal satisfaction, or something to that effect; we can put a wonderful bow on your confession and truly inspire the troops." Tavor scrolled through the notes and advanced to a fresh screen on his pad's small display.

The boy took an uncertain step, paused, lost his balance, and fell into the mud without a sound. Kom exhaled and turned away from the little window.

"Will this truly make a difference?"

Tavor looked up from his pad and let a serious and solemn look haunt his spotted face and quivering jowls. "Mr. Kom, a legion of young troopers will be hanging on your every word. Young men and women who are facing an immense challenge and who need to hear from a veteran like yourself how their commitment to duty and willingness to sacrifice was not taken for granted by the Central Command, or the Cardassian people. Yes, Mr. Kom, yes. Your guilt and desperate pleas of atonement will safeguard all of Cardassia!"

Kom sat across from his nestor, rubbed his numb left shoulder and began thinking about how he might best see to this, his last duty. Outside, the young boy was drowning in the mud.

25. Rue Saint-Dominique

Henry sat back on the small bistro chair just outside of *Café Comptoir* on Rue Saint-Dominique. He cradled his hot cup of black coffee in both hands and savored the rich, full-bodied nose as the heat from the ceramic cup radiated through his hands and soothed his arthritis. Commander Dazgin, most recently of the *USS Berhunut*, sat at the next table over. He was a young Benzite brought on to Admiral Wallace's detail to replace the soon-to-be Captain Osip Evengii. It'd taken some convincing, but Henry managed to persuade all concerned that a late afternoon stop at the café was essential following the day's Select Council session.

"If for the next hour we're off-duty Henry, why not enjoy a nice glass of wine? We're in Paris, after all." Thom picked up his glass of Cote-Rotie and took a long sip.

"I'm glad we did this, Thomas." Henry sipped his coffee slowly. It was still just a little too hot to drink. He'd almost had to order Knot to the small café after the session.

Once Admiral Wallace had informed Commander Dazgin of his intention to forestall his return to San Francisco both he and Admiral Knot had stowed their dress "reds" and changed into civilian clothing, to be less conspicuous. Henry wore a pair of green wool trousers and a pale-yellow chemise, while Thom was dressed in black slacks and a white turtleneck which made it look like he was trying to pass himself off as a Starfleet officer. Henry hadn't said anything about his friend's fashion sense; a lifetime in the service had limited Admiral Knot's civilian imagination.

"I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have popped off like that, Henry."

Wallace gently put his coffee down and rubbed hands together. They couldn't speak openly about anything too specific while on the street.

"I know, Thom. It galls me too, but when it comes to those connections both our hands are tied." Henry waited until Thom met his eyes, before drawing a deep breath and taking a slow look around the ancient street corner in what he personally felt was the most beautiful city on Earth. It was a cloudy and wet early spring day in Paris and the air smelt of wet cobblestones and soil.

"If Osip were here, he'd be having kittens." Knot took another sip of his wine and allowed himself to relax for the first time all day.

"Osip is too busy preparing for his first command to worry about it. Besides, young Mr. Dazgin there has things well in hand," Henry said this with a smile.

Thom looked over to where the tall Benzite sat, dressed in a black turtleneck (to hide his rebreather), a pair of bright blue pants and a matching

blue beret cocked at an odd angle atop his smooth blue head. He stifled a laugh. As ridiculous as the Benzite looked, Thom admired him. He was the first of his kind to enroll in the Academy and while the Benzites were not yet members of the Federation, Dazgin was an impressive glimpse into what could be a magnificent future. Thom watched as the Commander pretended to *enjoy* a cup of coffee himself. Gripping the dainty ceramic cup in his left hand using both opposable thumbs, while meticulously scanning the street and checking in with each special security officer he'd assigned to secure the block.

"I'll have to send more than *five*, if our Cardi friends are really on the move."

"I know." Henry's smile faded. "The Andorians want to present Grant with a medal for saving their asset." Wallace changed the subject quickly.

"Hmm...Well, he'll love that."

"I think I'll order him to accept it. He's had a hell of a career. He deserves a little pomp and fuss on his way out... Hibiki says he'll petition us to name TPD's first *Excelsior* the *Nogura*." Henry reached for his coffee.

"We just don't have the infrastructure out there to establish a permanent presence. The Guard are running some long supply lines. Hakton is little more than an outpost, truth be told." Thom reached for his wine to keep himself from saying anything more. "Shop-talk" was second nature to him.

Henry realized his friend wasn't taking the conversational hint and sighed. "From what we know they've mostly been annexing deserted planetoids. Looking for resources, but this move...this signals they're ready for bigger prizes."

Thom looked at his friend and nodded slowly.

Henry continued: "Everything else aside, they're a starving empire; too proud to ask for help."

"Too proud, too stubborn. Speaking of stubborn; the Bajorans are likely on the Cardi's short-list for future targets. I understand they've turned back another diplomatic outreach delegation?" Thom held on to his wine glass and waited for Henry's reply.

"How are they described? Priests and farmers? We can't help those who won't help themselves. I'd like you to consider sending the *Meni T'Pra* to join the *five*. I'd like to have someone close to us, there. It might be years away, but there's a war coming."

Thom nodded and finished his wine. Both men had to get back to work, their moment's repose was over.

26. Discovery

Shorh and P'nom sat at a second drafting table to listen as Dannar Teague shared what he knew of their mutual predicament. Teague looked suddenly much older than his near fifty-nine years and a raspy cough had taken hold of him. He kept his brilliant emerald eyes fixed on the Andorian and the young, dark-haired Vulcan sitting across from him. He cradled his head in his left hand. He believed Shorh and his officers were snatched from the stricken Andorian ship by a multi-phasic transporter which had triggered a biological reversion in Ensign Dirlo and Chief Rhupp.

Just as Teague was referring to him, Tagir ascended from the lower level and injected himself into the conversation. "What are you on about, multi-phasic transporter?"

Dannar coughed into his fist and readjusted himself at the drafting table.

"You'd be...cough...Rhupp, then?"

Tagir paced towards the group. He glanced around the Observation Gallery quickly before replying: "Chief Specialist Tagir Rhupp, and you'd be Mr. Mann?"

"Not quite, Chief Specialist." Dannar had learned long ago that Starfleet officers, even non-commissioned ones, were far more pliable when referred to by rank.

"Take a seat, Chief." Shorh motioned for Tagir to settle.

"My name is Teague, Dannar Teague...cough..."

Tagir nearly fell over a narrow work bench he'd pulled away from a dormant diagnostics module. "Teague? *The* Dannar Teague? San Francisco Shipyards?"

"Until three and half months ago, yes. Would you like me to start over? Or would you like a response to your question so we can all get this over with and I can get to bed?" Dannar tried to sit up straight, but his neck and back were aching.

Tagir pulled his bench beside P'nom to listen to Teague explain that a multi-phasic transporter could, in theory, penetrate shielded environments to acquire targets without detection. Rhupp was quick to point out that such technology had never successfully been realized; to which Teague countered that such a device was in possession of Section 31.

"I believe such a transporter operating at an amplified power setting could cause irreparable cellular damage in biological organisms, Captain." "Irreparable?" Shorh slowly rose from his place and studied the old human slumped over the opposite drafting table.

"Yes...cough...well, I believe given the state of this Andorian craft—no shields, no security fields, likely only basic structural integrity generators operational; *they'd* have operated the transporter at a much lower power setting." Dannar could feel himself fading.

"Why would they use such a dangerous device at all?" P'nom asked with a disbelieving look on her face. Her left eyebrow arched involuntarily—an automatic Vulcan response.

"Heh, ah...to counteract ambient radiation? To scoop the four of you up without the risk of any of that craft's internal sensors detecting anything? cough... To make you see ghosts..." Teague went on to briefly recount the odd events which he'd experienced months ago—the visions of Dr. Marlatti and the unnerving foretelling of his own future if he remained with NNNEC or ventured into the world of private enterprise.

It wasn't until Teague insisted P'nom use the medical tricorder on him that Shorh and the others seemed to accept his hypothesis. A basic scan quickly revealed that Teague's genes were actively decaying at an alarming rate.

"How long has this condition afflicted you, Mr. Teague?" asked P'nom.

"I began showing symptoms two days after being brought here. Weakness, muscle aches...cough...this damned cough. They came and collected me in a transport pod and ferried me over to their station..." The young woman's ears were elongated, but not quite pointy he noticed. He was noticing a lot about the young women who'd been left aboard the station and though titillated, Dannar was somewhat confused as he'd never had such feelings before.

"What station?!" asked Shorh, a little more forcibly than he'd intended.

"Heh? They're roughly fifteen hundred kilometers to our port aft, Captain. It's a modified K-type station. From the outside it looks like an antique, but it's been completely refit...cough. Anyway, I'm dying. I believe I've been washed through a multi-phasic pattern buffer a number of times and the damage, well..."

P'nom powered down the tricorder. "The readings I've recorded seem to indicate a rapid rate of degeneration. It does not seem possible that you could have survived all these months, as you claim."

"No. It's not possible. Eight days is all I get." Dannar pushed himself up and leaned over his drafting table on unsteady legs, bracing himself with both hands. "I'm on day five of what Dr. Ploum calls my *cycle...cough*. It's a day of bad coughs and fatigue, I'm afraid. I bounce back for days six and seven though. Generally, I'm pretty strong on day seven."

Tagir rose from his bench and moved towards the old man wobbling against the drafting table out of sincere concern. "Can I help you?"

"Ah, Starfleet empathy. Section 31 has none of that, I don't mind telling you. Thank you, Chief Specialist,...cough...just help me to my bed, please." Dannar let Rhupp take him under his right arm and shifted his weight from the table to the strong young man in the dirty radiation suit.

Shorh nodded slightly at P'nom, who then moved to help Rhupp with the old man. "We'll leave you to get some rest, but I must ask you to clarify all this. If my people have been exposed to something that can cause severe genetic degradation, I've got to get them some help."

Teague took three shuffling steps with the help of Tagir and Lt. P'nom then stopped. "None of you need worry, Captain. I'd surmise you were transported once—away from your damaged vessel and at low power. cough...Every eight days they come, collect me in the pod, take me aboard their station and a rather creepy little man named Dr. Ploum washes me through a regular transporter using an earlier, less corrupted pattern record to "re-set" me to day one...cough."

"We'll settle you, then return to the lower level until tomorrow morning," said P'nom as she urged the tall man to continue walking.

Dannar smiled weakly. "Thank you. Your ensign should be up and around by then...cough...and this will have passed."

"I'll have more questions, Teague."
"I imagine you, you will, Captain...cough...you were interested in my

discs and the reader unit...they won't likely make sense to you, but...cough...feel free to peruse them." Dannar was now very tired and wanted badly to be left in peace.

Shorh silently ran his right hand over his badly damaged tunic. His inner pocket was gone along with...

P'nom shifted her weight and produced a single isolinear disc from her trouser pocket. "I found this in the lining of your tunic captain, when I was making dressings for Ensign Dirlo." She handed the single disc to Shorh and then helped Rhupp get the old human to his bed.

27. Groundwork

"...so you see, your Mr. Nompol..."

"Nompel, Controller. His name is Nompel and he's now the Chief Political Officer aboard the *Tomed*." Maureen still couldn't quite believe she was sitting across from St. John Talbot.

He'd vanished a dozen years ago from a rehabilitation facility on Rigel VII. Maureen had read a classified brief concerning the incident while commanding the *Victory* in the Kandari Sector. Information was light, but the general feeling was Talbot had slunk off somewhere to drink himself to death.

"Yes, quite so. Your Mr. Nompel has done splendidly for himself—never more than ten meters away from the Praetor. Impressive, considering how they handled Nanclus after Khitomer." Talbot leaned back into the sofa he'd perched himself upon and flashed Admiral Bautlin his crooked smile.

"I don't want to seem *slow*, Controller Talbot, but what are you trying to ask me?"

"Each of we eight *Controllers* are selected to serve based on highly individualized, unique talents and connections." Talbot shifted in his seat and folded his hands in his lap.

"Yes, well you've explained the composition of Section Command, but I don't see what this has to do with my being here for..."

"Ekohl tasked you with an assignment the last time he saw you, yes?" "General U'Chtuklli audited K3 and my command decisions following the execution of Section Order 5."

"I apologize, Admiral, you're right of course. Ekohl's audit was impressively favorable towards your leadership I must say...and splendid work getting Admiral Wallace to 'bug' his own office, most impressive!"

Maureen leaned forward in her own seat and recalled the conversation she'd had with U'Chtuklli when she first arrived aboard K3 from Earth. "You're referring to the offload package General U'Chtuklli left for me regarding the Romulan activity in the Kea System?"

"Quite. Nompel was suitably shaken when you reached out to him...again, well done. Once we get the business here out of the way, I'll be tasking you with some rather challenging assignments to further our goals with the Romulans."

"You'll be ...?"

Talbot smiled again. "Sadly, my dear I will be your only contact with Section Command. For Section Command to commit to any course of action three quarters of the Controllers must be in agreement. In a few very rare

cases we require no less than complete consensus to act. As I'm sure you're aware I am not the Andorians favorite person. In fact, my own ascension to Section Command was fiercely contested by my Andorian peers. Ekohl had been in line as your contact, but *c'est la vie*, as they say."

Maureen leaned back and shook her head slightly.

"We are selected sometimes for our connections. Your connection to Ekohl got you here. Following the incident on Nimbus III, after the *Enterprise* liberated myself, General Kor and the Romulan representative; I developed a rather close and frankly passionate relationship with Caithlin Dar."

"Dar? The Enriov believed to be part of the Tal Shiar?"

"Caithlin is a vice admiral with the Tal Shiar, Admiral Bautlin. She's also my wife." Talbot's smile was absent.

"1...1..."

"Yes, well my lady wife and I have an unconventional relationship as you might imagine. She loves her world and I love mine, but we try to see our way clear to protecting both. We call it devotion."

"So, Ekohl's mission to gather information...Brian...the Sheaffe?"

"It was necessary, Admiral. Caithlin can only give me so much, the rest we have to work out on our own. Believe me, there have been times when roles have been reversed."

Maureen only nodded, too awestruck by what she was being told to speak.

"Now, Ekohl was to take the place of Section Controller Ethyhr Ch'Rhyrral. Ethyhr is ninety-two years old and dying of congestive heart failure. Ekohl is now dead and Ethyhr cannot leave his post until a replacement is selected—an Andorian replacement. There isn't one currently. As a result, our blue *friends* are less agreeable than normal."

"This is all remarkable, Controller Talbot, truly...but I still don't quite see..."

"No, Admiral. You've been with us now too long not to understand that nothing you see or hear here is *remarkable* in any way, under any circumstance."

Maureen watched as a shadow fell across *Sinjin* Talbot's weathered old face. Gone was the devilish glint from his eye and the crooked rogue's smile he'd so expertly flashed. He was a Section Controller. One eighth of Section Command. She might not quite understand all that he was trying to impart, but she understood clearly how deadly serious it all was. She only shook her head.

"No need to apologize, Maureen. Ekohl vetted you. He admired you and most of all, he trusted you. You wouldn't be here if there were any doubts. All of this should have been laid out for you months ago, but Section

Order 5 and the Cardassian situation delayed Ekohl in completing his duties unto death, sadly."

"So, if we're not going to speak about this hearing, what is it you need from me?"

"You've met Captain Harriman?"

Maureen tried to roll with the punches, but her mind boggled. Sitting across from Talbot she realized that up until this very instant she'd only ever handled isolated, often minor assignments. Ekohl was dead and gone. She was sitting in his seat and the time had come for her to handle the hard truths of the big picture, as difficult as it might be to even grasp.

"I've met John Harriman a half dozen times, I wouldn't say we're friends."

"Friends no, well. Once we're done with the business here, you will return to Earth and meet with the Federation President ahead of the next full Federation Council Session. You'll go in your official capacity as Admiral in charge of Contemporaneous Affairs. You need to arrange for the *Enterprise* to be ordered to the Foxtrot Sector...for whatever reason seems most believable."

"Why the Foxtrot Sector?"

"Your Mr. Nompel feels a certain Admiral Vokar can be instrumental in prompting a political shift for both the Romulan Star Empire and the Federation towards a mutually agreeable end."

"Ekohl said the Klingons were the concern, that we had to convince them to back off from the Romulan Neutral Zone. He said there would be blood on both sides."

"Yes, quite. The pieces are still being arranged, but Mr. Nompel has communicated that provided certain concessions are agreed to ahead of time, the Praetor and Senate would be agreeable to a bit of bloody theatre."

28. Disclosure

After helping Teague to his bed both P'nom and Rhupp headed down to the lower level to join Moira Dirlo. Shorh remained above sitting quietly at the drafting table with the disc reader Dannar had shown him. Once Rhupp disappeared down the stairs after telling his captain he was only a shout away, Shorh triggered the Observation Gallery's shutters and watched as the fiery orange face of Jupiter disappeared.

