

CRISIS ON DETENTE II

**by Dana Reynolds
with Sean O'Keefe**

Story by Dana Reynolds

Edited by Sean O'Keefe

The vastness of space seemed to keep the observation deck on Starbase 10 a fairly empty place. Each person was oblivious to everything around them. It was a quiet place to meditate and reflect on things that were bothering them. One such person was Chief A.S. MacPhearson, a regular visitor to this kind of place. He was drawn to places like these to ponder unanswered questions.

Being raised by his father's parents in the old Scottish traditions was a good start for him. Being out here among the stars didn't seem to help, though. As a child, he met Spock, who led him to acknowledge his Vulcan heritage. Even after that meeting there were still yet unsolved mysteries.

During his most recent assignment, he had faced a new dilemma. It forced him to consider that he may be of an alien race not associated with the Federation. Some of his shipmates jokingly teased him about hiding 'Romulan ears and features' under that long, fair hair and beard. These things, among others, brought him to the observation deck today.

After looking out at the stars for a few hours, he started to feel some peace. He started to feel his eyelids getting heavy. He blinked to clear them, and the viewport and starfield are gone. Instead, he saw a dungeon door slowly swing open. He cautiously entered, and saw the room was filled with portraits and antique artifacts. On the other side of the room, he see a portrait of people

vaguely familiar to him. 'That's odd', he thought. 'I wonder whose portrait this is?'

As he drew closer to the picture, he could see some detail, but the borders looked oddly fuzzy. The center picture was very unusual. There were three persons in the picture. Two men were on either side, with a female in the center, a little bit taller than the males.

The male on the left side appears about age 35 or so, with dark hair and in a faded tunic of the Special Security Divison, SSD for short. The male on the right was of vulcanoid appearance, but had blond hair and full beard. The two men looked hauntingly alike, almost as if they were brothers. What unnerved him about this picture was the lady in the center. She was surveying the males with an almost a matronly look. However, that was impossible, due to her appearance. She was wearing a duty uniform of the Romulan Star Empire.

He continued studying the portrait, trying to glean more information about this trio. However, the faces remained curiously fuzzy, and he could not help but think: 'I know these people.'

Wanting to know more about them, he turned to leave. However, he knocked a gold wine chalice off a shelf. He watched as it slowly fell, and as it hit the floor, the image disappeared.

At that moment, he heard the loud whistle of the intercom. All present looked up, hoping it was

not for them. The closest person hit the intercom button.

A voice asked: "Is Chief MacPhearson down there?" Looking around, the individual discovered that Mac was no longer here. No one noticed him leave by the turbo lift.

Chief MacPhearson knew the voice on the intercom and headed straight for the Security Office. Entering, Mac saw Lieutenant Commander Carson. He said, "Mac, where have you been for the past twelve hours? I've tried to locate you for the past three. Orders came for you marked URGENT." Commander Carson gave him a sealed packet.

Mac said, "I was on the observation deck. Being there helps me to think."

Carson replied, "Get your gear from next door. Make sure you're there on time."

Yeoman Takara entered the office and handed Carson some papers. As she turned to leave, she winked at Mac and said, "See you when you get back."

Carson cut her off, saying, "Check in with the duty officer before you leave."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Mac, picking up his baggage and computer as he left. Arriving at the shuttle bay, he found a twin-seater Needle at the launch area. Mac looked for the pilot. He checked his orders, to be sure it read `by the first available

transport'. He thought this must be important if he were to use the *first available transport*. He climbed in, throwing his stuff in the back seat. Giving up on the pilot, he thought, "I guess I will have to fly it myself."

After completing the preflight checks, he looked around one last time for the pilot before requesting launch clearance. He launched without knowing where to go except the course coordinates in his orders. As he entered the coordinates, he checked to see if anyone was following.

The ship left its present course and accelerated to warp one. He tried to override the autopilot. He could only override the acceleration thrusters. He thought, "If I am in a hurry, why not arrive a little early instead?"

After resetting the thrusters, he relaxed to reflect on the mission. He knew from the encoded coordinates and other discrepancies the SSD was knee deep in something important.

As time passed, he thought about possible mission scenarios. He made a mental note to scan everything on his computer about security and tactics.

When he arrived at his new posting, Mac found everything in a complete state of disorder.

It reminded him of a war story he heard in high school of an aging war veteran seeing the same situation. When asked what he thought, the

veteran replied, "It looks like a complete SNAFU, sir."

Mac decided to scout the area to find more out about the situation. He found enough men and equipment to set up a temporary base. Everything was portable, from the shields and heavy phaser cannon to building supplies and support equipment. This also included a reinforced company of Starfleet Marines and did *not* include Starfleet's regular complement of security personnel.

Later, after checking into his quarters, he set up some tapes and read until he reported for duty.

When Mac entered the Chief of Security's office, he found a lovely young Yeoman sitting behind her computer terminal. "Is the Chief of Security in?" Mac said smartly.

The Yeoman replied, "No, Lieutenant Thompson is down the hall. I can page him and tell him you are here, Chief."

"No, don't bother," he said, handing her his documents. "Here are my orders. I will report in myself," Mac said as he left for the briefing room.

Mac entered the office to see the Lieutenant busy with paperwork. The room looked like a cyclone had hit it. When he looked up, Mac said, "Chief Arthur S. MacPhearson reporting for duty, sir."

Lieutenant Thompson saw a freshly pressed uniform surrounding a well-groomed humanoid at

attention. He paused and said, "Welcome aboard Chief," motioning him toward a seat. "Now that you've officially reported in, what do you think about the situation?"

Mac searched for a diplomatic answer. After a pause, he said, "I need more information to base an intelligent answer on, sir."

"Before we meet with the diplomatic delegations, we need to improve our security contingent's readiness."

"I agree, sir. In order to perform efficiently, I need a briefing on my exact duties."

"Not yet, Chief. I have a briefing in fifteen minutes. When I return, I will fill you in. In the meantime, assign a detail to clean this place up." The Lieutenant then gathered some papers and left for his briefing.

Mac left to return to find his post. When he arrived, he saw the Yeoman sitting at her desk doing nothing. Mac asked, "Do I have an office?" The Yeoman pointed to a door off to her right. When Mac opened it what he saw angered him. He turned and growled at the Yeoman, "What in blue blazes is that mess doing in my office! I have been here less than an hour!"

"Lieutenant Thompson used this office so his would be neat should someone drop in on him."

Mac looked around and asked, "How many clerks are there in this chicken \$#%@ outfit?"

"Just myself, Chief."

Mac paused for a moment and reined in his temper. He said, "Call me Mac, since we will be working for together. First, Get the Lieutenant's papers together. Compile his current work. Make sure it is on my desk by 1800 hours. If you need help, use whoever you want."

"Aye, Chief. My name is Terrance Jones. My friends call me Terrie or TJ."

He acknowledged her statement with a quick nod before getting back to business. Mac said, "Before you begin, bring me the personnel files. I want to know about all of my co-workers, including you and the Lieutenant."

Mac left the room muttering under his breath. "What kind of chicken \$%#@ Commander am I stuck with now?"

Soon after, he found himself in lounge. Gazing at the exterior vista, he realized the SSD sent him into a complete mess again. His thoughts turned to the Lieutenant, hoping not to have to deal with that clod for long. He certainly hoped he would not have to follow him into combat. Staring off into the distance, Mac realized how small his problems were compared with the universe outside.

Mac decided to see if Yeoman Jones needed help, as he had given her a lot to handle by herself. He poked his head into the conference room while heading towards his office. He found

two marines cleaning the room. Satisfied, he continued on towards his office.

Mac found everything as ordered upon his arrival. What puzzled Mac was that neither the Lieutenant or Yeoman Jones were in sight. He frowned to himself before decided to retrieve his computer from his quarters. On the way back, he picked up sandwiches and coffee at the galley. He returned to his office to study the Lieutenant's mess.

The more Mac read, the more he understood the nature of the mission. Working with the information at hand, he could not help wondering what he is in for. The computer beeped and printed the following.

PERSONAL LOG; Stardate 6377.8

1. Space Station ES-405 is the embarkation point for a project code name "Trade Winds". A diplomatic mission is trying to cement trade agreements with The Romulan Star Empire.

2. The reason for the breakdown of communications between units is lack of command and control at a higher level. The Commanding Officer and his staff are not here. Co-operation between the subordinate units is nonexistent.

3. The task force taking this zoo to "Detente II" has not yet arrived, Thank God.

4. Personal Note: Computer, find out everything about Lieutenant Thompson and Yeoman Jones.

Their service record does not reveal the idiosyncrasies observed about them. Lieutenant Thompson seems to be under-qualified for this command. Yeoman Jones seems too efficient for this job. She's here to keep the Lieutenant out of hot water. He doesn't belong here and shouldn't be in command. Scan all record banks thoroughly. Access any computer to get the necessary information. Route this through official Special Security Division channels.

After finishing the log entry, Mac retired to his quarters to get a good night's sleep.

The next morning, the computer listed the following intercepts of fleet communications.

The following are excerpts of fleet communications:

USS Enterprise proceeding to Starbase 10 for scheduled shore leave.

USS Avenger, proceed to Starbase 10. Pick up personnel and transport to final destination.

USS Krieger pick up Federation Ambassadors at Command Headquarters.

USS Endurance and USS Chandlery proceed to Space Station ES-405 for duty.

USS Nimitz pick up equipment and personnel at Space Station ES-405 and await convoy.

Mac sat down to ponder these latest developments.

A ship about the size of a long-range shuttle quietly entered the sector of space known as 'The Triangle'. Its lone passenger waited for something to happen. Having nobody to talk to was making this young junior Lieutenant anxious to drop off his satchel and return to headquarters. The Commandant of the Special Security Division was going to have an old fashion cotillion for his Granddaughter's sixteenth birthday. 'I didn't want to miss it for anything', thought Lieutenant Lee.

Another ship stopped in the same sector as Lieutenant Lee's. Lee turned on the main viewer to see nothing but empty space, which disturbed him. He ordered the computer to scan the area. The computer reported no other ships or planets within sensor range. After a few moments of silence, the Lieutenant found himself looking into a brightly lit shuttle bay surrounded by a starship painted so darkly he wondered which was blacker, it or the space it inhabited. A voice suddenly said, "SS DESPICABLE, this is SS SUBTERFUGE. Come in."

Lee's computer gave the proper, automated, reply.

The voice said, "SS DESPICABLE, this is Ambassador Aaroc. Are you there, Lieutenant Lee?"

"Sir, this is Lieutenant Robert E. Lee, Ambassador. I'm ready to hand the satchel over when you sign for it."

"I beg your pardon, Lieutenant. Just land and leave it on the flight deck. I am very busy now and cannot meet with you," said Aaroc. "I will have one of my aides pick it up when you leave. Lieutenant, be sure you take off right away. I have other places to be."

"No way, Sir! No can do. That's against my orders," said the Lieutenant. The line suddenly went dead. Impatient, he decided to land anyway and await the aide. It only took a moment to guide the craft into the shuttle bay and set it gently down. He stood for a few minutes by the open hatch and waited. When the aide came, it was with an armed party – of Klingons. Caught by surprise, he froze. Outnumbered and weaponless, he still refused to hand over the satchel upon demand.

The aide wasn't in a mood for geniality. He glanced at a guard and he took the opportunity to unsheath his d'k tahg, savouring the metallic click as he extended the side barbs.

Terrified, the Lieutenant stumbled back into the shuttle and tripped, falling heavily and knocking himself out when his head impacted the floor.

A couple of Klingon troops stepped over his prone form and opened fire on the control panels, rendering most of the craft's functions useless. When they were satisfied with the destruction, the

Klingons left, ejecting the craft into space with it's hapless occupant inside before taking the satchel to Commander Kador.

In the commander's chamber, Ambassador Aaroc looked over the Kador's shoulder as he opened the satchel. Inside was a computer tape labeled `Operation Trade Winds'.

Personal Log: Stardate 6380.6

A few days of this madhouse is making my nerves raw. Every day is the same old thing. It's a constant struggle to keep an emotional balance. Each passing day increases tension between personnel and headquarters. The earlier the units and personnel are in shape and deployed the better.

When Mac reported for duty Yeoman Jones said, "Lieutenant Colonel Harrington wants to see you in his office at 1300 today. He is the SSD Commander for this mission, Chief."

Mac went into his office wondering why the Colonel wanted to see him. At 1200 hours, Mac left after clearing the desk of the backlog of paperwork. It had taken longer than he had hoped.

He changed into a dress uniform and proceeded to Colonel Harrington's office. Arriving, he noticed an Andorian entering the Colonel's office. Mac entered behind him.

Turning to meet him, the Special Security Division First Sergeant Thelin said, "May I help you, Chief?"

Mac replied, "Top, I have orders to report to the Colonel at 1300."

"Take a seat while see if the Colonel is able to see you."

After a while Mac began fidgeting and pacing the room. About half an hour later Colonel Harrington opened the inner office door and motioned for Mac to come in.

Entering the Colonel's office, Mac came to attention, waiting for the Colonel to sit down at his desk.

"Sir, Chief Arthur S. MacPhearson reporting as ordered."

The Colonel stayed on his feet, stony faced. "According to these reports, you are causing problems with personnel in this command. Lieutenant Thompson states you perform your duties well enough, but that you lack the social graces supposedly instilled at the Academy. He also states you have little or no respect for your superiors." He paused to let that sink in before continuing. "Another matter is a twin-seater Needle was reported stolen at Starbase 10. It miraculously appeared here a week and a half ago. What do you have to say for yourself, Mister?"

"Sir, I make no excuses and take full responsibility for my actions. As for the Needle,

my orders clearly stated to take the first available transport. In my zeal, I commandeered the Needle, which was pre-programmed to arrive here, which I believed to be a fulfilling of my orders which stated "by the first available transport". Concerning Lieutenant Thompson and my alleged misconduct, I'll let you judge if it is in need of correction."

The Colonel's left eye twitched. He wasn't certain the Chief was dissing him or just being too literal. "Chief MacPhearson, as an ex-officer, you should know the importance of not undermining the chain of command." His tone lightened a touch. "Regarding the Needle, you aren't being charged with theft of SSD property, so be thankful for that. Ever since I was a plebe at the Academy, I've wanted to get you back. I've finally got a chance to lock you up, but I won't. Make yourself at ease. Let's chat and I can find out how things are going around here. You won't miss things an insider will, because of their familiarity and willingness to overlook the failings of their comrades."

Looking puzzled at the Colonel's comments, he uneasily sat down in the opposite chair. Gazing at the Colonel, he said, "Sir, do I know you?"

Relaxing, the Colonel smiled. "I'm shocked. I thought you'd remember the skinny redheaded youngster you said wouldn't make it past the first week at the Academy."

Colonel Harrington pressed a button under the desk. First Sergeant Thelin entered the room with a pot of coffee and two cups. Mac studied the face of the Colonel, trying to picture him as a young cadet. All he could see in front of him was a graying and balding man.

"Sir, for the life of me, your face rings a bell. I cannot recall an incident to link it to the past, though."

"That's OK. What happened to you, anyway? You used to be one of the finest SSD officers around," the Colonel said.

"Sir, I resigned from the SSD for personal reasons. Afterwards, I traveled around the galaxy for a while. With my pay gone, I decided the profitless jobs had to end. I decided to enter Starfleet for something different. The only available openings were in Security."

A knock on the door sounded and First Sergeant Thelin entered. "Colonel, you have a staff meeting in the conference room in fifteen minutes. I thought I should remind you."

"Thanks, Top. I'll be along at once. Mac, we'll have to continue this conversation later." They both got up and stepped outside. Mac stopped at the front door watching the Colonel and Sergeant Thelin walk down the corridor. He thought the Colonel waddled like a duck. Mac snapped his fingers as he remembered who the Colonel was. Mac said 'Ducky' as he walked to his quarters.

Personal Log: Stardate 6387.

After speaking with the Colonel, I am optimistic about the success of the mission. My own emotional problem seems to have dwindled. I believe my difficulties were due to the turmoil around me.

Personal Log: Stardate 6401.

In the past fortnight, this command is shaping up. The troops know what is going on. Everyone has a positive attitude for this mission. The transport tug is here to take us to our destination. We are seventy-five percent loaded.

The other starships and escort vessels are at the rendezvous awaiting our arrival. Lieutenant Thompson is still a complete shambles, but he has Yeoman Jones and myself to keep him out of trouble.

Somewhere in Klingon space an Imperial Battleship ominously sat waiting. They awaited a group of ships whose insignia identified them as privateers. Commander Ketrek paced the confines of his quarters until he was summoned to the bridge. As he stepped into the command centre, Captain Qolotlh turned the command chair to him.

"Commander, the ships commandeered for the mission are arriving. It's imperative you complete

the mission as planned. All personnel at the Federation base code-name 'Detente II' must die. If you fail, it will mean the end of the Klingon Empire. Do you understand, Commander?"

"Yes, Captain, I understand. It will be as you command to the last detail," replied Commander Ketrek.

"Q'plah!" the Captain said, grinning. He wished he was a part of what was undoubtedly going to be a glorious battle.

Ketrek left the bridge and reported to the transporter room to beam over to the ship that had been assigned to him. Materializing on board, he proceeded to his station.

'It's good to be back in command again after a long exile,' Ketrek thought. He commanded the communications officer to notify all ships to prepare for warp speed on a heading of 53 mark 86.9.

The task force jumped to warp drive. Captain Qolotlh wished them '-gang toy'wI' 'maj wan'. He knew no matter what, everyone aboard those ships are dead one way or another.

Personal Log: Stardate 6413.

Landed on the planetoid five days ago. Construction of the buildings and security posts are going well. Upon landing I received a message placing me in command of all security personnel. Lieutenant Thompson and Ensign Jones are on the

Colonel's staff. The rotation of personnel with the Marines is going well. This will help the Marines get a feel of the land if anything should happen. I am taking a little walk in the woods to check the perimeter outposts.

COMPUTER TIE-IN: Notify Colonel Harrington I am conducting an exercise of the security perimeter. Tie in all communications and security systems for this exercise. Notify Colonel Harrington of my whereabouts if I do not return by the time the delegations start arriving.

The computer (beeped!) saying: "Your analysis is ready."

COMPUTER ANALYSES OF LIEUTENANT THOMPSON AND YEOMAN JONES COMPLETE.

COMPUTER RECORDS OF THE ABOVE ARE INCONCLUSIVE. THE INFORMATION GATHERED AS OF THIS DATE IS AS FOLLOWS.

1. THOMPSON, SAMUEL E. SS742-0053HZD

RANK: Lieutenant

PRESENT ASSIGNMENT CLASSIFIED

NOTE: UNUSUAL GAP OF MISSING TIME BETWEEN LAST ASSIGNMENT AND HIS PRESENT ASSIGNMENT.

2. JONES, TERRANCE E. SC1192-35849CSC

RANK: ENSIGN ACTING YEOMAN FIRST CLASS

PRESENT ASSIGNMENT PERSONAL YEOMAN FOR LIEUTENANT THOMPSON, S.E

Completing his log, Mac disconnected the portable unit from the mainframe and placed it on the desk. Mac decided to take enough provisions and clothing to last a few days. Even if there were transporter facilities located on base, it's too nice a world not to do some walking. This is why the Federation chose this place. The smells of the forest reminded him of happier memories with his family.

Mac left his quarters and headed toward a place in the perimeter where he hoped the security personnel weren't patrolling. The closer he came to the perimeter, the more stealthy he became. Mac suddenly stopped, noticing one of his troops checking out his assigned post. Mac crouched down to avoid observation. After a short time the sentry turned his back and walked in the other direction. Mac slipped past the post and into the forest beyond.

Mac combed the area outside the perimeter to find a suitable location to set up his base of operations. He found nothing nearby suitable for his needs so he headed for a nearby hill. He found a small cave entrance covered over by dead brush.

Clearing the brush away, he found an opening about two-and-a-half meters wide. Mac took off his pack and pushed it into the opening and crawled in. Three meters down the tunnel, the cave expanded into about a 10-meter wide circle

and about the same in height. In the center of the cave he found the remains of a fire. He looked up to see a small beam of light brightening a side of the cave wall and set up camp.

Personal Log, Supplemental:

Computer, tie in all programs dealing with intruder security. At random intervals, set them off starting at 2039 hours. Correlate all reaction time. End intrusion alarms at 0621 hours.

During this time I will infiltrate into the base perimeter, placing the word (BOMB) in key locations. If I am caught doing this, the exercise will come to an end.

NOTE: A sentry at checkpoint twelve didn't notice me on the way out.

Mac decided to get a little sleep. He thought: 'it is going to be a long night.' At 2000 hours Mac arose from a restless sleep to find it was raining 'cats and dogs'. He left his gear inside and crawled out. Mac found a dry spot under the bough of a fir tree overlooking a meadow.

He waited for the first intruder alarms to go off. He watched to see the reaction of the security personnel. Watching, he decided to infiltrate the perimeter using different routes, each time blowing up a different target. This gave him an opportunity to observe the personnel moving about

the emplacements. This allowed him to check their reactions to a live intruder.

After five perimeter penetrations, he decided the troops had had enough and called it a night. They didn't defend the council chambers, phaser generation plants, dining area, and force field generator.

He started back to the cave as a cold northern wind picked up. Mac hoped there was still enough dry wood in the cave. He much preferred to make the cave dry enough to sleep in. While walking back to the cave, he heard noises off in the distance. They evoked memories of a time and place long since forgotten. Crawling into the cave, he found no wood. Mac hoped changing out of his wet clothing and sleeping in a blanket would keep him warm. His intentions were not to return to base until completing the exercise, even if it meant getting a cold. Mac gently took a change of clothes and blanket from his pack and turned in for the night.