Shorh sat in near total darkness for several silent moments. His white hair was matted and plastered to his forehead in clumps. His left antennae, though immobile, sang out in pain as the medication he'd been given aboard the *Shrar* had finally worn off. He was tired, angry, frustrated. Teague had only given him enough information to inflame a host of urgent burning questions.

The sick old human began snoring sloppily in the darkness. Shorh's right antenna curled at the decidedly undignified sound. He raised the disc P'nom had salvaged from his ruined tunic and studied it for a moment in the dim glow of the drafting table's idle three-dimensional emitter. Teague snorted. Shorh inserted the disc he'd salvaged from U'Chtuklli's cabin aboard the *Shrar* and watched in silence.

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

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

A flash of blue static destabilized the recording. Shorh sat silently waiting to see if the disc had any more to offer. The sight of the fierce one-eyed Admiral was eerie. The fact that U'Chtuklli had apparently sent the message to Brian Harris was completely jarring.

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

The Romulans completely erased their computer core and scuttled their cloaking device..."

Another flash of static from the corrupted disc caused the playback to cut out.

"...Khitomer Accords aside, the fact that the Empire's fleet was concentrating in increasing numbers along their borders gave us reason enough to mobilize. In light of what we've so far discovered aboard this Romulan relic though—we're starting to question some of the assumptions...tions...tions...tions..."

The projection of Admiral U'Chtuklli seemed to stutter and phase for a moment.

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

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

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

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

Again, a wave of static washed the holographic admiral away. For a few seconds it appeared as though the message was trying to replay itself from the beginning, then the image of the Head of Deployment Resources seemed to skip and freeze, before continuing:

"...at all costs, Captain. We must have more information.

This transmission ends."

where.

Shorh watched as the image of Admiral U'Chtuklli faded to black. U'Chtuklli had sent Brian Harris to his death. Shorh had known that for months, but he hadn't known why and now he had a better understanding of

Teague continued to struggle in his fitful snoring repose. The message reset and replayed itself again and again.

29. Preliminary

Kom opened his eyes before the metal hatch from his cell to the corridor beyond was even touched. He could hear the trooper's boots clomping along the worn metal decking beyond the solid metal barrier that kept him contained within the small chamber. The latch cracked free of its socket and the hinges squealed as the young trooper on duty pulled the door free of its frame. Kom sat up perfectly straight on the cell's bunk and waited for direction as was expected of a military prisoner.

"Prisoner Kom, you're to clean yourself and put these on."

Today's trooper was a very young man who looked as though he'd just finished basic training. He was skinny, but tall. He wore the insignia of the Second Legion Second Order, Infantry. He kept his dark brown eyes locked on his prisoner as he entered the cell with a bundle tucked under his arm. Kom remained perfectly still as the young man carefully dropped the bundle at the end of the sleeping ledge, then backed away slowly. He kept his eyes on Kom as he blindly ducked back through the open hatch and secured the cell again.

Only after he heard the latch *clank* locked did Kom push himself up from his perch. He could have easily overpowered the boy. Basic training in the modern Cardassian military was a far cry from what it had been in Kom's day. Makot picked up the bundle and unfolded a simply tailored brown shirt made of flayer hide. A pair of flayer pants tumbled from within the shirt to land on the thin, orange mattress. The pants had been tanned a deeper brown than the shirt, almost black. He'd never owned such fine garments. Kom held the shirt up by the shoulders and examined it in the dim light. It was simple, but luxurious. He rubbed the leather between his thumbs and forefingers, then held it to his nose and breathed in its sweet, earthy scent.

Ten minutes later, just as Makot had finished washing himself in his cell's tiny basin and was pulling the stunning shirt over his head—the latch cracked free of its socket and the hinges squealed.

"Fix your hair Kom, it's time to go."

Makot hadn't heard the approach this time, he'd been too absorbed in the luxury of his new clothes.

"Gul Kovor!" Kom snapped to attention out of habit.

"Conservator Kovor. I see my package arrived. I trust they fit; I pulled your sizing information from central stores."

"Fit?...yes. Yes thank you, Conservator!"

"Fix your hair Kom, we're due to appear in twenty minutes." Kovor glanced around the spartan cell. The prisoner had kept his cot neat and his toilet/sink unit immaculate. The rough-hewn prison uniform he'd been wearing since his admission had been neatly folded and stowed at the end of his sleeping ledge.

"I...my tribunal isn't scheduled until..."

"Your nestor informs me you've been very cooperative the last few days. Your professionalism is noted. You are being granted the privilege of attending your preliminary hearing. Now, fix your hair and let's go."

Kom quickly pulled back his thick black hair and used water from his basin to hold back some long unsightly strands behind his ears. He was in desperate need of a proper haircut. The soldier in him was almost embarrassed by the unsightly mane which he hurriedly wrestled with as Gul Kovor impatiently waited just outside his cell.

Kom was led along the corridor, past the common room where he and Tavor G'aro had spent much of the last two days, then down a steep set of stairs to a subterranean tunnel linking the prison with the Retek Hall of Justice. The young trooper escorted Kom and Gul Kovor as far as the stairs.

"You will meet the Archon today and hear the particulars of this Special Military Tribunal. You will not speak. You will not ask questions. G'aro reports you know your duty and are committed to the acceptance of your guilt. Bear that acceptance in mind at all times." Kovor's voice was firm, but not unkind.

"Will I hear the specific charges I am guilty of? What of the *Disac*?" Kom was enjoying stretching his legs after his short confinement and the feel of his new pants against his thighs was almost erotic.

"The Archon is under no obligation to divulge the charges ahead of the actual Tribunal; however, if you are sincere enough in your guilt the possibility is not remote. The *Kreke Disac* is in a salvage dock at a secret location. She'll be parts for her sister ships."

Kom kept pace alongside Gul Kovor in silence. Ahead of them a well-lit ramp appeared out of the dingy gloom of the smooth-walled tunnel running beneath the slums of Retek City. Two burly troopers stood guard on either side of the ramp. Both young men snapped to attention as Kovor approached. Kom could clearly see their regimental insignia matched that of the young man back in the prison.

"As I've said, this is a preliminary hearing. No more talk." Kovor strode past the guards and up the ramp, leaving Kom to follow like a pathetic vole.

30. Badlands

"Admiral Knot?"

Thomas looked up from the interactive display mounted to his desk and saw a tall, impeccably dressed Androgynelacerta standing in his doorway. The officer wore the blue flashes of the science division and the brilliantly polished rank insignia on the blue strap holding the red tunic closed denoted a full commander.

"Commander G'pnor, thank you for coming by. Please, come in."

G'pnor nodded slightly and reflexively blinked their inner eyelids in appreciation of the Admiral's invitation. In their left hand they held a large pad on which they'd downloaded all the data so far collected and available from the Umoth Nebula. G'pnor specialized in Astrophysics and had graduated at the top of their class from Daystrom nearly twenty-five years earlier. They were only recently being recognized as one of Starfleet's preeminent experts in the field of magnetohydrodynamics.

Thom watched the oddly attractive blue-and-green-scaled Androgynelacerta power up the pad and get situated at the dark grey metal conference table beside the window which looked down on the floor of the command center. Much like Commander Dazgin, G'pnor was the first of their people to have successfully joined Starfleet and Thom felt the same admiration for the blue/green scaled individual's determination and drive as he did for Dazgin.

"You asked for a quick summation of what's happening in the Umoth Nebula, sir. After combing through all pertinent and available telemetry I'm comfortable in reporting that what was only recently a nebula of various radioactive isotopes, gases and pockets of ionized proto-acetylene/hydroxy compounds, is now a mass of self-sustaining plasma founts and tempests." G'pnor found the data they wanted on the pad and turned it towards Admiral Knot.

Thom picked up the pad and couldn't make heads or tails of the technobabble. "I'm sorry Commander G'pnor, it's been a long day. Can you streamline this for me?" The wine he'd had in Paris only hours earlier was giving him a headache. He'd gotten too used to the new synthehol the Fleet was embracing. Real tannins were no longer his friend.

G'pnor blinked four times and their long, forked, purple tongue darted out from between their scaly lips for a fraction of a second. "Well, simply put Admiral, what used to be the Umoth Nebula is now a massive field of plasma storms."

"The Umoth Nebula has always experienced random plasma events."

"No sir, the nebula is gone. In its place is a churning, self-feeding mass of plasma storms. Most remarkable. I can't see how it could be a natural phenomenon; however, I should wait until I receive all the data collected by the *Fury* before reaching any conclusions." G'pnor blinked four more times.

"Badlands." Thom stared at the pad.

"Pardon me, Admiral?"

"The...the uh, Bajorans call areas with frequent plasma storms within the Umoth Nebula, *badlands*. Their trade vessels avoid them like ancient sailors here on Earth tried to avoid bad patches of sea where they knew squalls, waterspouts and the like were more common." Thom didn't know why that had occurred to him.

"Yes, well. As you can see the general borders of the old nebula have remained relatively unchanged; however, now it is all *badlands*, as you call it. I will endeavor to determine how this happened, but I will need complete access to the *USS Fury's* sensor logs when they are available. I helped design the specialized module installed on the *Fury* at Utopia Planetia, I am proud to say."

"Yes of course, Commander. I'll take this with me to the Emergency Council Session, but no doubt we'll need to know more about this...phenomenon." Thom thumbed the power button on the pad and rose to stow it in his attaché case.

G'pnor pushed up from their seat at the conference table a split second after Admiral Knot had gotten up. "Very well, sir. I shall relay any updates or further reports through Starfleet Science and copy your office at the same time."

"Yes, thank you, Commander. Dismissed." Thom offered G'pnor a professional smile as they left his office.

He decided not to ask G'pnor if a warp reactor overload could have sparked these plasma storms. Without *Fury*'s sensor data, they'd just be speculating. Still, it would provide a plausible explanation as to where *Isadore* might have gone. He'd also made a conscious choice not to mention G'pnor's assignment prior to his posting to Starfleet Science, aboard the ill-fated *USS Sheaffe*.



Figure 6: Corridor. Published 13 May 2014 Pixabay License Free

31. Diuturno Metu

"Ekohl said there would be blood on both sides, *Sinjin*. I've already helped commit a ship and crew to their deaths. I'm reluctant to endanger any more Starfleet personnel, or Federation citizens before knowing exactly what's going on." Maureen kept a stoic expression on her face as she looked St. John Talbot; infamous ambassador from decades ago, Nimbus III hostage and notorious burn-out, possible Romulan collaborator and now, Section Controller, squarely in the eye.

Talbot held the woman's eyes for two heartbeats, then leaned back and smiled his crooked grin. "Andorians have a particular way of doing things. You were U'Chtuklli's asset, as such you were his responsibility. It is vexing you see—had I had my way..."

"Controller Talbot, please, can we be direct?"

"You will attend the next regular Council meeting and do as we require of you, Admiral. I will be direct: you are no longer an asset. No longer an agent, or operative. You are the head of our operational arm; rather time you started acting the part, yes?"

Maureen bristled but kept quiet.

"Did you know there is an Emergency Council Meeting convening in just a few days? Hmm? I know you don't, Admiral. You've had your nesting period while establishing K3 and seeing Section Order 5 through. You've even tinkered with holographic gizmos and amped-up transporters, *such fun*. Now, sadly, the time for "fun" is over. We monitor no fewer than three hundred independent data streams from across the Federation here. We are only as effective as the intelligence we traffic in; do you understand?"

"Section Order 5 was to relocate operations off Earth for the first time in *our* existence, or so I was told. Perhaps, before you lecture me, you should start being honest with me."

"This is what I mean about Ekohl failing to prepare you. Order 5 did relocate operations from Earth for the first time. Oh, up until the disastrous end of *Control* there was a forward operating base at 74 mark 5.6, but that was only ever a security measure taken to safeguard the computer system, which frankly was a mistake. Honesty, Admiral, is as ethereal as truth."

"Then what are you telling me?"

"Listen to everything. Your job now is to listen, report and act accordingly. Cor Coroli exists as an *arms-length* hub of administrative direction. You at K3 are for all intents and purposes, Section 31. Use your operatives to monitor and watch everything. Report the significant, ignore the noise and stop thinking so small...stop expecting to have your hand held."

St. John rose from his seat and pulled on his black robe. He knew Bautlin was a fiercely intelligent, fiercely ambitious woman, but he worried Ekohl U'Chtuklli had elevated the good admiral above her abilities. She remained seated, staring at him. "Control very nearly destroyed us. In fact, without giving away too much, our threat assessment system very nearly destroyed all sentient life everywhere. Eh? Let that sink in. The Romulans haven't exactly found many reasons to want to trust or be around us since then."

Maureen pulled herself up and gaped at the older man who looked like he was being consumed by some black cloud now that he was draping his long black robe on again. "I need to broaden my scope; I can clearly see that, but what are you talking about?"

"Our methods, your methods since being brought on by Ekohl, have been *out of step* at times with Starfleet standards, but they have been necessary. We are the few who understand that to protect the sweet and the innocent, we must sometimes commit to the unsavory and *dark*. After the threat of *Control* was ended the Section moved away from the admiralty and this arms-length command structure was adopted."

St. John watched for some sign of understanding before continuing.

"The next regular Council meeting will be a month from tomorrow. You'll do as you're asked. Steps will be taken to preserve Federation lives. Rest assured; our mandate remains to protect the Federation at all costs. We have a small window with the Romulans. They will help us stabilize our borders, we'll help them continue their efforts in the Kea System and it will all be codified in a treaty the Federation President will sign at Algeron IV within twelve months."

Maureen watched Talbot fasten his robe. She felt like a first year Academy cadet after being dressed down by an instructor. From an unseen speaker a nautical bell chimed three times.

"That's for us, Admiral. Arrange for your reemergence at Council and keep the lines of communication open with Nompel. I don't mean to be harsh, but time is short. We're here to help you along and we will. Shall we?" Talbot cocked his head slightly and offered Maureen another crooked grin before pulling his robe's heavy hood up over his thinning grey/blond hair.

Without a word, Bautlin followed the Section Controller back into the corridor.

32. Hall of Justice

"This Preliminary Hearing of the Special Military Tribunal is hereby called to order, the venerable Superior Archon Ejan R'aka presiding—ALL RISE!"

Ejan R'aka? thought Kom to himself as he dutifully rose from his place in the prisoner's dock. Gul Kovor, Kom's assigned conservator was already on his feet and at full attention.

The Glinn who was serving as the tribunal's bailiff receded two paces back to his place in a shaded nook as the Archon stepped into the small, dimly-lit chamber. No one spoke as the short, fair skinned man strode proudly towards the room's elevated bench and ascended to his position. He wore a standard brown battle tunic adorned with clusters of gleaming awards and emblazoned with the long, flat decoration that denoted the small, older man as a full Legate.

Kom kept his composure and remained silent, his head slightly bowed, but his mind boggled at the sight of Legate R'aka himself. The man was the face of Central Command. He may as well be considered the leader of the entire Cardassian Empire.

Superior Archon R'aka seated himself at the bench and took a few seconds to survey the sound board and maul to his right and the data tablet prepared and waiting for him on his recessed desktop. A single beam of white/blue light fell upon R'aka from above and made his pale complexion appear to glow beneath a thick mane of white/grey hair. A web of scars crisscrossed the old man's forehead badly disfiguring his dark frons. Satisfied with what he found, R'aka looked down at Gul Kovor and the accused briefly, before taking the maul in his unusually large right hand...

THWACK!

"I call this Tribunal to order. Conservator Kovor, does the prisoner accept his guilt in all matters yet to be brought by this body?"

Kom remained standing as Kovor stepped towards the bench. "Superior Archon R'aka, the prisoner does indeed accept his guilt in any and all matters this Special Military Tribunal brings forward."

"The prisoner will be seated." R'aka reached for his tablet and powered on its orange display.

Kom blinked twice and looked towards Gul Kovor, who glowered at him with stern eyes. He obediently melted into the hard metal chair in the prisoner's dock. "Supreme Archon, the prisoner has demonstrated his complete willingness to declare his guilt publicly and humbly submits a request to hear the charges he is guilty of." Kovor kept his eyes respectfully cast upwards towards the older grey-haired man looming over the proceedings.

"This Tribunal acknowledges the prisoner's willingness to confess his guilt. The request is denied. Who is this man's nestor?" R'aka studied the relay status report on his tablet and noted an unexpected window of opportunity was fast approaching.

The Umoth Nebula had exploded and interfered with military communications between Alpha 441 and the rest of the Empire. They'd had to delay the much-needed tribunal because of the communications blackout. The closest forecasted window of opportunity was still days away, but a small miracle had materialized.