During the night, Mac slept very little due to the dampness of the cave and cries of wild animals.

After a frustrating time trying to rest, Mac finally got up to start today's exercise. He finished a dehydrated food pack for nourishment, allowing him to evaluate the effect of these meals on the humanoid body. Afterward, he crawled outside and noticed animal tracks leading to the cave. He vaguely remembered seeing similar prints in a

survival manual, but couldn't remember the animal type. The prints reminded him of a mix of a bear and a large cat. He made a mental note to keep an eye out for what could be a nasty predator.

As he foraged for dry wood without success he decided to infiltrate into the perimeter to determine how well the night shift briefed their relief. He hoped by the late afternoon he could find dry wood for tonight. At noon Mac stopped the day shift's exercise. He took a walk in the woods for some relaxation and meditation before returning to the cave by nightfall.

Mac found tracks upstream from the base just like ones he found earlier. Farther upstream Mac found the remains of a very large deer as big as a moose. Mac continued to follow the tracks, hoping to catch a glimpse of the animals but to no avail. Another rainstorm brought his foraging to a close.

As Mac returned to the cave, he gathered what dry wood he could find. When he crawled inside, he found all his belongings scattered about. Only the computer, food packets and a shredded blanket remained. Mac found the computer intact leaning on the cave wall. Mac took it apart to check for internal damage. After completing the test circuit, he reassembled it and made a systems check. Mac checked around the cave, only to find more of the bear type tracks. Mac built a fire to get the dampness out of the cave. He also hoped it

would keep the wild animals away from the cave while he left to find some more wood.

After finding a little bit of wood, he returned to the cave. He knew that, even though he would go hungry tonight, at least he would be warm. Mac decided he would hit the perimeter once or twice a shift to keep them alert. After completing these tasks, Mac returned to the cave thoroughly soaked. The fire was low, but he managed to get it roaring again. Mac changed into his last dry set of clothing before lying down next to the fire. He began to think of how to write his report of this exercise.

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The aroma of damp fur filled his nostrils, waking him from a sound sleep. Arthur yawned and rolled over into the body of a young sehlat. He stood and yelled `Targa! You were not suppose to come here. I wanted to do this myself.'

Arthur looked around his cave to find Shea in front of the entrance. Annoyed, he called: "Both of you go home. Do not come back unless I say so. Do you understand?" The sehlat crawled through the cave entrance as he gathered wood for a fire. There was enough tinder, so he built the beginnings of a teepee fire in the center of the fire ring.

Afterwards, he went outside to get enough wood to warm the cave until later that afternoon. Striking the match, the tinder burst into flame. Arthur added enough wood to keep the fire going

for a while. He backed away from the fire to survey the surroundings. He guessed the cave was nine to twelve meters in diameter and about the same height. The smoke from the fire rose straight up through a hole in the cave roof. Arthur looked around and found no other exits other than the one he came in last night.

Arthur put another piece of wood on the fire. He took the belongings out of his sack and placed them around the cave, making this his personal hideout. The last item out was his father's coat of arms. He looked around on the wall to find a prominent place for the shield. He found a soft spot on the wall about a meter-and-a-half up to the north. He gathered up some flat rocks to reach the soft spot on the wall to no avail.

Arthur crawled through the cave entrance to find Targa lying just outside. As Arthur brushed himself off, he thought about how to solve his problem. He called Targa inside to stand on her back to reach the soft spot on the wall. The work was precarious, but he was successful in raising his family's standard.

Arthur surveyed his fortress to see if anything was out of place. Finding nothing amiss, Arthur crawled out and headed toward the stream to wash before heading home.

On the way home he heard his tutor T'Pal call him to his studies. He evaded her and entered the house silently. As he walked through, he noticed

his mother sitting at a computer terminal checking the family medical records. Looking over her shoulder, he was able to view the contents of the screen.

- NAME: MacPhearson, T'Renna
- RACE: Vulcan
- AGE: 38 Earth years
- HT: 5 feet, 7 inches
- WT: 125#
- EYES: Grey
- HAIR: Black.

Having learned nothing he wasn't already aware of, Arthur slipped out of the room to get his gear. As he gathered provisions, he heard T'Pal come into his mother's office. Arthur slipped out the back door to find Targa and Shea lying patiently for him. He continued through the back yard and into the tree line, followed by the two sehlat. Arthur entered the woods and crawled into the cave. He continued the process of setting up camp as his father taught him. After finishing his meal and stoking the fire, he snuggled up to Targa. He thought of his mother, and after a short while Arthur fell asleep.

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Mission Log: Stardate 6415.

This is Lieutenant Colonel R.C. Harrington Commanding. We occupied the planetoid Code

Name `DETENTE II' one week ago. This planetoid looks like the Garden of Eden. A large meadow about 160 square acres is secure for building temporary facilities housing the delegations and support equipment. The buildings are ninety-five percent complete. All security and support personnel are bivouacking in the field to lessen confrontations. The security perimeter extends one half mile around the meadow. I expect both delegations to arrive within three days.

Mac rolled his face into an old sehlats' fur. Waking up suddenly, he realized there are two sehlats in here.

Unafraid, Mac shivered, looking around the cave to find a dead fire with a stack of firewood next to it. He got up and rummaged around for kindling. He found enough wood to prepare a teepee fire. He lit a match, stoking the fire until the cave warmed up. As the fire raged, Mac noticed a glint of metal on the north wall. He went to check, finding a tarnished piece of metal shaped like a shield. The signet on the shield heralded the first son of the Earl of Skye. This shield was his father's, and soon to be his. His head started to spin and he sat down under the device, upon a small pile of rocks. Mac looked across the fire at both sehlats and whispered `Targa? Shea?' The two sehlats raised their heads as he spoke their names. Mac shivered while placing more wood on

the fire. He crept close to the fire and curled up into a fetal position to fall asleep.

Personal Log: Stardate 6417.

Chief MacPhearson is several days overdue since his last computer report. I sent out several patrols to search for him to no avail. I hope he shows up, as the delegations are overdue. I shudder at the thought of turning Security over to that dunderhead Thompson.

I need Mac for his linguistics ability. If he fails to report within two days, I'll have to report him missing.

Mac awoke sweating profusely. He tried to light the fire without success. He searched the cave for his computer. Finding it, he pressed the distress key and lapsed into unconsciousness.

Mac rolled over, finding himself in a warm infirmary bed, with the lights at low intensity. Mac could not see anyone else in the seven bed ward. Mac tried getting up, only to notice the straps restraining him to the bed. Mac heard the unmistakable sound of the ward door opening. The doctor in charge stode in, all business.

"It looks like you're improving rapidly, Chief. I'm not experienced with your type of physiology. Tell me, what happened on the surface? It would help me finish your treatment."

"I got a little wet and cold in the cave, nothing more." Mac said with a sarcastic tone.

"We found you babbling something about your mother and two sehlats?" the doctor said, removing the straps from Mac's wrists.

"What are these things for? Was I violent?"

"No, just an added precaution because of your Vulcanoid physiology."

Itching to get back to work, Mac asked: "When am I going to get released? I have a job to do down there."

"If you feel better tomorrow, we'll see about it. Tell me about your blood type, as I've never seen it before."

"Blood is blood, Doc. You spill it."

The doctor walked out shaking his head in disbelief. 'A few days in sickbay will keep the cowboy down,' the doctor thought.

Mac looked up at the monitor to see the readings, then decided he was fine. He got up to change into his uniform, and then walked out of Sickbay. Shortly after, he arrived at the transporter room and beamed down. Materializing on the surface, he received a communicator call and found the doctor highly irritated at him for leaving Sickbay without being released.

The doctor demanded he return immediately. Mac argued he was fine and the doctor was not going to play guinea pig with *his* body.

Colonel Harrington interceded for Mac. He asked the doctor to release Mac for light duty, with the condition that he remain under medical supervision. The doctor half-heartedly agreed with the stipulation he receive regular updates. Mac took the rest of the day off. He simply hated being in hospitals.

Personal Log: Stardate 6418.

Being sick for the previous day was not fun and a waste of my time. Nobody knows exactly why I am sick. The doctor on the USS Nimitz did not have any idea either. All he wanted was to stick needles into me. I have many things to do besides becoming an incompetent's pincushion.

The delegations should arrive anytime. I am assigned by Colonel Harrington to prepare for their arrival. The reception will commence the evening following their arrival. The doctor is trying to keep me out of the field, according to my computer. Good luck with that.

Mission Log: Stardate 6418.

This is Lieutenant Colonel R.C. Harrington reporting. I am apprised that in twelve point five hours, both delegations will arrive. I am placing Lieutenant Thompson in charge of the security detail welcoming both delegations.

Protocol requires the wearing of dress uniforms. I am assigning Chief MacPhearson the collateral

duty of Delegation Aide. He is also in tactical command of the security forces. I shall require him to delegate some duties to a subordinate.

Mac walked across the compound toward the building that will hold tonight's reception. He could feel the tension in both delegations. He hoped this reception would thaw this cold war somewhat. Mac entered the hall to check the food detail. While sampling the food, Mac heard the door behind him open. As he heard footsteps enter the room, he straightened the front of his uniform and turned around nonchalantly. He saw a female Romulan Military Officer standing inside the main door.

Mac walked toward her slowly. He surprised her out of her silence by addressing her in fluent Romulan. He said, "Come in Commander. I am checking the details for tonight's reception. I don't mind having someone looking over my shoulder. I will appreciate any suggestions you can think of. Making tonight's reception a success is our common goal."

The Commander almost reacted with outrage at this Chief speaking to her as an equal. She calmed herself and said nothing. She scrutinized the Chief closely. Her first impression is he was self-confident, possibly arrogant. Continuing her observation, she noted the long hair and beard, as no one else here had one. Secondly, his uniform

was adorned with a pleated cloth hanging over the left shoulder. Finally reaching her, she noticed the upward slant to his eyebrows.

She took out a tricorder to scan him as he watched her every move. She decided to check his work. She planned to scan him as she dressed him down for incompetence. She looked around the hall, expecting to find it festooned with Federation frivolity, but it wasn't. The room accommodated both Empire and Federation decor. Still determined to find something amiss, she walked around the hall, scanning for bombs and unwanted listening devices. She didn't hear footsteps following her, so she went to the table holding the food and drinks. She scanned them for poison. She even sampled some of the available delicacies. Mac hoped they would meet with her approval.

Mac was standing patiently when she returned to the door. He asked, "Does everything meet your approval, Commander?"

"Switch to Federation Standard, if you don't mind. Your Rihannsu is passable but my English is better. The facilities are adequate. The food is passable."

"Did you complete your inspection? I am planning to secure this area by posting a couple of guards. This is for the sanity of both delegations. I welcome any personnel you want to assign." Mac opened his communicator. He asked for two security personnel to meet him at the reception

hall immediately. The Rihannsu Commander did the same. "Do you want the teams segregated or integrated?"

She thought for a moment and said "Integrated and we brief our own personnel."

"Would it be better if each team heard what is being told to the other team, Ma'am?" Both teams arrived as he said this.

In Rihannsu Mac said "Commander, if it is all right with you, I will brief my team within earshot. I invite your personnel to listen on their translators. I hope you will return this courtesy, but it is not necessary."

Mac turned to his personnel and spoke in English. "Gentleman, this is Commander r'Ven. She is the Naval Attaché and their Chief of Security. You will extend every courtesy to her. You will consider the area inside the hall a no-lone zone. We will not allow anyone inside by themselves unless cleared by Lieutenant Colonel Harrington, Commander r'Ven or myself. Guards will accompany anybody given access."

He continued, "You will pair with a Romulan Security Officer. This will guarantee neither side can cry foul. Lieutenant Thompson and the honor guard detail will relieve you just before the reception in one point five standard hours. Commander r'Ven will brief her people and appoint assignments while I secure the door. Do you have any questions?"

"No," they reply in unison.

Mac turned to his companion. "Commander, do you have anything to add?"

"No. I need to talk to my people before I dismiss them for duty."

Mac turned around, locked the front door and started to walk away whilst keeping his highly sensitive Vulcan hearing tuned to r'Ven.

The Commander turned to her people. Restating what the Chief had just said, she added, "That Chief is very interesting. Your orders come from me. You will contact me if anyone asks for admittance. Watch your counterpart closely. Take note of anything irregular or of an interesting nature. Check in with me in half hour increments. If the Chief comes back before the honor guard will relieve you, watch him closely. Do you have any questions?"

"No Commander," they replied.

She assigned the guards and went towards the compound containing the Romulan delegation and Mac started towards his quarters. Mac chuckled as he walked. 'What an interesting conversation I just had with the Romulan Commander,' he said to himself under his breath. It was an odd universe. He had never expected to be working in close proximity to a real Rihanna.

Yeoman Jones spotted him and skirted across the compound to intercept him. She called him but was unable to get his attention. As she

touched his shoulder, he snapped back to reality. "Is everything all right, Chief?", she asked, a little concerned.

"Yes. What can I do for you, Yeoman?"

"The Colonel asked me to give you these reports. He also advised you read this particular report." She picked a tape out of the stack and handed it to him.

"I will look at it while I change. What is on it?"

"I do not know, Chief. Colonel Harrington told me to deliver it and to insist you read it."

Palming the report, he left the Yeoman with the rest. "Will you please drop off these reports at my office so I can read them later?" Mac turned away from Jones and continued to his quarters.

She wanted to talk to him some more, but she decided to report to the Colonel how he was acting. If Mac was still suffering from anything, he shouldn't be on duty. She scurried off to find Colonel Harrington.

Mac entered his quarters, placed the tape into his computer and called it to the screen. A picture of the Commander he just talked to came up on the screen immediately. The name by the picture is "r'Ven s'Shinsaeunt t'Kiltonn, Commander, Romulan Intelligence." Mac told the computer to read the tape aloud. He unpacked his dress uniform jacket and Breacan a fheile¹.

1 Breacan a fheile: Traditional Scottish attire of the Kilt and Plaid.

The computer started. ...

- Federation Biofile: Ch'r Commander r'Ven t'Kailtonn
- Full Name: r'Ven s'Shinsaelin Hallianaera t'Kailtonn (t'VanShaya?)
- Current Rank: Khre'Riov (Commander)
- Date of Birth: About Earth Date 2237
- Description Genotype: Vulcanoid/Romulan
- True: pure
- Gender: Female
- Hair: blk
- Eyes: blue/grey
- Face type: Narrow, square
- Height: 173cm
- Weight: 794 dkg
- Frame: Heavy bone, medium density
- Current Assignment: Assistant Naval Attaché to Ch'Rihan diplomatic party on Detente II (presumed to be responsible for security and intelligence thereon).
- Specialty: non-Rihan affairs (Rihannsu Fleet Intelligence).
- Rated subspecialties: (Known): Administration, Cryptography, Diplomacy, Swordsmanship/Dueling, Electronics, and Exotic weapons. Also skilled in Interstellar laws & trade, Languages (Federation Standard, Orion, Klingon, Vulcan), and Starship strategy & Tactics. Known

personality traits and habits; meticulous, proud, highly intelligent, stubborn and tenacious. Subject has a very dry, sarcastic wit and a biting, almost vicious, sense of humor. Collects edged and/or exotic weapons, as well as methods for their use.

- Assessments: She is young and presumably the gifted, privileged (or both) type that rises rapidly in the Rihannsu Fleet. Though young enough to be flexible, she is highly loyal to the Rihannsu Empire. It is rumored she has blood connections to the ruling praetorian clans, but doesn't flaunt them. r'Ven t'Kailtonn is understated in the usual Rihannha manner. Federation personnel should use caution when dealing with her. UFP Intelligence only knows her last known assignment was in the "Triangle" region. She has connections with various fringe elements of both the Klingons and the Federation. Her Standard is excellent, although it includes some idioms found among Orion pirates. She is definitely loyal to the RSE. Assume she misses nothing. She has a very Rihan code of personal ethics. Although trained in diplomacy, do not assume she lacks the typical Rihannsu temper. She's presumed to be a Ch'Rihan Fleet Intelligence officer. 2Lt. R. L. UFP/SSD

Mac listened, noting what to watch for when he met the Commander next. He smirked to himself that he seemed to have found the Rihannsu version of himself. He had to admit to himself they were more alike than he might admit in polite company.

With a sigh, he started dressing for the reception. He placed two skindos in each of his socks and a dirk in its scabbard on his right side. He also decided on carrying a Mark Five phaser with a modified derringer release device on his right forearm. He put on his dress jacket and pulled the Plaid over his left shoulder. Mac placed his insignia and decorations on the tartan of the 'Black Watch.'

After making sure he was ready, he placed the basket hilt claymore and scabbard at his left waist. He may have looked more decorative than practical, but the claymore had a razor sharp edge, like himself.

PERSONAL LOG: STARDATE 6419.0

The reception is beginning. I do not want to go. It is a command requirement, however. I am not comfortable in these types of situations and do not know what to do at them. I usually stand around bored.

The information on the Romulan Intelligence Officer might give me something more interesting to do.

He turned his attention to his computer and barked out an order. "Make a computer record search on Commander r'Ven. Start a search in all other files to get any information to add to this file. Show detailed breakdown of delegations and respective staffs."

The information quickly came up on the screen:

ROMULAN DELEGATION:

K'Arun tr'Riha Chief Diplomat, Head of Mission.

T'Renna t'Riha Diplomat

Arhae t'M'Shas Mission Aide/Linguist

Commander M'Har tr'kale Naval Attache

Commander r'Ven t'Kailtonn Assistant Naval Attache/Chief of Security

Centurion Taonn tr'Biroj

Subcenturion t'Cortiel

Subcenturion tr'Johriss

Subcenturion tr'Nhalle

N'Nioli tr'Dilas Linguist and Cultural Analyst

Joliss t'Mhresin Translator/cultural analyst

FEDERATION DELEGATION:

Sarek of Vulcan Chief Diplomat, Head of Mission

Lady Amanda Grayson

T'Veth	Mission Aide
Yelsen, Borris I.	Earth Representative
Ditwood, Robert	Alpha-Centauran Representative
Than Thor-Mej	Andorian Representative
Gen-Tragen	Tellarite Representative
RADM Sevin, Garri	Starfleet Representative
Lt. Col. R.C. Harrington	Mission Security Officer
Theam Far-me	Linguist/Translator
Gissgis Metfam	Linguist/Translator

The sound of the reception waxed as Mac crossed the compound toward the main hall. He stopped short of the entrance to check his appearance and turned the translator on before entering. He stepped through the door and started walking around, seemingly aimlessly. He noticed everything seemed to be going smoothly. There were some pockets of uneasiness and suspicion, but at least the reception was serving its purpose.

Mac wandered behind the serving line. He snatched a drink off a passing tray whilst continuing to scan the crowd. He spotted Colonel Harrington chatting to Rear Admiral Sevin, the Starfleet representative. His eye then caught Commander r'Ven standing next to a female Romulan diplomat. She was talking to Ambassador Sarek and his wife, the Lady Amanda.

Mac noticed most people seemed to be enjoying themselves, but a few were standing around simply watching. Mac surmised they were security personnel or intelligence. He also observed Yeoman Jones wandering around holding a tray. The more he wondered about her, the more confused he got. He made a mental note to recheck her background from the beginning. There was something about her he just couldn't put his finger on.

Mac continued to scan the area. He saw the Colonel motion for him to come over. Obediently, he quickly joined him.

Colonel Harrington said, "Mac, is everything all right?"

"Yes, sir. Why do you ask?"

"Yeoman Jones came by to see me after talking to you. She does not think you are yourself."

"Sir, I had something on my mind. I do not think another complete evaluation will give us any more information than we already have." Aside from it being a complete waste of time, he thought.

"Good! Did you read the report I sent about Commander r'Ven?"

"Yes, sir. She is a very interesting person. What, if anything, do you want me to do about her? Assign security to watch her?"

The Admiral gave him a small smile. Mac was ever the careful soldier. "One person will be more

than adequate. She is too smart for twenty-four hour observation. Besides, this conference is trying to reduce tension, not increase it."

"I guess I will volunteer for that assignment, sir, as I've already made personal contact with her. The only thing that concerns me is that people have seen us talking, Colonel. We don't need the appearance of evil."

The Admiral understood his caution, but though it overkill. "It will work itself out, Mac. Did you notice the lady standing next to Commander r'Ven?"

"Yes, Sir."

"She seems interested in Earth culture. It might be a way into their delegation. The report on Commander r'Ven states she is an aficionado on edged weapons. Aren't you an expert too?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Explore that possibility, too." With a quick glance over Mac's shoulder he added: "Don't look now, but the hunter is now the prey. See you later," the Colonel said as he left.

Mac turned around just in time to see Commander t'Kailtonn try to tap him on the shoulder. Mac replied in a Scottish brogue, "Good evening, Commander, how nice too see you again. Can I help you with anything, Lass?"

Commander r'Ven t'Kailtonn stopped in mid-thought, wondering 'is this the same person or twins?' Not seeing anyone else who resembled

him she assumed the former. "Are you a military person or a verbal impressionist, Chief MacPhearson?" she commented dryly.

"Perhaps both, Commander.", Mac replied. He switched into Rihannsu whilst still keeping the brogue.

r'Ven was mildly disgusted at the abuse of her language and let it show. After a pause, an amused smile formed at the corners of her mouth. 'This one has a sense of humor subtle enough to be tolerable', she thought to herself. "I notice the sword you carry is not a type I have seen before. Where does it come from?"