"Tavor G'aro has been designated as nestor, Superior Archon R'aka." Kovor was unaffected by Legate R'aka's denial.

Kom sat as still as he could within the dock. He was not to speak.

"I am satisfied with the prisoner's apparent commitment to dutifully confess his guilt. His willingness to properly concede any ludicrous claims of innocence has helped this preliminary hearing complete its designated task most expediently. Therefore, I order Nestor G'aro to attend this place post-haste so that we might further serve the needs of Justice and respect the resources of the Cardassian people. If there are no objections, I would bring this preliminary matter to a close and order that the business of this Tribunal continue in one hour's time."

R'aka put his tablet down and gripped his maul. He looked down at Gul Kovor and then quickly at the silent prisoner seated in the dock.

"Superior Archon R'aka, there are no objections to the speedy delivery of Justice." Kovor smiled at his superior, supremely satisfied with himself.

"Very well. When we reconvene in one hour's time this Special Military Tribunal will commence. The prisoner will plainly and clearly deliver an opening statement of guilt, after which the charges will be laid bare. All of this will be transmitted live to our glorious troops of the newly formed combined Third Legion of the Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Orders, stationed at our forward operating base at Alpha 441. Any middling questions or concerns from this moment on should be handled by the prisoner's nestor. This preliminary matter is adjured. The Special Military Tribunal will convene in one hour."

THWACK! THWACK!

Kom remained seated until Legate R'aka left the chamber.

33. Call to Order

St. John directed her down a short corridor off the main hallway, towards a gently rising ramp with a pair of black marble doors at the top. Once Admiral Bautlin began making her way up the ramp, the older man in the inky black robe continued along the wide, white hallway to an unseen lift. As Maureen approached the doors at the top of the ramp, she noticed the ambient lighting decrease. With just a dozen steps left before arriving at the doors an unseen sensor triggered a mechanism and the two doors swung in on themselves giving the admiral a view into a dark chamber within.

Undeterred, Maureen stepped through the open doorway and into a circular chamber finished in what looked like glossy, black marble shot through with veins of brilliant white and deep red. The sound of her boots clacking along the shiny floor echoed off the dark, slick walls. Once clear of the portico, the double doors automatically swung shut and the shaft of light from the ramp beyond was extinguished.

Admiral Bautlin stopped her advance for a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the queer lighting in the room. High above four purple points of light washed out from behind an immense circular marble slab which seemed to hang from an unseen ceiling. Slowly, the cold light intensified. Maureen could see a marble paneled station waiting just ahead of her. She could make out the outline of a high-backed chair and slowly made her way towards what she discovered to be a simple, but elegant, hooded desk and decadent, overstuffed chair.

"Please, take your seat, Admiral."

Maureen turned towards the far end of the dark chamber towards the voice. The cold, purple lighting continued to wax to a level where her eyes could make out a tall, semicircular dais. The same glossy, black marble covered the imposing structure as did the desk before her. Her station sat ahead of and beneath the near end of the dais. As the light grew, Admiral Bautlin could make out eight dark figures a top the dais. The black forms were all hooded and stretched out in an arching line along the elevated platform.

She took her seat and recognized from a distance the rotund silhouette of Wegaos Skeffef seated among the dark hooded figures. The overhead lights reached what appeared to be their highest intensity and Maureen was able to make out the configuration of the room. The Section Controllers were seated along one half of the room on their crescent shaped dais. Her station stood to the left of the Controllers' and across the room a

second, much grander, vacant station stood to the Controllers' right. In the center of the room's polished marble floor was a grated hatch, perhaps two meters in diameter.

Several of the black-hooded figures on the dais were still getting settled. Maureen was sure Talbot was among them, but unlike Wegaos (the ponderously enormous Tellarite), picking out the man just from his silhouette was impossible. She looked up towards the bright, purple lights and could see now that the ceiling was adorned with a giant marble relief of the seal of the United Federation of Planets...only it was slightly modified. Only four stars appeared in the center of the seal and each *star* was actually the emblem for the four founding members of the Federation itself.

"I call to order this special hearing of Section Command." A tall shadow seated towards the middle of the dais said in a clear, emotionless voice.

A shorter figure seated two down from the unseen speaker leaned forward and struck a small, polished silver ship's bell three times with a small hammer. The sound of the three rings echoed beautifully throughout the chamber.

Maureen watched the dark figures settle and bustle before her. Wegaos snorted audibly at the large figure seated directly to his right. Beside Skeffef's unknown neighbor, a shorter, stooped figure seemed to nod feebly and looked to be buoyed by the last hooded figure at that end of the row of eight. Bautlin wondered if the frail looking figure was this Ethyhr Ch'Rhyrral, Talbot had mentioned.

"Section Command is pleased to finally welcome Admiral Maureen Bautlin, Operations Command to this chamber." All eight dark figures straightened and looked down towards the black-uniformed admiral.

"I thank you all." Maureen kept her voice steady but had no notion of what these eight might want from her. Talbot had left her with more questions than answers.

"Bring forward the accused." Ordered the emotionless speaker and again the silver bell rang out two more times.

From the grated hatch in the floor came a bright white light and the grill quickly peeled back into a hidden pocket somewhere beneath the slick marble. Maureen watched as a man's head suddenly appeared in the midst of the bright light and was quickly followed by a neck, broad shoulders, strong arms, torso, legs... The light was extinguished as a solid platform supporting the bound and clearly irritated Thayer Moddax came to a stop once it was level with the rest of the chamber's marble flooring.

"Operative Thayer Moddax, you stand before this council accused of treason."

34. Day Six

A steady trilling from the room's flush-mounted computer interface filled the darkness with sound. He grunted and stirred atop the light-blue, silky sheets. He'd not set any alarm...but he wasn't alone aboard his mother's dock. Dannar wearily propped himself up on his elbows and blinked his eyes in the near darkness. A soft green indicator light was flashing on the panel by his bed. It was an alarm. Dannar sat up in the middle of the king-sized bed and glanced around. There was no sign of his guests. Teague looked down at himself and saw he was still wearing the blue and orange suit from yesterday. He groaned softly and pulled himself off the bed.

Dannar shuffled to the main panel by his bed and consulted the time, he wasn't surprised to see that he'd been asleep for close to eighteen hours. Day five was always a killer. A flicker of light drew his eye to the drafting tables further along the Observation Gallery. He noticed something was playing on a loop. After getting himself a glass of water and taking some personal time in the head, Teague shuffled towards the drafting table to investigate the playback.

Dannar watched the fragmented message from some floating Andorian head with one eye twice over before he heard the approaching footsteps of his Starfleet guests making their way up from their lower bunkroom.

"Feeling better today, Mr. Teague?"

Dannar looked past the holographic image of Admiral U'Chtuklli and watched as Captain Ch'ornithon slowly made his way through the gloom of the shuttered Gallery. The cute Vulcan and the big man in the white radiation suit were following close behind their captain, as was a young woman with dark brown matted hair in a gold sweater covered in blood stains. She wore the captain's ragged tunic loosely over her shoulders.

"Good morning, Captain, yes. Day six is always a marked improvement for my condition. Am I to thank you for setting my alarm?"

P'nom stepped out from behind Shorh and cleared her throat. "I thought it prudent to try and preserve something of your privacy given our intrusion, Mr. Teague."

Dannar watched as the big man headed towards the store of MRE's. The young woman who'd been injured, followed in silence. The Vulcan, who wasn't quite a Vulcan, was right. The alarm had afforded him some time to rise and attend to personal business without an audience. "I see, thank you then...uh...?"

"Lieutenant P'nom, Mr. Teague."

"Yes, of course. Well, I suppose we should all have some breakfast then...*Brain*?" The dock computer chirped. "*Brain*, open the shutters."

The computer chirped again, and the Observation Gallery's massive shutters retracted. The orange/red light of Jupiter flooded the room. The others collected their trays and slowly spread out to eat their meals. The young man in the tattered white radiation suit offered Dannar a fresh tray.

"Brain?" asked Tagir.

"Thank you, yes. It's what I've named the program which runs this facility."

"You've seen the message then?" interrupted Shorh.

Dannar thanked the young man again for getting him a tray, then turned his attention to the weary looking Andorian. "I have, Captain. Though I'm afraid I don't really understand what any of it is about—or who the one-eyed gentleman speaking is."

Shorh hadn't slept. He didn't know how many times he'd watched the message and honestly couldn't remember descending to the lower level at some point in the wee hours of the morning. Leaving the playback running hadn't been an intentional act. What he did recall was finding Moira alert and wandering around the lower level trying to make sense of what had happened. Soon, Shorh was sharing all he knew about U'Chtuklli and the manipulations which had ultimately led to the loss of *Isadore* with all three of his people.

"That's a message meant for a friend of mine. He disappeared along with his ship and crew because of that man," Shorh said with a flat, emotionless voice. He tried to mask the rage and cold lust for vengeance which had consumed him.

"I...I'm sorry, I didn't realize." Dannar sat by the giant window with his tray.

"From what you've shared, Mr. Teague, you have nothing to be sorry for. It would seem you're as much a captive and victim of that man and...the organization he represents, as we are."

P'nom, Dirlo and Rhupp all silently ate. They'd all agreed to what needed doing.

"You mean Section 31?" asked Teague, suddenly very aware of the tension in the room. The message continued to loop over and over.

"I mean you're going to help us get off this dock."

35. Alpha 441

Gul Eskan moved to the flap of rough canvass which covered his temporary shelter's west facing window and lifted it free from the patch of clear plastic moulded into the plasticized wall of the temporary building. Spread out before him were no less than two hundred *Yadak*-class troop transports. Most were old and dated back to before the siege of Draygo IV. Eskan had established a forward operating post as directed, but supplies were low and the Legion newly assembled, would soon be growing hungry. They were already agitated and growing pensively angry.

"Gul Eskan, a message sir."

Eskan let the canvas fall back into place and turned to find Glinn Ghemar standing at attention in the open door of the modest shelter. "Gul Bretek asking for more rations?"

"No sir, it's Legate V'eka on subspace."

Eskan ground his teeth and drew a breath. Legate V'eka was the supreme commander of the Fifth Order and the man designated by Central Command to oversee the mobilization of the Third Legion. Eskan extended his right hand expecting the young Glinn to hand him a secure data tablet, then went cold when he noticed that Ghemar's hands were empty.

"Legate V'eka is online, now?" Eskan asked incredulously.

"Yes, Gul Eskan. The Legate wishes to speak to you—now."

Without another word, Eskan hustled out of his private shelter and across the dusty plain he and his officers had erected their fragile plastic city upon. Below were thousands of tents the troopers collected from three different Orders had assembled while they awaited transport and deployment. Eskan, charged with commanding no less than two battalions, half the Legion, didn't stop to look out over the sea of brown-and-yellow tents. He willed himself to keep from breaking into a run as he headed directly to the communications shelter with Glinn Ghemar close on his heels.

Gul Eskan blew past the trooper guarding the entrance to the communications shelter and keyed his passcode into the receiver array. Legate V'eka appeared.

"Ah, Gul Eskan, good. Assemble your troopers, we're stepping up the transmission. Thirty minutes."

"Yes sir, of course. Right away."

36. Delictum

Nestor G'aro took nearly forty-five minutes to arrive at the Hall of Justice. Two troopers had been dispatched to collect him from a brothel in the southern quarter of Retek City. He stumbled into the hearing room dressed in a very casual green, patterned tunic and loose-fitting brown pants. Conservator Kovor and the Superior Archon had both vacated the chamber. Makot Kom was alone in the prisoner's dock awaiting his trial.

The two troopers left to stand watch over the prisoner were not impressed by the sight of the fat old man in his casual clothes and disheveled hair. The older of the two troopers blocked Tavor's entrance to the chamber with a phaser rifle and asked the escorting soldier, a man he knew from the barracks, to verify the nestor's identity before admitting the spotted old fool.

"It took you long enough," grumbled Kom as he watched Tavor stumble past the troopers.

"Most irregular, most, most irregular!" G'aro glanced back at the troopers. He didn't even have his tablets.

"Did you know who the Archon for this was going to be?" Kom pulled himself up from his uncomfortable metal chair and motioned for his nestor to hurry.

G'aro moved to the dock opposite the bench and took a seat on the conservator's chair, which was padded and far more comfortable than the two metal chairs in place for the prisoner and nestor. "The Archon? I don't know, one of the five Supreme Archon's from Cardassia Prime I would presume, quite the honour indeed."

"No, Tavor. Not one of the civilian Archons. Legate Ejan R'aka."

"Legate R'aka? The Central Command's Legate R'aka?!" G'aro chortled and felt his ample stomach drop.

"Yes! What am I going to do? I don't understand any of this!" Kom lowered his head and exhaled harshly.

"Oh, oh my...Mr. Kom, no, no, no. There's no need to despair. This is a special tribunal after all, just for the military. It makes sense that Central Command would have special officers of the court in place." Tavor himself was suddenly terrified. While having left his military career years earlier for civilian public service, the presence of Gul Kovor and now Legate R'aka gave the old man serious cause to worry for his own wellbeing should things not go as expected.

"This is supposed to start in a few moments, wh...what am I supposed to do?"

Tavor quickly pulled at his thinning hair and tried to make himself look presentable. As nestor he had but one job: advise the prisoner of the best course of action in order to ensure the orderly functioning of the Cardassian Justice System. This case, though, this was not a normal case. The conservator was a Gul of grand standing. The Archon was a living extension of Central Command; the condemned a failed Dalin. Tavor alone was the civilian. Any failure, real or perceived, would likely be laid at his feet.

"Mr. Kom, we've both agreed that your only concern throughout this is to perform your last, greatest duty. You've already admitted your guilt. We've rehearsed your opening confession. Focus on that. Focus on the comfort of knowing you've already accepted the guilt."

Kom took a long, steadying breath and rubbed his hands against his thighs, feeling the flayer leather bunch and release under his palms. "I know, I know..."

"As I understand it Mr. Kom, your testimony will prove crucial to an entire Legion poised to make some sort of critical contribution to all Cardassians everywhere. We've been over this. Please, trust your instincts. Trust me, Mr. Kom. Stand proudly and deliver your opening confession as we practiced." The troopers at the door suddenly snapped to attention and Tavor leapt to his feet fearing the wrath of Gul Kovor should he be discovered sitting in the conservator's chair.

Conservator Kovor swept into the chamber, immaculately dressed. He looked at fat old G'aro, standing before the prisoner wheezing as though he'd just run a circuit and shook his head at the pitiful sight.

"Nestor G'aro, pleased you were able to join us."

"Conservator Kovor, yes...cough, cough...yes of course. I'm always at the service of the Court."

"Fine. Sit down before you topple over. Kom, this will be broadcast live to Alpha 441. At times, portions may be redacted to safeguard sensitive information, but essentially an entire Legion of loyal Cardassian troopers will need to hear and see you contritely accept your guilt. Do you understand?"

Kom blinked slowly and felt his head spin. The fat, age spotted, old man wheezed into the metal chair beside him. "I understand Gul Kovor, I'm prepared to do my duty."

"Good. Just so we're clear, no mention is to be made of the Starfleet vessel. None. All of Cardassia may well rely on how well you carry out this last mission."

37. Rage

"Treason!? You think I'm the traitor? I'm the only one who seems to understand just what it is we're supposed to be doing here!" Moddax strained against his bindings and swept his glare from one end of the dais to the other. He was still dressed in his heavy black coat and the same clothes he'd been wearing during his meeting on Ganymede.

"Thayer Moddax, you will be silent while the charges are read, or you will be tried in absentia."

Moddax bristled but kept quiet. He swept his eyes over the eight hooded figures seated above him and fixed his gaze on the portly one he assumed must be Skeffef.

"I know that's you Wegaos! Are you going to tell them about your role in all of this? Well!?"

Skeffef popped his jaw audibly and snorted his derision but said nothing. The slender Controller seemingly in charge of the proceedings rose slowly and in a clear, unemotional voice commanded Moddax to remain silent.

"You are charged with seditious activity resulting in the deaths of Federation citizens, reckless abuse of the powers of your rank, wanton cruelty; knowingly conspiring with agents of a hostile government and trading privileged, sensitive and most secret intelligence and tactics to said governments for your own personal gains."

Moddax rolled his dark eyes and shook his head in disbelief. The eight Controllers remained perfectly still. Thayer looked down at the heavy bindings restricting his arms and drew a long breath preparing to launch into a passionate diatribe in response to the list of charges constituting his treason; when he caught sight of the quiet figure seated off to the side of the dais at floor level. Moddax blew out his breath in a long, steady hiss and swallowed whatever words he'd prepared. Maureen Bautlin was sitting in the eerie purple darkness watching all this play out.

"You...?" he hissed at the black-clad woman.

"That's correct, Thayer Moddax. As Chief of Operations, Admiral Bautlin has earned the right to be in this chamber. She will hear the evidence and whatever defense you might offer," proclaimed the tall, thin Controller from on high.

"Just execute me now, you lot of hypocrites!" Moddax spat the words out.

"We are not Klingons. You will answer to this body, Thayer Moddax."

38. Resignation

"Tell me, Captain...just where is it you think you're going to go?" Dannar rubbed his eyes with the balls of his palms, smiled and shook his head.

Shorh kept his expression fixed and said nothing.

"The four of you are here, with me. This means *they*, Section 31 that is, don't want to host you aboard their station in the brig. Neither do they want to turn you over to Starfleet proper. Though, they did go out of their way to pluck you from whatever misery you were all enjoying aboard that wrecked Andorian ship you've been nattering on about. So, what does this mean? Was it Starfleet or Section 31 who rerouted you to the Umoth Nebula? Perhaps Starfleet has just assumed you went roque, hmmm?"

Dannar watched the Andorian captain's one good antennae bunch and curl in on itself in frustration. The man's expression hadn't changed, but that one little blue sprig, balling up in frustration, told Dannar all he needed to know about the good captain's state of mind.

"I have no great insights to share, Captain. No secret understanding of some grand plan, but I'm confident you and your people will be no more welcomed on Earth as you have been here orbiting Jupiter. We are all of us just small pieces on a much larger board."

Shorh balled his fists and clenched his jaw. The old human made sense. Still, that didn't change the fact that he and the people he was responsible for needed off this odd floating prison before their situation grew any more dire. Rhupp, Dirlo and P'nom had all gathered around him to show solidarity.

"What about that wreck?" asked Tagir forcibly as he pointed up towards the dark hull of the antique *Hermes*-class scout ship hanging high along the Space Dock's upper superstructure.

Dannar turned and looked up at the tiny, dark ship. "That!? That's been stripped of nearly every essential system you can name. Computer cores, viable fuel converters, engine components, weapons, sensors, gravity plating...it's all been removed."

"Then why is it here?" asked P'nom.

"It...I...there's likely some trace amounts of dilithium they missed, a few micrograms perhaps. When this dock's systems are online, I'm permitted to remediate whatever I can for future projects."

"Mr. Teague, I have spent my life planning and strategizing for every foreseeable contingency I might expect to encounter, either as an individual,

or as a commander of a starship. You can't tell me that you haven't also developed such habits after accomplishing all that you have in your life. You've been here for months. Surely, you've thought of a way out." Shorh motioned for his crew to remain silent.

Teague looked down from where the *Revere* hung along the upper decks of his mother's dock and turned around to face the fierce Andorian head on. "My initial question still stands, Captain. Where is it you think you will go? It's likely you'll just be trading one prison for another, at best."

Shorh sighed and forced himself to relax somewhat. He paced over to the small table where Teague had taken his morning meal and seated himself with a deliberate ease. "First, I must get my crew to safety. Then I will find a way to get out to the Typhon Sector, or wherever it is I need to go to find out what Brian and the crew of the *Sheaffe* died for."

"You think you're going to manage that alone, do you?" Dannar asked, suddenly intrigued by the newest pieces to the puzzle they all found themselves trapped within.

"Who said he'd be alone?" Tagir said from his place in front of the drafting table which was still playing Admiral U'Chtuklli's message on a loop.

"No, Mr. Rhupp, you and the others will go to Starfleet and report back all we've learned. These Section 31 people wanted me. The rest of you just had the misfortune of being in the same room when they locked onto the ID tag built into my delta shield."

"So, that's it." P'nom moved over to Dirlo and gently pulled the gold delta broach free of the captain's shredded uniform tunic.

"Yes, for now only ship captains and flag officers are being supplied with the tags, but the intention is to make the personal identification tech standard fleetwide within two years. Toss that downstairs. When they came looking for me, they obviously couldn't be one hundred percent sure who they were transporting, so to keep the whole thing a mystery it seems they simply took us all." Shorh was speaking to P'nom but kept his eyes on the old human.

"What about it, Teague? How do we get off this dock?"

"There are no transporters, no pods. Even the worker bees are down until power is restored by the station..." Dannar looked from Shorh over to the Vulcan and the young human woman wearing the Captain's tunic. "If I could get the lot of you off this dock, how do you expect to get anywhere without a ship?"

"We'll find a ship if we have to," said Moira Dirlo, feeling somewhat uncomfortable under the older man's gaze. The blood and sweat on her sweater had dried uncomfortably tight over her right breast and formed a rather telling shell Teague seemed intrigued with.

"Quiet, Ensign! I told you, you three will be going to Starfleet. The rest I have to do alone."

"With respect sir, Tracy was my responsibility when she died. If that one-eyed bastard and these Section 31 creeps are the reason that girl is dead, I'll be damned if I'm going to sit back and let you take all the risks." Tagir pushed away from the drafting table and stepped towards Shorh and Teague.

"Commander Yeal was like a father to me, Captain. I owe it to him to make this right, whatever this is." Moira clutched the oversized maroon tunic closed to cover her chest.

"Logically, every crewman aboard both the *USS Isadore* and the *Imperial Guard Battle Cruiser Shrar* who lost their lives are owed similar debts of sacrifice and honour considering the duplicitous nature of the facts so far revealed to us, Captain. I too must insist that I be included in any sortie with the aim of discovering the true identities and motivations of those responsible for setting all of us on this disastrous course to begin with." P'nom boldly stepped to Shorh's right side and took her place as she effortlessly tossed the gold delta broach across the Gallery and down the stairwell.

"Karskat ahrasath...fine!" cursed Shorh in Andorian. "Teague?"

Dannar looked from the steely, blue eyes of the Andorian captain sitting across from him to the determined young Vulcan in her red tunic and over to the girl wrapped in her captain's rags and the scruffy looking engineer standing beside her. "You're all insane."

"Maybe so, *Mr. Mann*, but you're going to help us, yeah?" Tagir stepped forward and allowed the dirty white fabric of his radiation suit to strain against his well-muscled arms and chest as he advanced slowly towards Teague.

"Fine, fine! There, there may be a way, maybe *Trudy...* I've worked out a few things in the weeks I've been here. I've never attempted anything as I can't last more than eight days without medical intervention. Frankly, I couldn't see how I'd have managed it alone. We don't have a lot of time."

39. Blind Devotion

Kom slowly lowered himself back into the hard metal chair in the prisoner's dock and was shocked at how hard he found it to remain composed. His hands were shaking, his legs felt weak. For a moment during his opening admission of guilt he feared he might breakdown and cry, so impassioned were his words and will to atone to the State. Conservator Kovor continued standing but silent as his client resumed his seat. Superior Archon R'aka remained stoic behind his bench, seemingly unmoved by Kom's words. Four bright, white lights burned above and behind the Archon—indicating the proceedings were being broadcast live to Alpha 441.

"Wonderful Makot, simply wonderful! Oh, never in all my years serving the civil courts have I had the privilege of witnessing such a heartfelt, sincere, oh...heroic admission of guilt! *sniff...*Well done young man, well done indeed!" Nestor G'aro was openly weeping and had an expression of absolute joy on his face.

Surely the Central Command will see from this happy opening confession alone, that I have done my duty supremely! thought Tavor as he gushed quiet compliments in the ear of his condemned client.

"The prisoner has accepted his guilt and sentence with grace and sublime humility. Superior Archon, may we now hear the charges Makot Kom is guilty of?" Kovor ignored the blubbering old fool draping himself on Kom's shoulder in the dock.

THWACK! THWACK!

R'aka slowly lowered his maul and cleared his throat. Kovor remained standing, respectfully looking up from the floor and the old balding fool of a nestor stopped his blubbering. The young man's admission of guilt had been surprisingly moving, but R'aka had learned long ago to hide his emotions deep within. He could feel the lights burning behind him and knew every word, every action was being watched intently by the Legion stationed on Alpha 441. All of this was necessary; however, the likelihood of matters venturing into sensitive and even classified domains necessitated a cautious approach. R'aka kept his archon's maul firmly in his muscular right hand, but carefully kept his left hand hovering next to the *redact actuator* built into his desktop should a forbidden subject suddenly spring forth. By pressing the actuator, the live feed from the courtroom would be instantly blocked from transmission.

"Let the official record show that this tribunal accepts and is deeply gratified by the prisoner's opening confession. As for the specific charges:

Glinn Makot Kom, recently elevated to the rank of Dalin, is charged with insubordination, incompetence, and most seriously, gross dereliction of duty."

Kom shifted forward in his seat at the charge of dereliction of duty. Nestor G'aro put a surprisingly heavy, flabby arm across Kom's lap to keep him from launching to his feet in protest. Conservator Kovor pretended not to notice the activity in the dock. Clearly the young man's confession had persuaded Legate R'aka to use the lessor of the two lists of agreed upon charges. The four lights burned above and as fat, old Tavor settled the prisoner, Kovor mused his best course of action.

"Superior Archon, surely these charges are well levied and serious; however, the sentence of execution seems somewhat extreme. Is the tribunal prepared to demonstrate how such charges warrant death, when I can cite numerous precedents in military jurors' prudence where similar offences have been satisfied with various terms of incarceration?" Kovor spoke in a deep conversational tone, never letting his eyes drop from those of Legate R'aka's.

Kom took several deep breaths and motioned to his nestor that he was in control of himself. Tavor relaxed his arm but kept its mass resting on Makot's right thigh. Duty was clear. Duty was all Kom had ever cared about. The confession he'd just delivered had been heartfelt and sincere and came from that deep-seated sense of duty. To hear he had just confessed to abandoning his duty was a blow he wasn't prepared to take. He found himself biting his inner lip hard to keep from protesting his own innocence; reminding himself over and over that his duty was to the Third Legion on Alpha 441 now. True, he was still unclear what his execution was going to do for the brave young troopers and Cardassia itself, but he was resigned to his duty, always.

Kovor paced slowly from the left side of the prisoner's dock, across the open floor before the bench, towards the small viewing gallery where prisoners of the civil courts could have immediate family stand and disavow them publicly. Then made his way back to his original position again, all while keeping his eyes fixed on the Superior Archon. He'd changed outfits since the earlier preliminary hearing. He now wore a new, almost gleaming, polished brown breastplate adorned with black piping and sporting his Gul's emblem and various decorations up and down the right side of his chest. His hair shone in the light of the four transmitter units. His very skin seemed to glow. Though middle aged, Gul Kovor looked every inch the hero he was reputed to be.

"Conservator Kovor, your dedication to justice is rivaled only by your devotion to duty. This tribunal acknowledges the heavy burden you have

bravely taken on. The sentence imposed will stand. This tribunal will hear from witnesses who will attest to the validity and severity of each count." R'aka's voice was cold and detached.

He didn't possess Kovor's bass, but from the bench his words took on a haunted, heavy echo that pleased the old legate.

Kovor bowed slightly to show respect and managed to hide a sly smile. Provided Tavor could mind the young man condemned to death in the prisoner's dock, the rest of the dance would be a matter between the Gul and his Legate.

"I would never question the wisdom of this tribunal, Superior Archon R'aka. I do gratefully accept your indulgence of *our* request to understand the fulsome impact of these three serious charges—it is far more than a guilty man deserves."

"It is indeed. This is a Military Tribunal, as such it is prudent that all who witness this justice understand the supreme authority of the Central Command. The glorious troopers stationed on Alpha 441 will bear witness to the prisoner's guilt and as we hear from witnesses—they will come to understand how Makot Kom's crimes have affected and even jeopardized them as well."

Kom shifted again in his seat. R'aka was watching the prisoner dock closely from the elevated bench. The four lights illuminating the plain grey and black court room from above and behind the Legate's own seat, effectively blinded the prisoner.

Two fat beads of sweat broke free and rolled down Tavor's age spotted temples. He pressed down on his young charge with all his might to restrict Makot's movements. The opening confession had been a triumph. It would be a humiliation to allow the young man to ruin things now. "Be still Makot! For Cardassia's sake, be still!"

"No challenge, Superior Archon, none at all." Kovor didn't need to turn around to know Kom was again being persuaded to hold his tongue.

Kom willed himself to settle once again. From what he'd learned from G'aro over the last few days, Kovor was to be promoted to legate in short order. It wasn't lost on Makot that it would, in all likelihood, be Legate R'aka himself who did the honours once this trial was over.

"Very well." R'aka saw the nestor settle the prisoner. He none-theless kept his left hand next to the redact actuator. "On the charge of insubordination, this tribunal calls its first witness!"

THWACK! THWACK!

40. Salon d'Observation

Admiral Knot studied the preliminary report Commander G'pnor had forwarded to Starfleet Science. *Fury* was still too far out from a completely secure Starfleet server to safely offload her readings, but she had relayed a portion of her raw Umoth data back for preliminary analysis. As Thomas had feared, the results pointed strongly to the source of the unprecedented plasma storms suddenly enveloping the nebula as being artificial in origin. While G'pnor was cautious about drawing pre-emptive conclusions one sentence in his report stood out:

There is a high probability, based on early gaseous readings when compared with medium range telemetry of the plasma bandwidth and radiogenic properties, that the artificially induced phenomenon was likely the result of an uncontrolled matter/antimatter event.

The uncontrolled "event" likely being the warp core of the *USS Isadore* exploding, thought Thom to himself.

Knot's attention was drawn away from his desk's central display by a flashing amber indicator and a soft trilling. A call was coming through on the secure priority line—the direct link he as Chief of Operations shared with the Commander-in-Chief. Thomas closed out the report and opened the priority channel.

"Henry, what's wrong?" The channel was only supposed to be used for urgent purposes, but Knot kept his voice flat and calm as the image of Henry Wallace appeared before him.

"Have you got your briefing materials for the Council meeting prepped and ready to go, Thom?" Henry himself had just collected the four pads he'd been working on.

"I...I do for the most part. I was just reviewing an analysis Science is going to present; could be some dicey information..."

"I don't mean to be curt, but I've just now received orders for the both of us to report to Paris A.S.A.P." Henry said this as he secured his diplomatic attaché case.

"Paris? We were just there yesterday."

"Thom, the order comes directly from the President herself. Gather what you have, put on a clean uniform, and meet me at the Presidential Annex in fifteen minutes. This is an order. Wallace, out." Henry jabbed a finger into the transmit actuator and terminated the secure call.

After locking and then powering down the interfaces in his own office, Admiral Wallace checked himself over in the mirror to be sure his appearance

was appropriate for a Presidential audience. The last time he'd been summoned to meet with the President, he'd found himself being ambushed by Maureen Bautlin. There'd been no sign or mention of Admiral Bautlin in over a year, but Wallace felt anxiety stirring deep within. He paused for just a moment after collecting his case and gazed at the silver decoration with the three red hash marks displayed on his desk. He would never forgive Maureen for what she'd done.

Ten minutes later the Starfleet C-in-C was being greeted at the Presidential Annex attached to the Council Meeting Hall in Paris by Starfleet's Chief of Operations.

"I brought what I could, Henry. Any idea what this is about?"

"You're early, Thom. Keep it up, you just might get promoted." Henry tried to force a smile but failed. "All I know is you and I were both summoned and we'd best not make her wait any longer than necessary."

Thom brushed a few specks of lint from his left shoulder. He'd not worn this particular tunic in quite a while; it was the "spare" he kept on hand in his office should a bureaucratic emergency ever break out. "Alright then, let's walk. You alright?"

"Just..."

"I doubt she'll be here. If she is, you have nothing to worry about. I'll tear her apart with my bare hands." Knot kept pace with his friend and smiled thinking about what he'd like to do to Maureen Bautlin.

The pair were already in the secure part of the Annex. As they rounded a corner to the reception office, they saw two Presidential Detail Security officers open the lift doors ahead of them. "Stow it, Admiral." Henry rasped in a muted voice as they boarded the lift.

When the lift doors opened five seconds later both men were greeted by the President's Executive Assistant and were ushered into the *Salon d'Observation*—the elegantly appointed small conference room adjacent to the President's Office. Wallace and Knot stepped inside and were immediately greeted by the sight of the Federation President. She was dressed in her black and white robes of office, standing in front of the panoramic window overlooking the Sein and the Old City.

"Gentlemen, thank you for attending post haste. Please have a seat at the table." The President was a remarkably tall woman, a Deltan.

As with many Deltans, it was nearly impossible to discern her age from her looks. She was possessed of the deepest blue, sad eyes Henry had ever seen in his life. She was remarkably beautiful. Flawless skin. A songbird voice. A uniquely smooth and indescribably lovely bald head and yet, she had the look of exhaustion and defeat all around those gorgeous eyes.

Thom lay his case atop the mahogany conference table in the centre of the room and set about withdrawing the few pads he'd collected. Henry did the same as the President moved effortlessly from the window to the head of the table. Wallace noticed that the two overstuffed wing-backed chairs where Maureen Bautlin had once lain-in-wait, had been removed.