"Well, Lassie, tis' a long and thirsty story I should only tell in private." Mac downed his drink, placing the empty glass on the tray of a passing waiter. "If you want the short version, I need a refill. Do you need a refill, Commander?"

Mac walked behind the bar and pulled two glasses and a bottle from under the counter. The Commander thought it somewhat strange an Earthman would have a bottle of Romulan Ale. Mac popped the cork and poured both glasses. He handed one to her. He then sipped, saying, "Commander, anyone knows not to kill your enemy in the front parlor while everyone is watching."

r'Ven said nothing.

"Now to answer your question, Commander. These blades are replicas of swords used by my ancestors on Earth from 1100 CE to 1600 CE. The

genuine articles are in the family collection on Earth. I'd love to indulge your curiosity further, but I am sure you have other duties to attend to. If you find the time, I do have a collection of weapons with me. I would be more than happy to show them to you if you find the time." He tipped his head to the side and said genially: "With that I bid you farewell."

Mac turned to walked away. He had barely taken a step when a hand on his shoulder brought him up short.

"Chief, you are correct. I have better things to do than argue with you."

Mac turned and faced r'Ven once more, curious.

The Commander continued with an apparent change of subject. "However, Ambassador t'Renna likes your dress. She would like to talk to you personally at your convenience."

No Scotsman could let that comment pass without challenge. "Lassie, this is not a dress. For your information, this is a Breacan a fheile."

Commander t'killicon raised an amused brow, then turned on her heel, heading toward a group of people including Ambassadors tr'Riha. Mac followed her. She stopped at the edge of the group of delegates, politely waiting for the conversation to end. She used a pause in the conversation to whisper something into t'Renna's ear. The Ambassador turned around and stepped out of the

group and walked toward an unused space of the hall close by.

R'Ven made the introductions. "Ambassador, this is Chief MacPhearson of the Federation Starfleet Security Division," r'Ven said. "Chief, this is Ambassador t'Renna t'Riha."

Mac gave her a polite smile and broke protocol by speaking first. "Ambassador, I understand you make a hobby studying Earth's culture. If I can assist in your research, please ask." Mac noticed out of the corner of his eye the Commander retreat, seemingly out of ear shot.

"Chief, can we be a little less formal? My name is t'Renna. What can I call you?"

He was a little surprised by her candor, but refused to show it. "My given name is Arthur. Most people call me Mac, though."

The Ambassador was the picture of politeness. "Can I call you Arthur? That is a lovely Kilt. Which clan does it come from?"

Was the Ambassador trying to get on his good side by massaging his Scottish love for his clan? He wondered. "It is Clan MacPhearson." With a raised, upswept brow he added: "It is a bit unusual for a Romulan to interest themselves in Earth culture, ma'am." Being a gentleman, he noticed something awry. "You seem to be a little bit dry. May I get you something?"

The Ambassador was charming. "Yes, thank you, Arthur. What you have in your hand is fine."

Mac's eyes darted over to the bar where he had left the bottle of sapphire blue ale.

Commander Ketrek's hands glistened as the front view screen picked up three Romulan Warbirds ahead. He cursed under his breath. "You will pay for your insolence to the Empire, you Romulan devils." He spoke up and commanded: "Helmsman, plot an evasive course around those ships."

"Commander, we should destroy our adversaries before they can stick their knife into our backs again," Lieutenant Commander Targ said, eager for the glory of the kill.

"Targ, we are here at our Emperor's order. We will not play games with the Romulans. They are not our priority. Our mission is important. Do not get too excited. If we have time we will destroy them on our way out."

As the Klingons slipped by the Romulan patrol ships, Commander Ketrek wondered what other surprises lay in store for them.

Mac returned to t'Renna with a full glass. He handed it to her and said, "Where were we?"

The Ambassador engaged him with her deep blue eyes that reminded him of the ale she sipped from and asked: "Do all Scottish families own kilts or just the nobility?"

"Traditionally, most Clans have kilts. Nobility also have Coats of Arms. In my family's case, we have both. My Grandfather is the Earl of Skye. When he dies, I will inherit his title."

Surprised, the Ambassador asked: "Isn't the son the one that usually inherits the titles?" It wasn't the Romulan way.

"Any child can receive a title. Since my father is dead, I will inherit it." He paused.

The Ambassador appeared mildly embarrassed at the slip. "I'm sorry, Chief. I didn't know."

He gave her a wan smile. "That's all right, ma'am. I do not let it get to me or talk about it very often. Can we move on to something more pleasant? Why are you studying Earth cultures, anyway?"

"It is just a hobby I started while working in the Triangle. I decided to continue it when I received this assignment. Study of Earth culture is not a popular hobby in our empire."

"Yes, I guess it wouldn't be. Mind you, it's always a good idea to know one's adversaries." He gave her a knowing smile, then added: "What type of information do you need?"

"Earth is as diverse of a planet as I have ever seen," she observed, casually. "Its cultures are many. Where would *you* like to start?"

"How about with what you are most familiar with. You seem well tutored in the customs of Scotland. Why don't you start there?"

Mac spent the next fifteen minutes informing the Ambassador of the Highlands, with subjects as diverse as the bitter winter cold and the delights of the beer – all whilst keeping a watchful eye on her *and* the rest of the people present.

Finally a little weary of the discussion, he said: "With your permission, I need to take a break. I need a refill and fresh air." Charitably, he added: "You are welcome to join me."

The Ambassador seemed genuinely interested, but politely declined. "No, thank you. I need to get back to the discussing Empire business. If I spend too much time on hobbies, I won't accomplish anything. I *do* want to continue this conversation tomorrow, if you don't mind." She said good-bye and returned to her original group.

Mac walked to the bar, filled his glass with ale, and went to get some air. He found a place in the shadows where he could feel the gentle breeze blowing. It gave him some solitude to quietly meditate where he would not be observed.

After a few minutes he watched as Commander r'Ven, stepped outside, breathing in the cool fresh air.

r'Ven looked up into the sky, hoping to return there as soon as possible. At that moment, Commander tr'Kale exited the hall behind her and quietly addressed her.

"Commander, I notice you are spending considerable time with that Federation Chief.

Shouldn't you dealing with the SSD officer?" His eyes narrowed a little in suspicion. "Is your interest in the Chief business or social?"

The Commander wasn't going to be bullied by this little man. She put him off with a simple: "That falls under `need to know'."

"Well, this will not look good on your record, Commander. As senior officer on this mission, I order you not to associate with any Federation personnel, especially Chief MacPhearson."

Still in the shadows, Mac heard his name and turned his full attention to their conversation. Mac realized it was all one sided and r'Ven was winning. Knowing something of Rihannsu culture and body language, he noticed that tr'Kale desired his subordinate.

"Is jealousy what it's all about?" rVen quietly snapped. "Commander, who I choose to hunt is my affair. I see you haven't read my record too closely. I do have someone back home." She turned around and headed back to the reception. She felt tr'Kale place a hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "Commander," she said with a voice straight out of hell. "I suggest you remove your hand before you lose it."

After quickly withdrawing his hand tr'Kale said, "Commander t'Killatonn, you will confine yourself to quarters until we bring charges against you. You will continue your duty of personal security for

the Ambassadors. I will assume all your other duties, however."

Inside, she was seething. Knowing her limitations, she slowly started walking away, her quarters her destination whilst trying to figure a way out of her dilemma. She realized his wording allowed her more freedom with less responsibility. She sighed with relief. At least that was a consolation. A little good cheer entered her gait and she moved to rejoin her charges.

Seeing the change in her walk enraged Commander tr'Kale even more and he stormed off in the other direction.

Still in the shade of a huge pine tree Mac tried to keep from laughing out loud. He observed in the quiet of his thoughts: 'As diverse as the entire galaxy is, we all have the same problems with our base emotions.' He tried to calm his instinct to laugh, without much success.

As she continued to walk back to the compound, r'Ven occasionally heard chuckling. She wondered who may have witnessed the argument.

For some reason, Mac had found the entire exchange hilarious. He was finally able to control his giggling forty-five minutes later during which he considered their exchange before finally returning to the reception.

Upon entering the hall he heard Sarek say, "Ladies and Gentlemen, this was a long and tiring day for both delegations. Seeing the hour is late,

we will officially end the reception. Those of you wishing to stay may do so. Refreshments will be available." He headed toward the door where Mac was standing. As always, the lovely Lady Amanda was at his side. He was courteously followed by the Romulan Ambassador's party.

Sarek paused as he passed Mac and said: "Chief MacPhearson, will you stay around to assist the stragglers?" Mac nodded his head yes and the Ambassadors left.

Most of the attendees got Sarek's message and took leave of the event. Some took him at his word and decided to keep partying, even though the numbers had dwindled. Mac paced around the room, scanning each person, intentionally making them feel uncomfortable. Many got the message and retired for the evening.

Continuing to broadcast his message, he began putting all the tables and chairs up, except those still occupied. He then let the staff go. After a short while, he told the two remaining staffers it was three o'clock in the morning and he would escort them to their quarters. With them gone he was finally able to get some rest himself.

Mac walked behind the serving table and pulled out two unopened bottles of Romulan ale. He placed both in the plaid at the small of his back and turned out the lights at the main door.

As he turned out the lights, Commander tr'Kale walked in glaring at Mac. Mac politely said, "Sir,

everything is closed down for the night. I am just locking up."

Mac didn't have to be a psychic to know the man was on the warpath. "I know. I have been waiting for you, *untranslatable*" tr'Kale said in Rihannsu.

Mac didn't need the Universal Translator for that nasty epithet. Ever the professional Starfleet officer, he replied: "Sir, I do not understand your attitude towards me."

tr'Kale indicated his Universal Translator and barked: "Turn that thing off. I do not want this recorded."

"Well, Sir, in that case should we step outside? Here is my translator," Mac said. He fidgeted with the right temple of his glasses and motioned the Commander outside into the chilly night air.

Mac secured the door and followed him down the ramp. "Sir, can you please tell me what this is about?"

Switching to Federation standard, tr'Kale said, "You know well enough what this is all about. I want you to stay away from my people, especially Commander t'Killatonn. I heard the remark you made to her at the reception. She was a good officer until you got to her."

"Commander, I still do not understand," although he actually did. He just wanted the Romulan to spell it out. "Commander t'Killatonn took the remark the way I said it. This is a

diplomatic mission. We are here to get to know each other, not stand behind walls." In his heart he wanted this mission to be successful.

tr'Kale was beyond reason. "I do not care about this conference. You stay away," he growled as he left.

Still a little baffled, Mac unlocked the door and went inside to pour another glass of ale. He sat on the ramp and tried to calm down. After a moment, he remembered he had two bottles in his plaid. He wondered how he was going to get the bottle of ale to r'Ven. After a while he concluded that discretion was the better part of valor. He would forego trying for a while. He shrugged. Maybe giving one to tr'Kale would soothe his animosity. 'No,' he thought darkly. 'I would rather give him the bottle across the jaw.' Mac finished his drink and replaced the bottles. He secured the building and headed to his quarters.