"This won't take long gentlemen. I've received an update from Admiral Sellers at Starfleet Science regarding the phenomenon ravaging the Umoth Nebula." The President slowly seated herself. She watched the two admirals square away their pads and stow their attaché cases, before respectfully taking their own places.

Thom cleared his throat. "Yes ma'am, uh, the initial findings would seem to indicate that..."

"That our rogue starship was likely responsible for the calamity." The President concluded. She watched as Admiral Knot fumed silently. The man didn't like not being the smartest one in the room.

"Ma'am, the uh, the report which you seem to have gotten a hold of remarkably quickly, is drawing from preliminary data only. It's too soon to attribute concrete findings of culpability..."

"I apologize, Admiral Knot. I don't mean to offend you, or Starfleet for that matter; I'm looking at this through a political lens. You both must understand that given the sudden Cardassian territorial claims and this aggressive incident between the Imperial Guard and one of Starfleet's own capital ships—when and how this information is brought to Council is an urgent and pressing concern."

This time it was Henry who cleared his throat. "Madam President, with respect; we haven't yet ascertained the events leading up to the One Alpha - Zero which drew the *Fury* into the Actium Sector. In fact, we have very little intelligence on a great many events surrounding *Isadore*, the *IGBC Shrar* and whatever transpired in the nebula."

"No, Admiral. I don't believe you do have the necessary intelligence to answer a great many questions about a great many events which will, frankly, consume the upcoming Council meeting. That is why you are both here." The President rubbed at her right temple slightly.

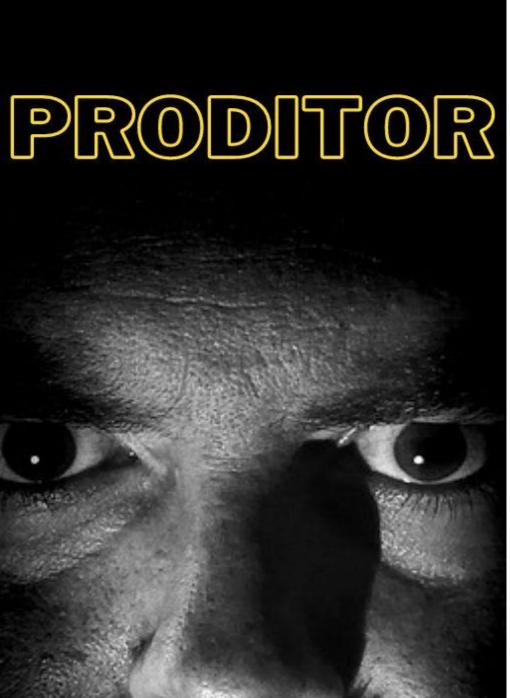


Figure 7: Moddax. Published 12 Dec. 2018 Pixabay License Free

41. Proditor

The flat, grey counter beneath Maureen's hands suddenly came alive and the entire surface area was populated by files, images, computer logs and a virtual navigational tool. She could feel the counter beneath her fingers—it was solid. There was no hidden screen inlaid in the surface, yet the dull purple and blue display seemed to exist upon the counter without a discernable point of origin. She swept her right hand across the counter and quickly dismissed the notion she was looking at some kind of holo. She tried to keep her focus on the Controller addressing Moddax but couldn't help herself from tapping at the various images which had just appeared. A deliberate push on the largest purple window caused the image to expand and Maureen found herself looking at Section Command's personnel file on Thayer Moddax.

"Operative Moddax, identify this man." The lead Controller motioned toward a suddenly active view screen set into one of the chamber's dark walls and an image of a tall, dark skinned Cardassian.

"I've never seen him before in my life!" responded Moddax without even looking. He made no effort to conceal the rage and pain in his voice.

"This image is from two years, eight months ago, from the border crossing at Cerebus in the Maxia Sector. This man identified himself as Eket Tule, a tanner and purveyor of Flayer leather goods. His identification documents and permits passed standard Federation scrutiny and he was issued a visa to attend the marketplace at M'orpk in the unaligned Altor System in the Typhon Sector."

"SO!? What does a Cardassian boot seller have to do with me?" Moddax spat.

The tall Controller (Maureen was sure must be a Vulcan) swept a robed arm towards the display and the image changed. A still, clearly taken from a security sensor appeared. A dark Cardassian was seen standing behind a booth of various leather garments and accessories. Bautlin looked down at her countertop display and noted that the same image populated the space only she could see.

"This would appear to be Eket Tule at work in the M'orpk market. We have over three weeks of stills and security segments documenting his limited movements in and around the market."

"If all you wish to discuss is Cardassian leather wear, I suggest you restore me to duty and hang Wegaos Skeffef as the true traitor!" raged Moddax.

"Bah!" Wegaos roared and violently threw back his dark hood.

"Controller Skeffef!" The tall Controller heading the hearing bellowed in a flat unemotional tone. "You will restrain yourself."

Moddax swayed from one leg to the other, seemingly quite satisfied by the reaction he was able to provoke.

Maureen's display fluttered and the image of the Cardassian merchant vanished and was replaced by a series of communications logs.

"Mr. Moddax, the moment you broke protocol and contacted Controller Skeffef using Admiral U'Chtuklli's confidential communications protocols, Controller Skeffef reported your activity to this body. You have been monitored ever since." The tall Controller waved his arm towards the display once again and the same communications logs Maureen had just been studying appeared on the main screen.

"Bah! -snort-" Wegaos shifted his ponderous weight and settled himself but made no attempt to replace his black hood.

The image shifted. This time a still from the Starfleet Security database appeared: a mugshot of a pathetic looking Dopterian.

"Will you identify this man, Operative Moddax?"

"Sadly, no. I'm afraid I haven't had a very dazzling social life and have failed to get to know every wandering parasite in the quadrant!" Moddax immediately bit his tongue. His rage was getting the better of him. There was no way out.

"This is Glavak Broit. You know this Mr. Moddax because four months before *Eket Tule* sought a visa to attend the marketplace at M'orpk—which would be three years ago, you and Mr. Broit met for coffee at a Bolian café overlooking the primary landing pads at Starfleet Command itself." Another wave of a black robed arm and the main display showed Thayer Moddax sitting at a table with the Dopterian apparently enjoying two large cups of Bolian brew.

Maureen looked down at her countertop and watched as security footage played over and over. The Dopterian looked uncomfortable. Moddax seemed relaxed. Subtly, Moddax slid two objects towards the Dopterian, who almost fumbled them attempting to stuff them into the deep cargo pocket sewn into the front panel of the green and red patterned vest he was wearing. Admiral Bautlin reran the exchange on her own display. She paused the footage when the two objects were most clearly visible.

"Tell us, Thayer Moddax, what is it you passed along to this man whom you say you do not know?"

Moddax tilted his head away from the dais and closed his dark eyes.

"Analysis revealed that the bulkier of the two bundles contained latinum, pressed in three twenty-four karat gold bars. Quite a substantial amount as I understand." The hooded Vulcan waved his arm once more and

a detailed breakdown of the two items in the security footage appeared. "The smaller package contained a sophisticated portable drive, similar to the ones operatives use in the field to upload falsified data to Federation data bases."

"Speculation," whispered Moddax. For the first time ever, there was no way out.

"Fact, Operative Moddax. Admiral U'Chtuklli had Operative Demby conduct a thorough forensic analysis on this item and while she was unable to completely confirm this drive you gave Mr. Broit contained false flag software—logically, it would seem to be all that it could contain."

Demby's report appeared before Maureen. The Admiral checked the dates and could see all these events played out while she was still commanding *Victory*.

The main screen reverted to an image of Eket Tule. This time the dark Cardassian was wearing a finely tailored suit and looked to be sitting in a spectacularly luxurious lounge or night club.

"This drive then would help explain how this man, whom you say you do not know... *Emar Rania*, according to the border agents at Ivor Lothra in the Typhon Sector, where this man sought passage to Lothra Minor to attend a light pod race. He stated he was a design engineer from Marva IV come to see the races. Remarkably the border agents found corresponding records of entry into Federation space for Mr. Rania through Cerebus the very same day as Eket Tule sought passage to the Altor System."

Maureen flipped through visa approvals, border agent logs and security reports confirming everything the Vulcan Controller was stating.

"You're certain you don't know either Eket Tule, or Emar Rania?" Moddax refused to respond. "Perhaps then you know this man simply as *Mr. Ligan*. A suspected agent of the Cardassian clandestine service known as the Obsidian Order?"

Maureen looked over to where Moddax stood motionless. The time stamp on the security image of Emar Rania in the Lothra System was identical to the stamp on the image of Eket Tule plying his wears in the Altor System; only it wasn't Eket Tule. Image analysis confirmed it was Glavak Broit in an elaborate disguise running the leather stand in the market.

42. Countdown

"If you're going to try and escape, you'll have to do it when they come to collect me for my treatment aboard the station." Dannar pushed himself up and made his way over to the primary drafting table.

"Why then?" Shorh watched the old human rummage through a storage compartment in the side of the table.

"You... Muscles, go to the auxiliary loading airlock and fetch me the shielded transport cannister. Be sure to initiate the anti-grav ring, it's heavy and volatile." Teague glanced up at Chief Rhupp to make clear who he was speaking to, then returned his attention to the junk drawer he'd pried open in his drafting table.

Tagir looked towards Shorh. The Andorian drew a breath and then nodded silently. As Rhupp made his way along the Gallery past the crates of MREs out towards the far airlock, Shorh paced over to where Teague was digging out portable drives and more of his unique discs.

"Why do we have to do this when they come for you, Mr. Teague?"

Dannar groaned as he stood up from his work. "Because, Captain...they must remodulate the interplexing oscillator their shield generator uses to convert Jupiter's natural radiation into the allencompassing bubble which wraps and protects this dock, the scrapyard beyond and their station. To successfully navigate within the field the phase discriminators in the oscillator need to be dialed back—which also weakens the overall shield just enough to allow a transport beam to pass through."

"You said all transporters, pods, bees, everything were offline," P'nom barked.

"Yes, yes, they are...sigh...this isn't just any spacedock. My grandfather and mother designed this facility superficially to refit the old Constitution-class cruisers and then a collection of lesser vessels which should have just been scrapped. This facility's real purpose was to construct and maintain a small fleet of Section 31 vessels. The entire upper superstructure houses more than just robotic arms and specialized tool bays. It's what my mother referred to as a fabricator. Do you understand?" Teague sorted through the collection of drives and discs he'd pulled from his drafting table and selected a handful of items of interest to him.

"So, like an industrial replicator of some kind?" asked Shorh.

"Mmm, no. No, not quite. Forty odd years ago we didn't have the tech for such a massive replicator. Even if we did it would have been easily detected by anyone interested in looking. No, it's more like a giant version

of a food synthesizer, if you would. It requires raw material, which it breaks down and reassembles into new pristine versions of its source material. Say you *'feed'* it a three-ton slab of twisted duranium, it breaks down the source material and recombines the available atoms to produce a three-ton sheet of duranium plating, or a three-ton duranium support strut...see?"

"So, nothing complex. It can't whip up a deflector array?" Shorh asked.

"No, no just basic components. It lacks the programmability replicators have allowed us to perfect. The point is the principle of atomic disassembly is not dissimilar to that of the first versions of Starfleet transporter units." Dannar took an isolinear disc and walked over to the central interface terminal by his bed and inserted it into a port.

"Mr. Teague, the first transporter units were not utilized for biological transports except in one or two extreme cases. They were meant to move basic supplies and cargo." P'nom took two long strides towards Teague who was carefully inputting commands into his terminal.

"That's correct little Vulcan, that is...correct. Be a lamb and go remove the access panel from the port pylon bulkhead, please." Dannar could see P'nom's reflection in the glossy, black surface of his interface. Her elongated "bobbed" ears and hazel eyes were remarkably stimulating.

"Lieutenant, please do as he asks." Shorh was close behind his Communications Officer and while he appreciated her logical approach to sussing out what Teague was saying, he needed his people to work fast.

"Hey, Teague! What have you got in this thing?" Rhupp and Dirlo were both slowly pulling a heavy cannister along the Gallery from where they'd found it in the airlock.

Dannar keyed in a final sequence of alphanumeric code and stood back from the computer panel as the requested functions were seen to. "Be careful with that, *Muscles*. You're moving an experimental core of uniformed isolated dilithium crystals specially aligned to replace the standard reactionary load of material required by an *Excelsior*-class starship."

Tagir slowed his pace and let the cannister come to a gentle stop. Dirlo backed away from the long, black cylinder she'd been steadying with her bare hands and began looking around for a decontamination station.

Teague turned and smiled at Shorh, the girl and the brute. "Not to worry. I've been harvesting scraps of dilithium for months now. That container is perfectly stable, provided you don't blast it with a phaser, or lean it against an EPS conduit."

"Why would you be...?" Shorh began, but he had no words. He looked in horror at the black cylinder hovering at Chief Rhupp's feet.

"Originally, I was hoping to make good on a promise to a young man named Riadir, but that time came and went. Then I started doing some math and decided I'd design and build a more efficient reactant regulator using scraps harvested from long-dead vessels nobody had any more use of. Not unlike that hull hanging out there now." Teague pointed up and towards the lifeless *Revere*.

"Again, how is this supposed to help us?" Shorh suddenly felt exhausted. If he had managed any sleep through the night, it had been scant at best.

The sound of metal crashing into metal rang out across the Gallery and everyone looked to see P'nom standing breathlessly beside a gaping hole in the bulkhead abutting one of the dock's main pylons. "Got it," was all she could manage.

"You and your group need to take that cannister, that automation unit over there on the workbench and..." A green indicator light pinged to life on the black terminal behind Teague and he turned to withdraw his disc. "...And this disc up that access tube to the top of the superstructure. Then head along the portside Jeffries tubes to the automator junction beneath the fabricator's scan buffer. You need to work fast though, it'll take more than a day for you to clear a path manually and in tight quarters. Once there, I'll activate the buffer using what's left in the dock's batteries and hopefully beam all four of you to the Tellarite Mining Consortium's morning ore transport."

"Like hell you will!" exploded Tagir as he stepped away from the cannister and advanced towards the old man and the captain. Dirlo gasped and guickly moved to keep the cannister of dilithium fragments upright.

"Stand down, Chief! Teague, you just said the fabricator can't handle complex patterns. How is it supposed to transport us and some volatile cargo through an interplexing energy barrier to some Tellarite freighter?" Shorh wasn't angry, but he was confused and very concerned now for the three young people in his care.

"It's not a freighter. It's a train of cargo containers magnetically joined and launched from a facility the Tellarites have operated for years on Ganymede. They send regular shipments of refined dilithium ore to Tellar; eight loads a day. The morning transport always has one container retrofitted with life-support to facilitate personnel transit. That train passes by roughly the same time they come to fetch me for my treatments."

"Roughly?" coughed Tagir.

Teague ignored the young man. "These trains are launched on a set trajectory to intersect an accelerator gate and then travel along a protected route at warp 3 to a receiving gate just beyond the asteroid field surrounding Tellar Prime. From there you just need to activate the remote transporter in

Trudy's hangar in that asteroid belt and you're home free." Dannar moved to drop the disc he'd just programmed into Shorh's hand. None of his *guests* moved.

"How are you going to mange getting us aboard an automated cargo train with a *fabricator* that sounds like it'll just break us down into our base components—and who is Trudy?" Dirlo asked from beside the cannister of dilithium.

Teague sighed and pointed out the huge viewport towards the *Revere*. "You said that thing has had its guts stripped out," spat Tagir.

"Yes. All the onboard components of any strategic or practical value were removed, but the directional array and core Heisenberg compensator unit are both fully integrated into her saucer's infrastructure. Once you're all in place I'll piggyback the signature buffer feed from the fabricator through that ship's compensators and direct the beam using her array. The dock's batteries should provide sufficient power."

Rhupp shook his head. P'nom drew in a long breath and began working the proposed course of action through in her mind to see if it made logical sense. Shorh stood silent and let his right antennae curl and slowly unfurl.

"That's the only way to get out of here, Teague?"

"Oh, believe me Captain, I've worked this through a hundred times. I just could never execute it myself as it requires someone to attenuate the transporter controls—uh, well when the transporters here are functional, that is. Also, given my condition a trip though any transport buffer not properly programed by the good Dr. Ploum would likely prove fatal."

"How do you know a cargo train will be available at the precise time these agents from the station come to collect you, Mr. Teague?" asked P'nom.

"My dear, when it comes to dining and mining, Tellarites are always precise. Section 31 goons are equally reliable in their regimented activities."

Shorh looked over to the briefcase-sized automation unit resting on the work bench. The unit looked ancient, but there was a story to it as well. He held up the disc Teague had handed him. "What's this?"

"That is *Brain*. At least the third of *Brain* that had been housed here aboard the dock. Now, we have much to get done in a very short window. Shall we?"

43. Price of Duty

The door to the dark court room slowly opened and from the corridor beyond stepped the newly-promoted Glinn Ellex, former communications operator aboard the *Kreke Disac*. Ellex wore a new uniform, still rigidly stiff from the special tailoring facility where all battle tunics were stitched and tanned. His Glinn's marker glinted in the bright lights of the four transmitters nested high above. He moved slowly, dragging his left leg slightly. A clean dressing was wrapped around his skull and covered most of the left side of his face and his frons; but it was Ellex without a doubt.

Kom sat forward in his chair as he watched the young soldier limp into the courtroom and take an uncomfortable looking stance between the Archon and the Conservator. From what Kom could see on Ellex's face, the man was racked with pain. Tavor shuffled himself closer to Kom and made clear the need for silence.

"State your name and rank for the record," boomed Superior Archon R'aka.

Ellex cleared his throat, then in a weak voice said: "I am Glinn Ellex, of the...cough...the Fifth Order, Superior Archon."

R'aka nodded and deftly depressed the redact actuator at his left hand. "Most recent assignment?"

"I was most recently assigned to the command of Gul D'gad aboard the *Kreke Disac*, Superior Archon. I was in the ship's communications pit." Ellex struggled to bend his head towards R'aka seated high above.

R'aka made clear that unless specifically asked, no one would discuss the *Kreke Disac* by name or the vessel's advanced design. He released the actuator and the live feed to Alpha 441 resumed. "You were a communications officer aboard Gul D'gad's flagship?"

"Yes, Superior Archon."

"You served under the prisoner then?"

Ellex looked over to the dock where Kom sat stifled beside fat Nester G'aro. He squinted with his one good eye as if looking through a fog, then turned back to face up to R'aka. "Yes, Superior Archon. I served under Glinn Kom, Gul D'gad's second in command."

"Point of clarity Superior Archon, if I may?" Kovor rounded on the injured young Glinn and as R'aka bade him continue, Kovor offered the boy who was barely managing to stand, a reassuring smile.

"Was not Makot Kom a Dalin while serving under Gul D'gad?"

"Uh...yes, no, I mean not at the commencement of our assignment Gul Kovor, sir," sputtered Ellex.

"Conservator Kovor, if you would, young Glinn. Please, enlighten the court then as to what rank the prisoner held at the commencement of your sortie." Kovor looped around the empty chamber and resumed his original place.

"The...the first officer was a Glinn First Class at the outset, Superior Archon. A short time later the crew was informed that Gul D'gad had promoted him to Dalin under the authority of the Central Command." Ellex grimaced as a jolt of pain seared up his leg.

"What became of Gul D'gad during the execution of your assigned task, Glinn Ellex?" asked R'aka, his left hand hovering.

"Gul D'gad...Gul D'gad died, Superior Archon R'aka. He, he perished at his post. There was so much happening...it was said his heart gave out."

"Died at his post? Died at his post! Superior Archon R'aka, please let the record show the devotion and slavish commitment to duty Gul D'gad, an elderly man who could have retired from service years ago, showed up until his last breath!" boomed Kovor.

"The record of Gul D'gad's meritorious service is clear, conservator. What this tribunal needs to hear is what happened in the moments following D'gad's death. Glinn Ellex?" R'aka glared down at the badly perspiring young man.

"Uh...Dalin Kom assumed command of the >>> REDACTED <<<...."

When the feed resumed on Alpha 441 the injured young Glinn was being assisted out of the court room. The prisoner and his nestor appeared to be in consultation and Conservator Kovor was beaming up at Superior Archon R'aka.

THWACK! THWACK!

"There is the charge of insubordination proven. Instead of ceding command of the flagship to Gul Gisgak of the warship *Khintic*, newly minted *Dalin Kom* kept control for himself, contravening standing Central Command protocols! Usurping a superior officer and condemning the entire operation in the process! Objections, Conservator Kovor?" R'aka locked eyes on Kom squirming in the dock.

"The State, Superior Archon R'aka, has proven its first charge beyond question. No objections, only a humble plea to allow the prisoner's confession to stand."

44. Secundum Crimen

"This tribunal accepts the standing confession of the prisoner with respect to the first charge," purred R'aka as he reached for his maul.

THWACK!

"As for the second charge, that of incompetence—this tribunal calls its next witness: Glinn Gomlir, decorated pilot and hero of Draygo IV!" R'aka slammed his maul into its sounding board three more times and the doors once again opened.

Kom sat slack-jawed as the tall, lean, fair skinned Cardassian rogue strode confidently into the courtroom. He wore a brown padded flight suit emblazoned with a scuffed and dirty Glinn's insignia. The left sleeve of his jacket was dark and smoke damaged and the ribbed collar was tattered and chewed. His hair gleamed in the harsh lights of the transmitters. He had the appearance of some mythological being from one of Crojeem Pem's poems come to life.

"I thought he'd died with the others..." whispered Kom to nobody in particular.

"Makot please, you're doing well, just keep quiet," hissed Tavor into Kom's ear.

"Glinn Gomlir, this tribunal is grateful you survived your ordeal," R'aka boomed from high above.

"Thank you Superior Archon R'aka. It was not easy, but I've managed to preserve myself to once again serve the people of Cardassia when called upon." Gomlir looked up at Legate R'aka and snapped the heels of his incredibly polished boots together.

The snap of Gomlir's heels echoed off the bare walls of the courtroom. Kom marvelled at the handsome pilot's boots—they looked as though they were moulded out of solid blocks of flawless obsidian.

"Glinn Gomlir, this tribunal acknowledges your myriad of accomplishments and the sacrifices you've made for the people of Cardassia. I also acknowledge that you are still recovering from injuries suffered in the most recent assignment of the *Trerratt*, under the command of Dal Bin. His failures as your commander must have brought you and your comrades to ruin, yes?" Kovor moved closer to Gomlir than he'd been to either Ellex, or Kom himself—almost as if he was hopeful some of the glamour might rub off the decorated pilot and enhance his own being.

"Please, Conservator Kovor, I must state for the record that Dal Bin was a fine commander and both he and the crew of the *Trerratt* did their duty

to the end." Gomlir's voice was almost that of an angel and as he spoke, he never let his eyes fall from the Superior Archon seated above.

"If that is the case Glinn Gomlir, you will explain to this tribunal how you came to be here, without a ship? Without comrades? Without victory?!" thundered R'aka from his perch. His left hand gently caressed the redact actuator just in case the flamboyant pilot deviated from his scripted response.

"The task force had engaged an intruding Andorian battleship, Superior Archon R'aka. The Andorian filth were trespassing in Cardassian space and had not turned away when given the chance to do so. Gul D'gad had devised a cunning plan of attack. No fewer than four warships and Gul D'gad's own flagship were going to engage the Andorian monster. I was tasked with leading a small wing of modified *Hirvath* shuttles to deliver modified >>> REDACTED<<<..."

When the feed resumed on Alpha 441 Superior Archon R'aka was thanking Glinn Gomlir for his service. Conservator Kovor remarked how incredible it was that Gomlir, injured and running out of breathable atmosphere had used his shuttle's landing claw to latch onto Gul D'gad's ruined flagship as it ran through the Umoth Nebula under the dubious command of Dalin Kom.

"In summary Glinn Gomlir, would you say the task force, fighter wing and flagship performed their duties in a competent manner?" asked R'aka.

"Superior Archon R'aka, I cannot be less than truthful to this tribunal, to Central Command or indeed to the Third Legion watching these proceedings. At the outset Gul D'gad's plan of attack was working perfectly. It became tragically evident though, that something drastic had gone wrong as I witnessed our warships fall away and my wingmen get incinerated. After learning of D'gad's fate and hearing that Dalin Kom had assumed command with limited experience and next to no understanding of the task at hand... I regret to state both I and the thousands of loyal Cardassians manning those ships, were victims of that man's hubris and incompetence." Gomlir said this as smoothly as a veteran stage actor and dramatically pointed towards the prisoner's dock all while keeping his eyes fixed on the Superior Archon above.

"Any objections, Conservator Kovor?" R'aka asked with a smug smile on his lips.

Kovor took a second to admire Gomlir's dramatic and very heroic pose. "The State has proven its second charge. No objections, Superior Archon R'aka."

The image of Gomlir pointing out the guilty prisoner remained on the screens at Alpha 441 for a full five minutes. The man was beautiful. His patriotism was beautiful.

45. Renuntiatio

"This will be your last opportunity to make whatever confessions you may deem necessary in light of the evidence thus far presented, Operative Moddax. Do you know Mr. Ligan?"

Maureen looked up at the tall Controller heading the hearing, then down towards Thayer, standing limply, shackled and bowed, bathed in the eerie purple light. She'd never seen the man so deflated. He said nothing. Were it not for the fact that he was standing on his own two feet, Maureen would have questioned if he was even breathing.

"Very well. This is security footage obtained from Lothra Minor's Chief of Security." A flutter of black material cut the still air as the Vulcan waved his arm towards the main screen where the dark-skinned, well dressed Cardassian was shown sitting in a luxurious lounge of some kind.

Maureen noticed her own display had synced up with the main viewer, but she kept her eyes fixed on the large screen watching the alleged Obsidian Order agent sip a drink and wait...wait...wait for...Thayer Moddax stepped into the frame. Maureen turned to her personal display and frantically paused her playback to try and enhance the image.

"Two years, and a little more than eight months ago Thayer Moddax, you requested and were granted nearly five weeks accumulated leave. Admiral U'Chtuklli approved this request. You boarded a Starfleet transport to the Brandon spaceport where you had arranged a seat aboard a commercial civilian cruiser to Teneb in the Typhon Sector. Do you deny any of these facts?" The dark-robed Vulcan didn't bother looking down at Moddax.

Maureen's display populated with transit records, aliases and security stills corroborating all that was being said.

"At Teneb, you arranged for a ferry into unaligned space to attend a light-pod race at Lothra Minor. As we can all see here you are attending that race along with *Mr. Ligan*."

A soft murmur of conversation rippled across the dais. Admiral Bautlin was pouring through the evidentiary documents and images populating her small display and nearly missed the odd sound Moddax made. She looked up from her display and looked at Thayer, now swaying oddly, left to right, left to right.

"We didn't hear that, Operative Moddax. Do you wish to make a statement?" came the impartial, emotionally detached voice of the hooded Vulcan above.

"I...I went to a race, so what of it? I've always been a race fan. There...there was this Trill pilot that season...an independent who was poised to win it all. I was just on...leave..." Even Thayer found his pathetic story insincere, exhausted, and far-fetched. He was beaten and he knew it. Wegaos had told him he would end on Cor Coroli, and the lard-assed space pig was right.

"Yes, I do believe Riadir Preed did win the race that day and in fact went on to win the LRL Championship that year. I do not believe though, that you were there simply as a fan. Observe..." With a wave of his arm the Vulcan restarted the playback.

Moddax approached Mr. Ligan from the left side of the security footage frame. He had a tall glass of what looked to be Romulan ale in one hand and a curious package in the other. The two men greeted one another the way business associates who'd only ever conversed through correspondence might, then they both settled back into their comfortable chairs and appeared to watch the race together.

Maureen watched in fascination as the footage played on. At first, they didn't really speak. They watched the race and drank; commented briefly from time to time about what they saw, like two strangers in any bar might converse over a sporting event. Gradually they stopped watching or even pretending to watch the race and fell into a deep conversation. The footage was allowed to play on for more than two hours. Moddax and the Cardassian, talking, drinking slowly. Exchanging who knew what? Then, just as Moddax was seen sliding the curious package he'd first arrived with across the table to Mr. Ligan, the Vulcan Controller paused the footage.

"Will you tell us what was in that package, Thayer Moddax?" The Vulcan rose and leaned forward from the dais to make it clear he expected a response from Moddax, but none came.

Maureen's display repopulated with a detailed scan of the package, a wireframe rendering of what the security sensors had detected and a breakdown of what it all meant.

"At this point, Moddax, your silence will be taken as an admission of guilt." For just a second there almost sounded like a tinge of anger in the Vulcan's words, but a theatrical wave of a black clad arm called up the same details Maureen was already studying at her small cubical.

The collected body of Controllers gasped as they read the information. For many of them it was the first time they'd been exposed to the report in question. A fabricated datarod, of the type known to be favoured by the Cardassian Central Command was revealed to be in the stiff polyfibre clutch Moddax had passed.

"Demby...damn...damn Demby..." muttered Moddax, who'd taken an awkward seat on the floor beneath the purple lights.

"No, Thayer Moddax. While Operative Demby has shown remarkable ability with digital assets, it was in fact Admiral U'Chtuklli's personal assistant, Ensign Jose Bull who noticed your extracurricular activities around the communications terminals, archive retrieval stations and restricted databases at Deployment Resources. You complained about Ms. Bull nearly as much as you raged about Captain Bautlin. The opinions of both women you shared freely and frequently with Controller Skeffef, who documented them all."

Wegaos snorted and popped his jaw triumphantly. He was not to speak during the proceedings, but his moment of triumph over the duplicitous human was not to be missed.

"You were Ekohl U'Chtuklli's primary Operative for close to nine years before events in the Kea System necessitated the Upgrade. Ekohl trusted you, at least in as far as Ekohl trusted anyone. Is it fair to say that what we've just witnessed here was you passing on vital details concerning the new Andorian Battle Cruisers Ekohl was excited to see built as a result of the Upgrade?"

Moddax hung his head and made gurgling sounds in his throat for his own amusement.

"Is it fair to say that Ekohl shared with you the tale of how Captain Bautlin had earned a debt of honour from both he and an Andorian Ambassador named Bos Ch'Eshryrrer?

"Perhaps the admiral, in an unguarded moment, shared that his friend the ambassador had a son, a Thiss Ch'Echaakrirh? That this young man looking to join the Imperial Guard late in life had just enrolled in training and would be looking for extra assistance to ensure his own success?

"Perhaps this young cadet sought out extra help with computer coding at Tesnia at his own expense just a few months ago, ahead of his third-year space trials?

"Is it not also a fact that Cadet Ch'Echaakrirh was approached at Tesnia by a dark-skinned Cardassian design expert named, *Emar Rania*?"

Moddax lifted his head slightly and giggled like a child. "Oh...the old man never mentioned a son, or Tesnia.... but, sure, it makes sense."

A detailed report on how Section Command suspected the events luring General U'Chtuklli and the *Shrar* to the Umoth Nebula appeared before Maureen.

"Perhaps then the Obsidian Order did do some of their own work in all of this after all. Do you deny though that you supplied the Cardassian agent, known as Mr. Ligan, also known as Eket Tule, also known as Emar Rania with sensitive schematics of the Andorian Battle Cruiser *Shrar* prior to its construction?"

"No."

"Do you deny that you supplied this agent of the Obsidian Order with a detailed breakdown of sensor vulnerabilities and copies of Starfleet's own confidential strategic contingency defense plans for defeating and if necessary, destroying an Andorian Battle Cruiser of this new design?"

A ripple of hushed talk erupted to the tall Vulcan's right. Maureen guessed that the two Controllers at the far end of the dais were the Andorian contingent. It was no secret that every navy in the Federation kept tabs on one another—hearing the fact out loud though had proven a bit upsetting to the Andorians though.

"No."

"Do you deny upon learning that Admiral U'Chtuklli intended Maureen Bautlin to succeed him, you took it upon yourself to do all that you could to sabotage her advancement and have U'Chtuklli himself eliminated by giving the Cardassians all they needed to lure the *Shrar* into a trap?"

The room grew deadly quiet. Moddax was in a heap on the floor. Maureen's display had reorganized itself into a collated set of icons relating to all the evidence presented over the past few hours. She didn't bother looking through any of the summary reports though. U'Chtuklli had been something between a mentor and a father to her. He was dead and the dark, pathetic man on the floor just five meters away from her had been the one to kill him.

"...just...heh...just kill me, please..." Thayer thought how wonderful it would be if they'd simply dematerialize him and scatter his atoms across space. It always was his favourite way of eliminating loose ends and troublesome actors.

"Thayer Moddax you are charged with treason. Admiral Bautlin?" Maureen turned to face the dark hooded Vulcan. "Yes?"

"You've seen the evidence in real time. Do you require additional time to review the material, or are you content to let this body render a verdict?"

It suddenly dawned on Maureen that her role in this whole affair was something akin to an arbiter. She looked at Moddax babbling on the floor and felt nothing for him. "Render your verdict, Controller."

46. Parisian Dispatches

"Chancellor Ch'Sharo has expressed a keen desire to award the captain of the *USS Fury* with a medal in recognition of his service to the Andorian people."