Mac walked in, unstrapped the blade at his left side and laid it on the desk. He took the Plaid off his shoulder, letting it fall toward the ground. He retrieved a glass and a bottle of Scotch from the bottom drawer. He poured a four-fingered shot then, exhausted, he lay on his cot. Sipping his drink, he pondered the day's events. A knock at the door disturbed his peace and quiet.

"Come," he said, wondering if this night would ever end.

The door opened. To his surprise, in walked Colonel Harrington and the Marine commander, Major Perrelli, still clad in their dress uniforms. When Mac saw them enter, he rose to attention.

"Sirs, may I help you with anything?"

Colonel Harrington pointed at the glass in Mac's hand. "How about giving us one of those first?"

Mac relaxed and indicated the bureau. "Help yourself, sir. There are glasses in the bottom drawer."

Major Perrelli followed his direction and retrieved two more glasses. He poured a two-fingered shot in each, handing one to the Colonel.

"Absent companions.", said the Colonel in the age old tradition.

"Absent companions," Mac and the Major echoed.

The Colonel turned to business. "Mac, the rotation is almost complete. Major Perrelli has an idea to bring the entire Marine force down for field exercises. What do you think about it?" the Colonel asked.

Major Perrelli added: "Sir, shouldn't we discuss this with Lieutenant Thompson. After all. .."

Colonel Harrington raised his hand to stop him.

"Since our arrival, Major, Chief MacPhearson has run Security. I assigned Lieutenant Thompson other duties."

Mac was concerned with their line of thinking. "Sirs, if we are discussing running exercises while

the delegations are here, I strongly suggest against this. We have enough problems to deal with without adding the unnecessary stress of an exercise. If the Major wants to bring his people down to walk in the woods, I see no reason not to. I believe it will be profitable for relaxation – as long as they stayed away from the Romulan delegation. Their presence could be ... inflammatory."

"Well Major, I guess that settles it," the Colonel said.

"Colonel, we need to show the Romulans what we can do," the Major insisted.

Mac said, "Sir, the reason I am against the idea is two fold. If anything happens, we will have a harder time reacting to it. This will slow our personnel in a real emergency. This is a diplomatic mission, not a field exercise."

Perrelli was insistent. "Colonel, the chance of an attack during an exercise is unlikely considering the mission's secrecy. The escort ships in the vicinity should discourage an attack." He gave Mac a dirty look. "I also resent being told by an enlisted man I cannot do something."

"Major, Chief MacPhearson is more than competent to run security. I have complete faith in his abilities to serve in that capacity. Besides, I'm the one saying no to the exercise, not the Chief. Do I make myself clear, Major?"

"Aye, Aye, Sir."

Mac tried an olive branch. "Major Perrelli, sir, what time should I tell Commander t'Kailtonn your people will beam down?" he asked politely.

"Don't tell her anything." Major Perrelli slammed the glass on the desk and stormed out.

Colonel Harrington called after the Major but he was quickly out of earshot.

A tad embarrassed, he said: "I will talk to him later about that, Mac."

Mac fingered his glass. "Since that takes care of business, what can I *really* do for you?"

Shrewd, that was the Chief, the Colonel thought. "Mac, I need someone you trust for a job. I was working on a very sensitive assignment before being posted here. One of my people just informed me classified material is leaving Headquarters and ending up in the hands of a foreign power. They also suggest there might be an operative here. At the very least, a leak."

Totally honest, Mac said: "Colonel, *I* am the only one I trust in that situation. With all the responsibilities I have, I do not know how I can fit any more into my day. I still check on security and go over everything with Chief Sharkey."

"I thought I told you to turn everything over to him," the Colonel said with a knowing smirk.

"I did, but I still pop in on him and he comes to me sometimes. If you do not have Lieutenant Thompson doing anything important, he and

Ensign Jones can handle security until the conference ends."

"Ensign Jones?"

"Yes Sir."

"What are you doing? Holding out on me, Mac?"

"No, Sir. Her assignment is to keep him out of trouble. I am still looking for more information."

"That's fine. I'll put them back to security. I will transfer you to my staff and reactivate your commission, Captain."

Mac jerked, surprised. "Sir, please do not reactivate my commission. It will cause too much suspicion and I will not be able to do my job."

Colonel Harrington looked at his timepiece and said "Alright, I won't. We both better get some sleep. Today will probably be a long one." He nodded his respect and left to return to his quarters. Mac sipped his drink and started his log.

Personal Log: Stardate 6421.8

After such a long day, I do not want to do this log. I will dictate some notes.

1. My first meeting with the Romulan delegation was interesting, to say the least. Commander t'Kailtonn and Lady t'Riha are most unusual.
2. The Colonel told me there might be a spy among us.
3. Lieutenant Thompson is again Head of Security.

4. Yeoman/Ensign zzzzzzzzzzzz.

Even Mac could feel the effects of sleep deprivation. Once his body had gotten the bare minimum of the rest it needed, he dragged himself into the shower and dressed for the day. Once he was fed and the anti-hangover drugs had taken effect, he managed to drag himself to his office and get down to business.

Some time later, Mac looked up from his paperwork, realizing he hadn't informed the Romulans of the additional Federation personnel to be beamed down. As he started for the door, he spotted the chronometer on the wall. He wondered where she might be at this time of the day. As he crossed the compound, he hoped she was not out snooping around. In the mood the Major was in last night, there's no telling what he might do to her if she was caught.

When Mac came to the entrance of the Rihannsu compound a sentry challenged him. Mac responded, "I am here to see Commander t'Kailtonn."

At that moment, Commander tr'Kale walked up. His manner was oddly polite. He said, "Chief! Is there anything I can do for you? Commander t'Kailtonn is not available right now." Then, with a hint of sarcasm, he continued, "I will be more than pleased to pass on any message you wish to leave."

Mac paused for a moment to consider how to respond to him. It was clear that there was a real chance his message would never be delivered anyway. Also, he considered his feelings towards the man. Am I picking up r'Ven's animosity toward him, or is it my own?" he thought." He decided to maintain his pleasant air of professionalism. There was no point in stirring the dragon. "Sir, is the Commander within the facility or is she elsewhere? I must speak with her."

Commander tr'Kale, was obviously perturbed at the insubordinate moron confronting him. He growled, "Do you not understand, you Federation underling? She is not here!" He turns to walk away, muttering some particularly nasty epithets under his breath.

"Commander that is no way to talk to a guest. This applies especially when he does not understand our language and cannot challenge the point." No one saw T'Renna approach, her steps had been a feather touch.

The NCO guard at the gate and Commander tr'Kale came to attention when she spoke. Mac, not knowing what to do, stood a little straighter.

T'Renna waved off the Naval Officer. "Commander, you are dismissed." She turned her attention to Mac, the picture of diplomatic charity. "Chief, is there anything I can do for you?" She strolled past him out of the compound. She paused, turned and said by way of invitation:

"Chief, I would like to continue our conversation of last night. That is, if you have the time. .."

Stymied for now, Mac hoped the Ambassador might be more approachable. "Certainly. Where would you like to start?"

"Commander, sensors are picking up a dead zone at 227, mark 14. Nothing seems to penetrate it, sir," said Science Officer Warc without looking up from his screen.

In the dim light of the Klingon ship's bridge, Commander Ketrek exuded a confidence he did not feel. "Excellent. That has to be the corridor. What are it's dimensions?"

"As close as we can tell, it is 0.3312 light-years wide and 0.000195 light-years high. It encompasses the target."

It was an interstellar pancake. "How many enemy ships can the sensors pick up?"

"We cannot tell, sir. We need to be within the field to get an accurate target picture. Their sensors, as well as ours, will be useless."

Not good. "What you are telling me, Worc, is you don't know. When we're in range, we still won't know. Right?"

"Yes, sir."

He stepped down to the sensor control and breathed over the underling's shoulder, his voice a veritable death rattle. "Warc, you had better find a way into the dead zone without us getting caught."

He spoke up for the communication's officer. "Notify all ship captain's there will be a final briefing at 1200 tomorrow." He indicated the screen, indicating their prey. "Monitor their transmissions. Notify me if there is a pattern." Commander Ketrek then left the bridge, hoping his P'tak crew could do their jobs.

"Now, does that explain the evolution of Coats of Arms?" asked Mac, wondering if he would ever get a chance to talk about something meaningful.

"Yes, it does. Now that the history lecture is over, what about the real you, Arthur?"

As they walked through the grassy meadow, Mac thought the question to be a bit intimate, but he was nothing if not an open book. "Being raised in Scotland, I attended military school, university and 'the school of hard knocks.' Then I joined Starfleet. There is really not much to tell." Mac paused and tried to take the attention off himself. "What is that?" he asked, pointing to the medallion around her neck. "It has an interesting design on it. May I see it?"

T'Renna reached behind her and unclasped the chain before she handed it to Mac. "It is just a - how would you say it? - keepsake."

Mac held it gingerly in his hands. It was light and beautifully crafted. "This looks like a binary star," he said in mild awe. Mac turned the medallion over, staring at an engraving of his Coat

of Arms. A flow of unintelligible sentences came spewing out of his mouth. Who? What? When? Where? How? He looked into the Ambassador's eyes seeking answers.

T'Renna took the medallion back from him and placed it around her neck. "Arthur, calm down. This is not what you think." She paused for a moment to see if he would say anything. She could see he was still flabbergasted. She decided to remain silent for a while until he, and she, had a chance to think.

T'Renna took him by the elbow and gently led him for a slow walk under the sun.

Next to her, Mac was racking his brain trying to remember what his mother looked like. All he could recall was the general description on the computer screen in his dream of a few nights ago. The Romulan female standing in front of him fit the that description. He kept trying to remember something specific, almost missing what she said next.

"Arthur, this is the symbol for the Rihannsu court system," she said, fingering the medallion.

"Wha.. please explain. Mac said as he started coming out of his mind fog.

"All judiciary personnel wear the hand-grasping scales. All but the Supreme Judiciary have ladders of some sort. In my case, the design you use as the first son means I am to become a member of the Supreme Judiciary."

It was beginning to make sense to him. "Please explain the gauntlet."

"That is a stylization of my own. I hope the people entering my court see it as a symbol of a firm and fair judge. It also indicates I am a military judge."

Regaining his composure, Mac looked around and spotted her escort, standing a ways behind them. Wary, but not concerned. "It has been a pleasure talking with you, ma'am. I can see by the fidgeting of your escorts it is time to go. Until next time, if you wish." With that he turned to leave.

She brought him up short. "Arthur, I would be more than happy to pass on your message to r'Ven."

Finally. "If you see her first, please tell her the entire Marine contingent beamed down to walk in the woods for some short leave. I hope she is not outside the perimeter. Major Perrelli is not real thrilled with Romulans and enlisted personnel."