Knot quietly looked over at Wallace sitting opposite him. Henry took a breath and nodded towards his friend before addressing the President.

"Of course, Madam President. Captain Baker will be honoured to receive any decoration the Andorian Chancellor might wish to..."

"The captain and his crew are expected as guests on Andor this Tuesday," the President said flatly.

"Madam President, the Fury is meant to be..." started Thom.

The President looked at Knot and cut him off. "The *Fury* was on a 'shakedown' cruise, testing a new science module recently installed at Utopia Planetia, was she not?"

"Yes, ma'am. That's correct."

"Fine. Simply consider this a revision of her mission profile." The two admirals sat in uncomfortable silence for a second. The President continued: "The Fury and her crew are being escorted to Andor by an Imperial Guard Frigate and several Raiders; they are de facto hostages at the moment, gentlemen."

"What?!"

"Excuse me?"

Both men shifted from uncomfortable silence to stunned outrage.

"Ambassador Sarek has made it clear that while the Vulcan High Command commiserates with the Andorians over the loss of their Guardsmen and vessels, they do not intend to allow the Imperial Guard to rearm following these latest events."

"Madam President, I saw no evidence of such a stance yesterday during the Select Council meeting. Ambassador Sarek even stated that the Andorians should commence repairs on the *Shrar* as soon as the investigation into this incident is concluded." Henry stroked his jaw nervously as he spoke, trying to reconcile the political situation the President was starting to describe.

"With Vulcans what they say is only ever as important as what they don't say. They're pressing for a far-reaching multi-panelled investigation into this matter. Conservatively, such an investigation could be expected to take twelve to eighteen months. Once the investigation is concluded the High Command has indicated that the Andorians may repair the *Shrar*, but they've

no intention to allow the Imperial Guard to construct more heavy cruisers, or even replace the Raiders they lost in this incident."

"My God...that would end the Imperial Guard and possibly start a war," sighed Thom from his seat.

There were only three military powers of scale in the Federation:

- 1. Starfleet—which honourably serviced all Federation worlds.
- 2. The Imperial Guard of Andor (which generally augmented security and policing duties within the Federation), and
- 3. Vulcan Command Fleet (which while primarily concerned with scientific mandates, boasted formidable offensive capabilities).

While most Federation worlds were content to allow Starfleet to see to their defensive needs, Vulcan and Andor ardently clung to their smaller, yet sovereign navies. Great care had always been exercised in the logistical deployment of Vulcan and Andorian assets from the moment the first treaty indoctrinating the Federation had been signed. A renewal of centuries-old hostilities between Vulcan and Andor was always a nightmare scenario.

"Indeed, Admiral Knot. Which is part of the reason why we will redact the preliminary findings of the report on the Umoth Nebula. Cardassia has made a bold move claiming parsecs of space they have no right to. The phenomenon our ship seems likely to have ignited could be seen as a hostile act; we don't need to tempt the Central Command to seize the opportunity to surge any further, buoyed by some justification of assault on Starfleet's part while two of our core members renew a blood feud which would only make us look weak."

"Hostile act? From what we can tell it was the Cardassians who attacked..."

"Admiral Knot, the fact is the *Shrar* left her approved operational theatre to intercede in the Actium Sector. The *Isadore* abandoned her post to join them. Until we have facts and a timeline, Cardassian involvement is speculative. The Vulcan High Command has expressed dissatisfaction with Starfleet's asset management abilities along with what Ambassador Sarek terms: *Iatent Andorian aggressions*."

Thom cleared his throat again, shook his head slightly then addressed the President. "What are you asking us to do then, Madam President?"

"I understand you've dispatched a small group of ships to take up station on the border opposite Alpha 441?"

"Yes ma'am, five starships are *en route* now. A sixth, the *USS Meni T'Pra* is in Spacedock preparing to join them."

"Make ready the Meni T'Pra, Admiral Knot. You are to accompany the ship and crew to Andor and attend the ceremony Chancellor Ch'Sharo intends to hold for the captain of the Fury. I need Starfleet to demonstrate

solidarity with the Andorians. I can't spare Admiral Wallace; thus, you are to be my olive branch."

"Madam President, may I ask if we're hoping to show solidarity with the Andorians, what is our position with the High Command, then?" asked Henry.

"I've met with Sarek, and I've already agreed that the High Command's request for a full inquiry into these matters will be supported by this office. The Vulcans understand that their concerns and desire for *logical action* will be taken seriously. The sentiment expressed by the High Command is that, provided these matters are handled impartially, any gestures or shows of support towards Andor will be considered of no consequence.

"The Andorians have a somewhat different opinion, obviously. They will abide by existing Federation treaties and protocols; however, they see themselves as the wounded party in all of this. I'm sure both of you can empathize with their position. The Imperial Guard is a valued and honourable Institution, not just on Andor but throughout the Federation. Their sacrifices in all of this are real and will be treated with the utmost dignity and respect. Which is why you're to depart immediately, Admiral Knot."

The President watched Knot squirm, then continued.

"Your duties will be covered by Admiral Cahill until your return. Your briefs and reports will be handed over to Admiral T'Chou of Starfleet Security. He's been briefed as to what is and what is not to be shared during the emergency Council meeting. Now, I apologize Admiral Knot, but you need to get aboard the *Meni T'Pra* as she is to depart by 0400 hours Spacedock time—and I need to discuss some matters with Admiral Wallace privately."

Thom gathered his pads and case and slowly wandered out of the salon, stunned. Henry watched his friend leave without saying a word.

47. Crux

Gomlir swept out of the courtroom like an enchanted Koni Wraith of legend. R'aka waited for the doors to secure behind the dashing young hero before he depressed the redact actuator and locked it in place. On Alpha 441 the screens held the image of Gomlir patriotically singling out the loathsome prisoner.

"Very well, admit the final witness," growled R'aka.

Conservator Kovor paced back towards the prisoner's dock and seated himself beside Kom with an irritated huff. The doors once again opened and in walked the dark-skinned, dark-eyed Obsidian Order man who'd whispered so sweetly in Kom's ear after Gul D'gad had died and spurred the *Kreke Disac* on to her ignominious failure.

"YOU!" roared Makot as Mr. Ligan entered the chamber. Kom rocketed out of his chair and broke free of Nestor G'aro's heavy arms.

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!

"BE SEATED DALIN KOM! Be seated or be removed!" bellowed Legate R'aka from the bench.

Makot froze at the sound of his former title and looked up from the smug face of Ligan, who'd sauntered to the witness mark beneath the Archon.

"The majority of this witness's testimony will be redacted, Dalin Kom. Be seated and be silent. You've done your duty well to this point, don't falter now."

Kom looked up at the Legate seated above. The four lights were off. He was alone in the chamber now with the Legate, the Gul, a retired Dal and a loathsome Obsidian Order agent. Slowly he lowered himself back to his seat. "What's going on here? What about the Starfleet battleship? What about the truth!?"

"The transmission will resume shortly, Dalin," whispered Gul Kovor from his seat beside the confused prisoner. "Don't worry, you're still guilty and your sentence will stand—but for now you'll be treated as a Dalin, a soldier. You're expected to keep quiet and see your duty through. War with the Federation is inevitable, what we do here and now will mean the difference between victory and defeat. Now be silent."

Kom could only nod and then hung his head in shame and frustration.

"I'm so pleased I've made such a lasting impression." Ligan grinned broadly at Kovor and then spun around to look up at R'aka.

"Mr. Ligan, you've been briefed as to what is required of you?" R'aka kept a firm hold on his maul.

"Yes, of course. Shall we begin?" Ligan made no effort to hide the delight he was taking in the role he was to play in the final stage of Kom's condemnation.

"You are an agent of the Obsidian Order?"

"Oh, yes indeed," smiled Ligan.

Kom shook his head from side to side but refused to look up. Tavor put a flabby arm around the younger man's shoulders.

"You were assigned to the taskforce assembled from the Fifth Order?"

"I was. In fact, Superior Archon R'aka, I was responsible for baiting the trap meant to lure the Andorians to their fate."

"We know you had some nefarious contacts which allowed you to secure tactical information on the Andorians, but it was the brave men of the task force who baited the trap, Ligan." Conservator Kovor leaned forward in his seat and seemed genuine in his sharp retort.

"Oh, Gul Kovor, so ignorant. No, no, you see I arranged for the second engineer aboard that little Raider, the son of a prominent Andorian Ambassador as a matter of fact, to sabotage his own vessel by teaching him some rather unique computer coding some time back. You see, Kovor, dear Kom, Legate R'aka...this was an Obsidian Order operation from the outset. The Fifth Order was merely the tool we chose to serve our needs.

"It is lamentable that Central Command so rashly declared our territorial expansion before the mission was complete. Now, as I understand it, the Third Legion is stranded without D'gad's taskforce. The bulk of our assets are tied to the continuing situation with the Tzenkethi and as I can attest firsthand, Starfleet is now involved."

Kovor flushed and rose slowly from his padded chair. He was clearly furious, but he remained in the prisoner's dock. High above, Legate R'aka too was struggling with his own rage at the dark man's impudent remarks. For the moment the Order was untouchable, R'aka reminded himself. *Of course, in time many things change.*

"The need to politically declare dominion over that space was critical to justify our attack on the Andorian Battle Cruiser, don't fain ignorance, Ligan. The workings of the strategy were jointly agreed upon. Now, play your part so we might avoid greater political tragedies. You were present when D'gad died?" R'aka asked somewhat more forcibly than he'd intended.

Two generations earlier the fall of Epsilon Ashanti III had sparked a coup d'état as rank-and-file Guls, backed by demoralized troopers, lost confidence in the Central Government's ability to lead.

The plot to claim the superior Andorian Battle Cruiser was violating sovereign Cardassian space and thus justifiably destroyed was meant to destabilize not only the Imperial Guard but reignite Vulcan/Andorian tensions. The Tzenkethi were to rattle their swords and keep the bulk of the Imperial Guard and any secondary Starfleet assets concentrated in the Gamma Sector while D'gad and his task force moved the Third Legion from Alpha 441 across unclaimed space to seize the resource-rich planetary bodies skirting the Federation border. Ambitiously, Central Command had even left open the possibility of establishing an outpost on Bajor. It had all come to nothing and now a starving Legion would be primed to blame the Central Command for this disgrace.

Ligan smiled at Kovor before spinning around to look up at the Legate. "We certainly wouldn't want a whole legion revolting against the Central Command, would we?"

"LIGAN!" barked R'aka from on high.

"I suppose our glorious troops can be ferried off 441 in dribs and drabs and ruefully reassigned now, though, confident they were the victims of a power-mad Dalin and not the incompetence of..."

"Answer the question, Ligan. Were you present when D'gad died?!" R'aka felt himself losing control.

Ligan sighed, then smiled and bowed his head slightly... "Oh yes, I was there when the fat old bigot died. Anything else?"

"Was the prisoner insubordinate? Incompetent? In your mind, responsible for the ultimate failure of the taskforce?!" R'aka was on his feet and leaning far over his bench to glare down at Ligan. The four lights suddenly sparked to life and the transmission resumed.

"The Dalin was opportunistic and completely obsessed with taking D'gad's place as commander of the flagship! He deferred to no-one. Ignored the chain of command! Engaged the enemy without a full understanding of the necessary strategy and ultimately cost the lives of every trooper and loyal Cardassian aboard the *Asga*, the *Khintic*, the *Banot* and the *Trerratt*. Each one of those warships fell into oblivion under the misguided direction of Makot Kom." Ligan's testimony was clear, confident and completely sincere. Just as he'd rehearsed.

Kom said nothing. He sat with Tavor G'aro's arm wrapped around him, and his head cradled in both his hands.

"So, owing to insubordination and incompetence, Dalin Kom condemned four warships and their crews to death in an act of hubris that could best be described as a gross dereliction of duty?" asked R'aka as he slowly reseated himself. There was to be no mention of the Starfleet ship; that was a war for another time.

"Dereliction of duty, ignorant bravado, whatever term this esteemed tribunal would care to apply. I know I am lucky to be here today. Of more than three hundred souls aboard the...mighty flagship, only twenty-two of us survived. Kom had no understanding of the Central Command's strategy, no understanding of the flagship's unique abilities, and most damning of all, no regard for the legion of loyal troopers awaiting relief and transport on Alpha 441."

THWACK! THWACK!

Have you any questions or objections to what we've proven here today?"

Kovor cleared his throat. "No, Superior Archon R'aka. The prisoner indeed cost us all dearly. The task force was to eliminate the Andorian aggressors and then supply and ferry the Third Legion to their next objective

"The witness is excused! Conservator Kovor, we are here at the crux!

indeed cost us all dearly. The task force was to eliminate the Andorian aggressors and then supply and ferry the Third Legion to their next objective in securing our reclaimed space. As a result of his loathsome failures, Makot Kom directly cost the lives of over a thousand loyal Cardassians and placed in jeopardy an entire legion. No questions, or objections." Kovor ignored Ligan as he cooly exited the chamber.

"The sentence stands. Makot Kom, you are to be taken to Alpha 441 where you will be executed before the very soldiers you and you alone so deplorably failed."

THWACK! THWACK! THWACK!

48. Begin

Maureen stood silently at the bottom of the ramp leading back to the hearing chamber where the Controllers had passed their sentence. She'd watched as Wegaos Skeffef, St. John Talbot and the other six black-robed and hooded spectres had stood in unison and soundlessly melted away into the darkness. Moddax was on his knees, head down and muttering under a pale purple spotlight. A subtle whirling emanated from the platform Thayer was rooted to and the once fearsome, dark, brooding operative was lowered beneath the polished black floor and disappeared altogether. Only after the hatch closed over the shaft Moddax had descended into did the double doors leading back down to the white corridor open to allow Admiral Bautlin egress.

The walls were a brilliant, nearly pearly white. She wondered as she made her way down the ramp, if the colour of the walls had become more dazzling since entering the hearing room. At the bottom of the ramp, she looked for some indication of where to turn next, but all she could see were dead ends at either end of the corridor and no sign of the sitting room Talbot had shown her earlier. There was no sign of the orange door which would lead her back to the hangar.

"It can be rather unsettling, not knowing where to turn."

Maureen spun around at the sudden sound of Talbot's voice. He was still wearing the black robe, but his hood was down. His thinning grey/blond hair stood out at wild angles. He offered her a crooked smile and raised his right hand. A door appeared at the far end of the hall.

"This way, Admiral. We've downloaded the *Isadore's* logs and files from the N12. Well done, thinking to nab them while you could." Talbot began walking slowly towards the door.

"What's going to happen to Moddax?" Maureen asked.

"You heard the verdict. Guilty of treason. Life imprisonment."

"Tell me, if I hadn't had accepted the evidence presented..." Maureen fell into lockstep with Controller Talbot.

"If you hadn't accepted the evidence, then the Controller responsible for prosecuting the man's crimes would have some rather stern consequences to face."

"The trial, that show, it wasn't for Thayer, was it? It was for me." Maureen slowed her gait and turned to face Talbot.

The older man stopped and smiled again. "We have rules, Admiral. We may not be able to observe the niceties of the standard Federation Judicial System, but we are impartial, logical and precise. Your role as

Operations Chief requires you to serve in such circumstances as something of a juror. Shall we?"

Talbot motioned again towards the open door which looked to lead into a bright blue room. Maureen shook her head.

"So, Thayer will be sent to a penial colony...where?"

"The traitor will be housed appropriately at a facility we maintain. What is at issue now are the developments in the Actium Sector and the rather curious machinations of the Cardassian Empire."

"The Cardassians are pressing into their newly claimed space?" Maureen asked, accepting that any further discussion concerning Thayer Moddax was off the table.

"Yes well, that's just it, Admiral. You see it would appear the interference of the *Isadore* saved the Andorians and now a rather curious about-face is underway."

"How do you mean?"

"The data you brought back from *Isadore* reveals our Cardassian friends have fielded at least one, and likely more, new Heavy Cruisers. Impressively large. The timing and nature of the events which lured the *Shrar* and our mutual friend to their ends just outside the Umoth Nebula coincide too closely to their diplomatic withdrawal and these ludicrous claims to parsecs of space."

"You're saying the Cardassians are preparing an invasion of some kind?"

"We've known for months that they have been assembling a large force of infantry troopers and material on Alpha 441. A buildup to what Starfleet Security estimates to be close to *Legion* strength." Talbot paused as a ripple of disbelief passed over the admiral's face.

"If that was the case, why wasn't I..."

"Admiral Bautlin, you've established a base of operations. Mobilized three scout ships and only now have our own Heavy Cruiser back online. As I said, it is now time for you to open your eyes. Use your assets and begin your watch." St. John went on to assure Maureen that a full brief would be waiting for her upon returning to K3.

"What's this 'about-face' you're talking about then, Sinjin?"

Talbot smiled at the sound of his own name. "Yes, well, the Cardassians reportedly are pulling out of Alpha 441. Several small transports have been monitored ferrying troops and materiel back into recognized Cardassian space. The phenomenon engulfing the Umoth Nebula has made this exercise rather difficult for them to conceal. It will take them months to get off 441 with how they're going about it. Perhaps the ships they lost were vital to whatever it was they were planning."

"They spent months building up and equipping an invasion force, only to start pulling that force back? That's inconsistent with Cardassian tactics."

"Yes, curious, isn't it? The last time such a thing occurred there was a coup on Cardassia Prime. This time though, things seem to be progressing in quite the orderly fashion. I imagine the Central Command have found a rather attractive scapegoat to shoulder whatever failure led to all of this. Sadly, the Cardassian Government seems well entrenched. Of course, I shouldn't want to be the poor blighter asked to fall on his sword for whatever has gone wrong." Talbot motioned for the admiral to resume walking towards the transporter room at the end of the white hallway.

"Do you think they were looking at invading Federation space? Hakton perhaps?" Maureen caught sight of a panel of control sensors stitched into the inner sleeve of Controller Talbot's robe.

"Personally, I think they are so desperate for resources that they were planning on grabbing every rock floating in unclaimed space hoping the destruction of the Andorian flagship would keep Federation interference at bay. It will all be in your brief, of course."

"Of course. Bajor would be a tempting target. Resource rich. Potential slave labour. Isolated."

"Indeed. Here we are then. I shall be your direct point of contact with Section Command from here on. Read your brief and do take action, please. Oh, and don't worry about your return to Starfleet or the Council either. I understand Admiral Knot is deathly allergic to Andorian Vithi bulb tea."

Maureen stepped into the blue room and mounted the transporter pad.

"What?"

"No need to worry, Admiral. No need to worry." Talbot smiled his crooked grin and with a sweep of his robe's command sensors, transported Admiral Bautlin back to the orbiting N12.

49. Kanzei

Henry sat with both his hands resting flat atop the polished mahogany conference table in the President's *Salon d'Observation*. Thomas had just left the room. Admiral Wallace waited for the President to begin whatever *private* discussion she indicated needed to take place between them.

"Admiral, how long have you served in Starfleet?" The President's tone was now less formal than it had been while she was addressing Thom. She asked this as she rubbed the base of her nose between her eyes with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand.

"This will be my thirty-fifth year of service, Madam President." Henry had no idea where this was going, but he felt uneasy and anxious.

"Mmmm, I've been in public service for nearly as long. It takes a toll, duty." She lowered her hand and then deftly pushed herself up from the table. She offered Wallace a wain smile as he pushed himself up from the table out of respect.

"Ma'am?"

"Join me." She turned and walked towards the windows to take in the view of the Old City beyond.

Henry followed at a respectable pace and took a relaxed stance a good meter to the President's left side.

"When I finished my tenure as Deltan Ambassador to Earth, I truly believed my time of duty was at an end. Then I was approached to run for President. Now, just a few years later...sigh...I'm tired. Are you tired, Henry?"

Wallace looked at the President and cleared his throat nervously. "I'm, uh...I'm no spring chicken as we say, Madam President; but I serve with pride."

She turned to face the Starfleet Commander-in-Chief and let him look directly into her blue eyes. "Your service is noted, Admiral. After the next regular Council meeting, I shall be looking forward to my exit from public service."

"Ma'am?" Henry was dumbfounded.

"I will not be seeking a second term in next year's elections. I'm certain you understand how circumstances sometime conspire to put us in places we might not otherwise have sought out. How responsibility and an overriding sense duty to what we know is right can keep us in such places. Your own rise to office was not necessarily deliberate, was it?"

Henry half-smiled and exhaled heavily. "I...well I was Admiral Cartwright's attaché, Vice Admiral attached to Operations, when..."

"When Admiral Cartwright's plot to assassinate the Klingon High Chancellor and drive the Federation back into war with the Empire was exposed, yes. I've read your personnel files. Tell me though, when Admiral Morrow tapped you to be Chief of Operations in Cartwright's place, was that something you'd envisioned for yourself?"

"I had no real ambitions past making captain, truth be told. I only sat in the chair for five years before I was promoted, then promoted again...I don't think, no. No, I never wanted to be Chief of Ops.

"When Morrow retired after the first Khitomer Accords were finalized, I guess I resented him a little. There I was, C-in-C suddenly. My first challenge was handling the outcry and media storm around Kirk's death. It was a nightmare and largely of Morrow's making."

"Ah, yes. The El-Aurian incident," said the President.

"Harriman was Morrow's choice. Family ties is what he told me when I asked why we were turning over the flagship to a wet-behind-the-ears kid who by rights should have still been a Lieutenant Commander..." Henry stopped talking when the President turned away from the window and looked at him with a deadly serious expression.

"The last duty I will perform will be signing a treaty with the Romulan Empire which will stabilize our relations with the Klingon Empire and reestablish a largely favourable Neutral Zone between Federation and Romulan territory. They will essentially withdraw from all operations close to, or in our territory. Provided we keep the Klingons out of their space—Romulus will have nothing to do with Qo'Nos, either."

Henry stood slack-jawed for a moment. "That's...remarkable."

"We will agree not to develop cloaking technology in the Starfleet or other Federation navies. Precise details have yet to be worked out. Interestingly, Captain Harriman will have a role to play. You will be expected to clear the way for the *Enterprise* and whatever she may require. Understood?"

Henry gaped at the President. Unable to speak, he simply nodded his head.

"My duty is clear. Once it is done, I will retire to Delta to seek solitude. Your duty, your *kanzei*, as Admiral Nogura might have said—will be made clear to you in the coming days. Once you've seen your duty through, Admiral Wallace, you will announce your retirement as well. Am I clear?"

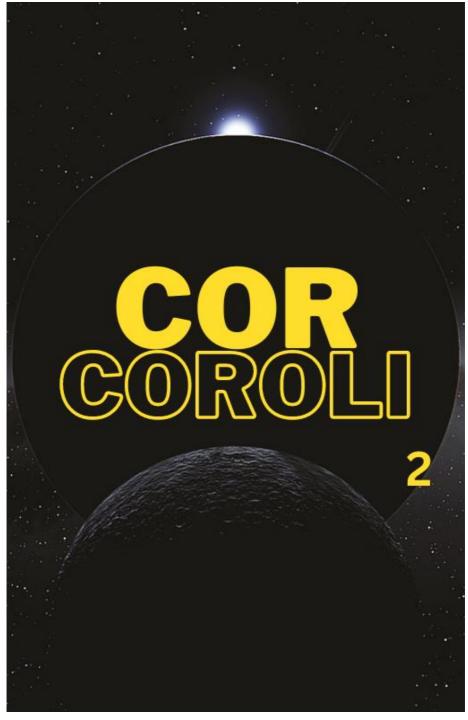


Figure 8: Alternate Cover. Published 13 Sep. 2016 Pixabay License Free



Figure 9: Green Mystery. Published 23 Aug. 2023 Pixabay License Free.

Cor Coroli: Convergence

They spent thirty-one hours climbing through the superstructure of Space Dock 17 hauling the dilithium container and bulky automation unit up to the cramped fabricator buffer. Using only a ram plate and their own strength to pry open more than twenty-three sealed hatches and access ports, they moved slowly. Exhausted, the four former members of the crew of the late *USS Isadore* huddled together in the cold darkness and braced themselves for what might follow. The buffer pad was housed in a cavity at the uppermost level of the dock where the clearance was barely one-and-a-half meters. The proposed plan to use the fabricator to dematerialize them and piggyback their signal through the infrastructure of the derelict *Revere* had not inspired confidence.

The transport through the fabricator to the passing Tellarite cargo train was rough. Whereas a regular transport took between two and four seconds, Shorh and his people fluttered through the industrial buffer and the *Revere's* low-powered directional array for nearly a full eight. Materializing in an empty cargo container with minimal atmosphere and near-freezing temperature was physically traumatizing for each of them. P'nom was violently ill and vomited repeatedly in the cold, dark container, but she'd managed to hold onto the white transmitter unit Teague had given them to trigger their next transport.

From the time Shorh felt his stomach flip as the train was propelled into warp by the accelerator gate, to the moment they dropped out of warp hours later, nobody spoke. Moira silently tended to P'nom in the darkness. Tagir Rhupp held firm to the automation unit in his left hand and cradled the dilithium cylinder between his knees. The anti-grav ring affixed to the heavy container was starting to run out of power.

Teague had been clear that Shorh and his party would have a scant two to three minutes to activate the next transport sequence once they dropped out of warp and were briefly in range of the asteroid belt. They were all freezing in the darkness. The stench of P'nom's sick hung in the stale air with a sharp, acidic bite. None of them complained. After reassuring himself that he still had the two discs Teague had given him, Shorh took the transmitter from the ill Vulcan and activated it.

Four seconds later they found themselves laying on a large receiving pad in a well-lit hangar bay built into a cave within an asteroid. P'nom vomited again. Moira slowly moved to help her stricken comrade. Shorh picked himself off the deck and moved to help Tagir, who'd materialized beneath the heavy dilithium cannister.

"Chief...are you alright?" Shorh asked as he bent down to help the shivering specialist to his feet.

"My...God, look at that!" Tagir pushed the cannister off his legs and sat-up with the captain's help.

Shorh turned and found himself looking at NAR-1331, the *Trudy*. Teague had explained that he and his former partner, Dr. Marlatti, had designed and built the over-sized shuttle as an independent runabout they could use for NECC business. She was a "Frankenstein" creation assembled from the bodies of two Class F shuttles. Fitted with upgraded nacelles mounted to the spaceframe by way of a *Miranda* inspired rollbar, *Trudy* was an odd-looking beast of a ship.

Teague had promised them that *Trudy* could get them from Tellar to Earth, if that was where they decided to go, but no further. The old man had admitted that he'd most recently piloted the unarmed runabout to Lothra Minor but insisted that it had been an insane undertaking. *Trudy* had basic deflector shields. No weapons of any kind. She was meant for friendly voyages alone. If Shorh was serious about venturing out to the unknown seeking the truth about Section 31 and his lost friend—Teague had provided him with a disc of navigational data and "some suggestions as to where a more appropriate ship might be found".

Rhupp moved towards *Trudy* and boarded her cautiously. Shorh assisted Dirlo with P'nom, who was still trying to recover from the harsh transports. Just as the slight Vulcan was finding her feet, Chief Rhupp emerged from the runabout with a smile on his face.

"Well, good news! She's got a sonic shower. Bunks for four and..." Tagir held up a pair of red crewman overalls from the 2260s.

"What in the world are those?" asked Moira as she helped P'nom towards the thirteen-meter-long vessel. She still wore what was left of the captain's tunic over her bloody and ruined sweater.

"Ha! These are vintage engineering coveralls from the 60's! My grandfather had a pair just like these!" Tagir beamed as he turned the red garment round and round to admire the pristine uniform he'd found.

"Status of the ship, Mr. Rhupp?" asked Shorh dryly.

Tagir lowered the coveralls and looked over to his captain. "She looks solid, sir. She's vintage, though. I mean..." Tagir stood silent for a second just shaking his head.

"What is it?" asked Shorh, too exhausted to get truly agitated.

"It's like the fleet museum in there, sir. Each bunk has a supply of these crewman uniforms, but none of them have ever been worn. I mean Teague and this partner of his outfitted the whole ship with pristine Starfleet surplus!"

After getting P'nom aboard and having Dirlo assist her into the sonic shower stall, Shorh ordered Tagir to examine *Trudy's* propulsion systems

and warp core in preparation for departure. It wouldn't take the nameless operatives of Section 31 long to deduce where Shorh and his people had gotten to.

The unique vessel was split into three sections. The forward compartment constituted a redesigned command deck with four independent control stations. The middle compartment housed the four bunks, the narrow sonic shower stall, and an equipment locker where they found two black-and-chrome tricorders, three type II phasers and a single phaser rifle. The aft compartment boasted a small table and four stools, an old-style food synthesiser and a modern drafting table (presumably left over from Teague's time running NECC). An odd field generator was also wired into the aft compartment's main EPS conduit.

After P'nom got through with her shower she dressed in one of the red jumpers and was helped into one of the narrow, recessed bunks to rest. Shorh was powering up the primary computer interfaces and reviewing Rhupp's report on the status of *Trudy's* unique engines. He held the disc Teague had downloaded *Brain* onto and considered what Dannar had shared with him...

"If you're serious about trekking across the quadrant, hell-bent on...what? Exposing Section 31? Resurrecting your dead friend and finding his dead ship? That it?" Teague was programming a second disc for Shorh to take along with him.

"I told you, Mr. Teague, I'm going to find out what happened to Brian and why he and a Starfleet crew had to die. Now, why do I need your AI?"

"Brain is more than just an AI. If you decide to go through with your little quest, you'll need him." Dannar finished formatting the second disc he wished to supply Shorh with and took a seat at his drafting table.

"Him? You did say that you're only giving me a third of this, Brain. What good is a third of a program?"

"If you really do decide to go through with your plan, you'll need *Brain*. Another third of the program is waiting for you, IF you're serious about this, that is." Teague watched as the young man in the soiled radiation suit wrestled the dilithium cylinder into the access hatch leading into the dock's superstructure. They'd been at it for more than eighteen hours already.

"So, two-thirds of a computer program are somehow going to help me?"

"Brain isn't just some program. Brain is the next evolution in multitronic programming," said Teague with a wry grin on his face.

"Multitronics? That's..."

"My *Uncle* Richard taught me a great deal, Captain Shorh. Since the whole Control fiasco there's been a moratorium on adaptive, independent, assessment and logistics artificial intelligence. Multitronics circumvents all that and will most certainly be vital to you and your cause."

"What will they do to you when they realize you've helped us escape?" Shorh reached into his pocket to touch the disc he'd been given earlier... *Brain*.

"Who else is going to fix their starship?" Teague wanted to sound glib, but he was weary and sick and dying, and he was too frustrated to pretend he wasn't.

"So, two-thirds of a program and a disc of secret instructions I can't review until after I'm blended through a fabricator, bounced into a passing cargo container, whipped to warp speed only to be ripped free on the other end by an automated transporter on an asteroid..." Shorh caught sight of P'nom helping Tagir into the Jeffries tube.

"The final third of *Brain* is aboard a freighter...the *Gunnlauger*. I wanted the program to imprint on a test pilot I'd hoped to work with, but I imagine it's just being used to monitor deuterium levels or something equally benign now. If you use what you already have there's a locator program that will help you find the final piece of the program."

Shorh stood silently contemplating all that had been said and all that hadn't been.

"You must be a good commander, Shorh. For those young people to so adamantly want to follow you into the unknown. It's almost inspiring."

"Will that disc you're writing tell me what I need to know?"

Dannar looked over his shoulder. "It will, once you reach *Trudy* and get underway."

"Sir, the shower is free."

Shorh turned and looked at Ensign Dirlo standing in the short hatchway accessing the command deck from the living quarters in the midsection of the *Trudy*. She was clean and wearing a scarlet jumpsuit cinched tight with a black duty belt. She looked like a weekend reenactor, or an over-enthusiastic museum tour quide.

"Has Chief Rhupp cleaned up?" Shorh asked dully.

"He's in the aft compartment trying to make sense of that field generator; clean and happily decked-out in his own red overalls, sir." Moira offered her captain a tired smile. Shorh rose from the seat at *Trudy's* science station and took two steps towards the bulkhead separating the command deck from the rest of the runabout. Ensign Dirlo moved to the helm without speaking. Shorh watched the young woman begin a preflight check of the oversized shuttle and very nearly ducked through the hatch without saying what had been on his mind since all three of his people had rallied around him nearly two days earlier.

"Moira…"

Ensign Dirlo stopped her activities and turned to look at her captain. "Sir?"

"Once we get underway, I can drop you all on Tellar Prime. You can go to the embassy and tell them...tell them I forced you to abandon the *Shrar* with me. Tell them anything you must to get yourselves clear of this."

From the aft compartment the sounds of Rhupp talking to himself echoed forward. P'nom was unconscious. Dirlo had scanned her with one of the antique tricorders to confirm her condition was not any more serious than a bad case of nausea brought on by the harsh transports.

"Sir, we're going with you. We're going to make this, this...whatever this has been, mean something. We're going to expose what went on here." Moira returned to her preflight check list.

Shorh's right antennae unfurled and stretched high. He looked out the narrow viewport mounted above the ensign's station and glimpsed the corrugated bay door. They had to get moving soon.

"Make ready for departure," he ordered before heading back to shower quickly and change into a clean, red uniform.



Figure 10: Universe. Published 25 Dec. 2019 Pixabay License Free