The Ambassador appeared mildly amused. "If you expect to find her out there, good hunting. She is very good."

"Thank you for the warning. Until next time, then?"

"Until next time."

Still in turmoil, Mac returned to his quarters to pick up his gear. Upon entering, he checked the computer for any messages and found there were

none. He pulled out his derringer arm holster, strapping it on his right arm. He practiced with it to make sure it worked and pulled down the sleeves of his archaic Battle Dress Uniform before he set off for the perimeter.

Approaching a section of the fence, he pulled a communicator from a cargo pocket to contact the perimeter post. He inquired of each sentry whether or not they had seen Commander r'Ven.

"Post twelve reports they had spotted her heading northwest."

Not good. Mac left the compound by post twelve and followed the direction.

As he walked, he found the ground soft and moist, due to the early morning rain. Mac was able to track r'Ven very easily. His only concern was to find her before the Marines did. The trail gerrymandered toward the cave overlooking the compound. Mac straightened out his course and headed for it. When he arrived, he found r'Ven standing in the clearing just outside the cave.

Mac crouched down to see what she was going to do next. He thought to himself 'I do not want to get shot for sneaking up on her.'

At that moment r'Ven heard a crack of a twig and pulled out her disruptor. She scanned the forest until she saw a glimpse of two furballs just outside the clearing. She stopped just short of the clearing's edge on the other side of the bush Mac was hiding behind. Mac slowly cocked his head to

see what she was looking at. He spotted the two sehlats sniffing the ground and air and heading for the cave.

Mac felt something wet and cold fall on his nose. He looked up and saw the clouds rolling in. He knew if they did not head back very soon they were going to get drenched.

He turned his attention back to her just in time to see her raise her disruptor to fire at the sehlats. Mac acted instinctively chopping at her wrist as she fired. The shot left a burn mark in front of her with the weapon on the ground. Mac drew up to his full seventy-six inch height to face her.

Instinctively, she stepped back a couple of paces to evaluate the new threat and reached for her boot knife. She looked up with the knife in her hand to see Mac's hand rise up and a phaser appeared.

"Would you mind putting that toad-sticker away before somebody really gets injured?" Mac said in Rihannsu.

Placing her knife into her boot she said: "What gives you the right to interfere with the way I defend myself?"

"Those two sehlats would no more harm you that I would." Mac paused to see if she would respond.

"Looking at the wrong end of your phaser is not a good sign of those sehlats intentions."

"Oh, excuse me." Mac squatted down, picked up the disruptor and gently tossed it back to her.

At the same time, Mac hid his phaser behind his left pocket and slipped it back up his sleeve. He then stood with his hands down at his side. Mac turned towards the sehlats and called: "Targa, Shea come here."

"I thought that sehlats are wild creatures and..."

Mac turned back to her and said "They are, predominantly. In this case, they are my childhood pets. They live in the cave you are standing behind." Mac felt more sprinkles on his face.

"... are indigenous to Vulcan?"

Sam gave her an apologetic smile. "Ah, that is also correct. My parents brought them here. They did what God told man to do in the Bible, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'"

"Then you claim this to be your home world?"

Mac heard the queerness of her voice and the look of surprise on her face at what he might be implying. Mac felt the rain through his uniform. He said: "Do you want to stay dry? If so, I suggest we move this question and answer session somewhere else."

At that moment, the wind gusted hard enough to reveal his pointed ears through his hair. As Mac walked past her, he caught a look of utter disbelief and surprise. After a few seconds, a look of understanding crossed her face.

Mac stopped to pull the camouflage off the cave entrance, to allow the two sehlat's inside. "If you do not wish to get wet, you're next. Or do you melt?"

She gave Mac a dirty look and asked: "Aren't you going to try to make it back to the compound? I am."

Mac shrugged. "Suit yourself. You will be soaking wet before you ever get to the bottom of this hill, let alone the compound." Not waiting for v'Ren, he turned and crawled into the cave. He thought 'Officers! When will they ever learn to come in out of the rain? It's her problem if she wants to get wet. I am going to stay warm and dry.' Mac found a pile of wood that he had not noticed before and started a fire, continually adding fuel until the cave was at a moderate temperature. About that time, r'Ven crawled through the entrance, soaked to the bone.

Mac appraised his visitor. "The first thing you should do is take off your boots and place them by the fire. I would suggest that you stand as close as you possibly can. You may also wish to take off your outer garments so those can hang to dry."

Without preamble, she began to take off her uniform jacket. Sarcastically, she replied, "You know, Chief, I could figure that out for myself. We also have survival courses. I am not a naive little girl on her first outing." r'Ven continued to remove her clothing.

Mac stoked the fire some more to bring the temperature up to keep her from getting a chill. He took off his BDU blouse and gave it to r'Ven. While rummaging around the cave, he found the tattered remains of his blanket from before. He handed it to her, saying: "It's not much, but it is all that remains here."

Not ungracious, r'Ven said: "Thank you." A glint caught her eyes and r'Ven spotted a gold cord around Mac's neck. She said, "I did not know Vulcans wear religious medals."

"They tend not to. This is not a religious medallion."

R'Ven made an inquisitive face. When more information was not forthcoming she asked: "What is it? May I see it?"

Mac reluctantly removed the cord from around his neck. This also revealed an onyx stone, engraved with inverted, balanced scales in gold, attached to the cord.

R'Ven looked it over curiously. "I have never met a Vulcan that is sentinel. What is it mean?"

Mac paused for a few moments to collect his thoughts. "It is a reminder of a task that I must complete."

"What is it, something like *kholhr ortaim*?" She wasn't certain of the proper word in Standard and she knew there were times when translations often suffered.

His eyes darkened as the old hate showed. "Yes, I have vowed that I would bring vengeance on the person responsible for my parent's deaths. I may not have much, but I have a voice print of the murderer." Mac's tone became extremely intense and gruff. He continued. "When I find him, he might as well give his soul to whatever God he prays to. His carcass is all mine."

R'Ven nodded her understanding. It was mnhei sahe. "Have you found out anything about the murderer?" The voice in her soul that sought justice resonated.

"Very little. All I have been able to find out is he is Klingon and his code name is Centurion. I just do not know who paid him. Once I have him, I'll be step closer to the real killer and maybe his reasons for what he did." Mac gently took the medallion from r'Ven and replaced it around his neck. He stoked the fire and somberly sat down. He gazed into the fire for a while without saying anything, hoping the fire would warm him against the cold he carried in his heart.

After a while, r'Ven realized they hadn't finished their talk from before. It would be a good ice breaker. She said, "Back to what we were talking about outside. Are you telling me you were born here?"

Mac dodged the question. "Come to think of it, why did you come back here? I thought you were going back to the compound."

The Rihanna was not going to be so easily put off. "It was raining so hard, I couldn't see where I was going. Now answer my question."

"Not being able to recall for sure, the facts do testify to that effect."

R'Ven was confused. "What facts?"

"First, these two sehlots did not attack me while in the cave. The second is a dream I had in this cave about my childhood several days ago.

"Third, I found this embedded in the wall after the dream." He touched the medallion.

"Those are just circumstantial. That shield could mean almost anything."

Mac was incredulous. "You think all this is just a coincidence? I'll invite you to come by my quarters later. I will show you more unexplainable things."

Just inside the Klingon/Romulan border sat the fleet commanded by Captain Qoloth. On the bridge he sat wondering to himself, how his operation was progressing. Desperately waiting for news, he sat pondering every possible problem and taking it out to its final conclusion.

"Captain, long-range scanners are picking up one unidentified ship heading this direction. When it comes within normal scanning range we will be able to identify it. Sir," said Lieutenant Kalla.

"Continue scanning." ordered Qoloth.

After a short time, the officer manning the communications station turned to Qolotlh. He said, "Sir, the identification beacon is on. We are being hailed."

"What type of ship, Lieutenant Kalla?"

"Sir, it is a Federation style long range warp shuttle."

Captain Qolotlh turned to the communication station and said: "Lets hear the message."

"Yes, sir."

"Project control, this is Messenger. Respond, please."

"Sir, the message keeps repeating."

"Open frequency. Messenger, this is Project Control. Prepare to come aboard. Shut down your engines."

Ten minutes later, after all was secured, the lone occupant of the shuttle entered the main bridge escorted by two guards.

"Captain Qolotlh, how nice to see you again."

Qolotlh turned his command chair towards the door and with disgust says "Aaroc, what can I do for you?"

Mac sat down in the chair at his desk with a two fingered shot and propped his feet up on the desk. He turned on his computer mainframe.

Personal Log: Stardate 6421.9

The weather is considerably...

A knock on the door interrupted his concentration on his log entry. He tried to ignore it but he finally gave up and said: "Come in."

Mac turned his head to see Colonel Harrington enter his quarters.

"I hope I didn't interrupt anything important, Mac."

"No, Sir, nothing important. I can do it later." He put aside the log recorder. "What can I do for you?"

"Mac, for starters you can drop the Sir. This is a social visit."

It was a friendly gesture, but the Colonel's appearance made Mac a little uneasy. "Since we are on a first name basis, Bob, what brings you by this late at night?"

"I decided to get unsociably inebriated, and you can't do that around remf's and ambassadors. I thought, 'Who better to do that with than an old friend like you?'"

The statement left Mac wondering about the stresses of the Colonel's position and what might be going on he didn't know about. "Did you come here to let your hair down, Bob?" Mac paused for a second before offering: "There's a clean glass on the end table. Here's a bottle. Fill the glass to your heart's content. I'll break out the good stuff when it's gone."

Bob spread his arms cheerfully revealing his contribution. "I didn't come to drink for free. I brought a bottle as well."

It took an hour, but after finishing both of the bottles, Mac figured the Colonel had drunk enough to tell him what was going on.

"Bob, in all the years we have known each other, have you ever done anything without a reason? So, for the third time, 'What's up, Bob?'"

"After being passed over twice, I worry about my next promotion. I have to make it next time or retire, and that's just for starters."

Mac made a motion for him to continue.

"I don't know if you know or not, but after our last assignment together, an apparent "accident" almost killed me. After recovery and rehab, they put me on diplomatic security to give me a hint to get out. I didn't. To top it off, I became good at doing this and I like it as well. A lot of these assignments went smooth as silk, and others just hit the antimatter pods." He paused for a moment to reflect. "This one seems to be going well, but I feel that it is going *too* well. I just can't put a finger on the problem."

His host sighed. "Bob, I don't know what to tell you. You're the expert. All I know is its time I got to get some sleep." To punctuate his remark he yawned.

Bob was inebriated, but not stupid. "Isn't that a bit unusual for you, Mac? I better call the medical officer on the Nimitz."

"No, don't bother. I don't need that 'mechanic' making me his personal pincushion. Besides, I have leave coming to me after this assignment and I will see a specialist then. Do you think you can get back to your quarters without my help or do you need an escort?"

"I can manage by myself." Only a little unsteady, he got up from his chair and headed towards the door. Reaching it, he turned to say, "I saw your verbal tête-à-tête with Commander t'Kailtonn. She seems to handle herself well, but don't do it with Commander tr'Kale. He wouldn't understand and that could make your life miserable. In fact, do not aggravate him at all." The Colonel waited for the reply.

"Yes, Bob, I understand."

"A simple, 'Yes, sir' will do."

It was clear that the time for relaxation of rank was over. "Yes, sir."

The Colonel left the room to stagger back to his quarters.

Mac had been tossing and turning for an hour or two. He tried to sleep and work out his problems to no avail. He continually wished his grandmother had allowed him Vulcan training. He thought to himself: 'maybe grandfather might be able to help

me understand'. Frustrated at his inability to rest, Mac got up to go to the communications center to make a call and only realized that realtime calls were impossible at this range and monitored anyway.

Not to be put off, he sat down at his desk and pulled out some stationery his grandmother had given to him when he entered the Academy. Mac opened the box and pulled out a couple of sheets from the unopened package of paper. Mac looked at it carefully. At the top was his family coat of arms and the inscribed words 'Clan MacPhearson'.

He put pen to paper and wrote:

Stardate 6422.2

Dear Grandfather,

I am sorry that I have not written for so long.

...

R'Ven tossed and turned on her bed until she couldn't stand it anymore. She had to discuss what happened between her and Chief MacPhearson the day before. She got dressed and headed straight for her cousin t'Renna's quarters. Surprisingly enough, the reply came quickly as she requested admittance.

When R'Ven stepped into the room she saw t'Renna sitting at a computer terminal working on tomorrow's agenda. She turned and asked serenely: "What can I do for you?"

"How well do you know this Chief MacPhearson? I had an interesting conversation with him yesterday. I saw the same shield with the same design you have on the medallion you wear. This is too much of a coincidence. If memory serves me right, you are the one who suggested it to our court system when they were looking for a new insignia." Her eyes narrowed accusingly. "Are you his mother?"

She didn't respond at once. She carefully masked any emotion, trying not to give anything away. Her mind raced to figure out what to tell r'Ven.

"R'Ven.. I, like you, I am an intelligence operative. I had a deep-cover operation for many years. This included a marital relationship with Chief MacPhearson's father. We shipped out to this planetoid to spy on my own people. For some unknown reason the Klingons attacked this place and then left. I assumed Phillip was dead, because I couldn't find his body. Being so close to home, I decided to let the Federation think both of us were dead. Besides, Phillip was as dark-headed as I am. Chief MacPhearson has blond hair."

For a moment, r'Ven was speechless. She said, whistfully, "If the wind blows right and you're close enough, you can see pointed ears and upraised eyebrows behind his glasses."

The computer made a bleeping noise and flashed the time. She turned to r'Ven and said:

"r'Ven, I must get some sleep before tomorrow's session. Maybe we can discuss this tomorrow. If not then, we will definitely do so on the way home."

T'Renna ushered r'Ven out of her quarters. When she was finally alone she collapsed on the bed from sheer shock. The thoughts and feelings she had bottled up for so long would not be put away, so she had to let them vent. And vent they did.

... the main reason I am writing is that I have met something I cannot explain. I have found a Romulan wearing our coat of arms around her neck. Compounding this, she has an uncanny ability to get me to talk about things I would not normally talk about. It is like talking to grandmother when I was a child. Please give me some answers to these questions soon. I will have leave after this assignment.

Sincerely,

He signed the letter, then put it in an accompanying envelope, addressed it, then put it aside for the mail the next day. The daily diplomatic dispatch would be the best option and arrive the soonest.

Mac awoke to the continual pounding at his door. He got up and put on a robe. then turned to the door and said: "Come."

It turned out to be Ensign Jones, in full uniform. "Chief, Colonel Harrington said you are to report to the delegation room this morning."

Curious, he asked: "What for?"

"I don't know, Chief." No answers there.

"Is that all, Yeoman?" A headshake was his response and it was enough. "Thank you. You can go." Mac quickly dressed and went to the conference room wondering what was up.

As Ketrek entered the bridge the report came instantly. "Commander, everyone is in position awaiting the order to attack," said bridge officer Gaff. He was eager to see this battle.

"Gaff, put Federation communications on audio" said Ketrek.

Silence for a moment, then: "Nimitz, this is Detente. How do you read this station?"

"Detente, this is Nimitz. I read you five by five."

"Have you heard from Outpost Four? I am wondering about the Interference."

"Detente, Outpost Four gives no indications of massing intruders."

"Thank you. Detente out."

"Outpost Four, this is Nimitz. Acknowledge."

"Nimitz, acknowledged. Go ahead."

"Outpost Four, Detente is still worried about intruders. Do you have any updates?"

"Nimitz, all is quiet here."

"Information received. Nimitz out."

"Outpost Four standing by."

Silence.

"Gaff, send the following message: Qapla!" said Ketrek.

"Captain, sensors are picking up an incongruity in the star pattern" said the helmsmen of the *Nimitz*.

"Put it on the main viewer, Lieutenant."

As the main viewer switched to the star pattern a bird of prey materialized into view. It let loose with a salvo of torpedoes and phasers. The torpedoes hit the warp drive nacelles, tearing them to shreds and beginning a cascade of exploding energy that roared down the pylons and tore through the engineering hull. Within seconds, the ship exploded, leaving nothing but debris where the *U.S.S. Nimitz* had been.

It was a well-coordinated attack as a second bird of prey had mirrored their technique and the result the the Romulan cruiser was the same.

The sound of clashing steel echoed off the trees surrounding the clearing. Mac continued to press the advantage, being more experienced with the claymore. R'Ven, an excellent swordsman in her own right, looked for an opening to exploit.

Seeing a slight opening, she parried a massive overhead blow. Sliding with the force of the blow, she followed it through, scraping the hilt-guard into

Mac's bare chest. However, the blow did not have the effect she intended. She was tiring from more than an hour of this exertion.

Blending with the tempo of the fight, Mac heard r'Ven saying, "Surprised, Chief?" Unknown to her, Mac had planned for this. She saw the sword coming around far too late. Mac smacked the flat of the sword across her derriere.

"Not really.", he said, with a lopsided grin.

Frustrated, she dropped her sword. She was done.

Mac said, "This concludes our lesson, unless you prefer further embarrassment."

She looked him straight in the eye and said, "Hegh SoH DenIbya Qalth."

Mac raised his right eyebrow and calmly said, "You need to cool off, Commander." He then, catching her off guard, slung her over his shoulder and unceremoniously tossed her into the nearby stream.

Both hysterical and furious at the same time, r'Ven splashed around for several seconds before rolling over and sitting on the pebbles on the bottom. She looked up and glared at the Chief who simply grinned back at her. For a moment, she wished the circumstances were different. She had only just learned they were kin. If they weren't, this would have been a great opportunity to take their relationship further. Instead of

following her more base instinct, she held up a hand.

Mac wasn't sure it was safe to take it but threw caution to the wind. He walked over to r'Ven, reaching out with his hand to pull her out of the stream.

At that moment they heard the sound of aerial disruptor fire and dropped. They both looked up to see a Bird of Prey swooping over the tree tops. Mac turned toward the compound to see the command and control center quickly reduced to a shambles.

Mac flipped open his communicator and said, "RED ALERT! ALL HANDS MAN YOUR BATTLE STATIONS. THIS IS NOT A DRILL! ALL HANDS MAN YOUR STATIONS! SOME ONE GET OVER TO THE POWER GENERATOR AND GET IT ONLINE. GET THE SHIELDS UP AND THE PHASER-CANNONS OPERATIONAL."

R'Ven crawled out of the stream to where Mac was flat on the ground from the concussion of the blast. Mac turned to her and said, "We had better get our delegations under cover before they get hurt. I have to get everything under control. Get as many of the delegates into the cave as you can." Mac picked up his sword and placed it in the scabbard on his back. He headed for what remained of the command post to see if anyone was still alive in the rubble. He also noticed the Bird of Prey starting its second run.

"Tifek calling Ketrek. Sensors are now picking up a second body of personnel at coordinates 554.973," came the message from the Bird of Prey. Before Ketrek could respond, communication broke up into static.

The speaker over the console broke into spontaneous chatter. The voice was more than a little concerned.

"Sensor Station Four to Command Central."

"Command Central, this is Commander Timmons."

"Sir, sensors are picking up wreckage type debris just outside the dead zone around Detente."

"Have you picked up anything that would give us any idea what is happening out there?" asked Timmons.

"No, sir, but general indications are that the wreckage is of an alloy consistent with Romulan and Federation manufacturing practices."

"Thank you, continue monitoring, Command Central out."

The communication's duty officer, Ensign Z'Vin von Gilvers, turned to Timmons. He said, "Commander, I have lost the ID signals for both ships orbiting the planet. I have tried to contact them but there is no answer. All communications with the surface are out as well."

"Very well. Open hailing frequencies to the *Avenger*, *Chandley* and *Daring*."

"Hailing frequencies open, sir."

"All ships; Outpost Four has lost contact with *Nimitz* and *Detente*. Sensors have picked up debris in area. Investigate and report. Consider this a possible attack. Take all necessary precautions. This is Outpost Four, signing off."

Mac continued to sift through the debris until he found the one remaining body his glasses said was still alive. With some effort, he lifted the wooden beam off his chest. "Medic!" he cried.

Mac scanned Colonel Harrington's body to find the most serious of his injuries and administer first aid.

Blinking away dust, the Colonel managed to say between coughs: "Mac, what in the hell are you going to do with that sword?"

"Lie still, sir. Help is on the way."

With his last breath the Colonel said, "Mac, are you recording this? You will assume overall command of the mission unless overruled by Ambassador Sarek. Assist the Romulans in any way you can." With a brief shudder, his friend was gone.

After a brief search, Mac found the bodies of Lieutenant Thompson, Commander Tr'Kale and the communications and weapons specialists on duty.

There were also two Romulan Security Guards and one Federation Security Officer deceased.

This was not good. At a brisk jog, Mac headed for his quarters to pick some equipment he thought he needed along with his array of weapons. This attack was not going to go unpunished.

Fire support from the Bird of Prey and the D-7C allowed the troop ship to slip in unnoticed. It landed in a valley out of effective range of the Federation's phaser-cannons. Within minutes, the Klingon Imperial Marines engaged the outlying security teams. Their three-pronged attack quickly forced the Federation troops on the defensive with heavy casualties.

Major Perrelli and his reinforced company of Marines guesstimated the most logical approach to the compound. Perrelli found a saddle between two hills. He deployed on the high ground to ambush the Klingons as they passed.

As the escort ships entered the Neutral Zone, Outpost Four monitored their progress. When the escort ships were attacked, Outpost Four sent the following message:

"Outpost Four to all ships in this sector. This is a priority SOS for DETENTE. All ships in the area respond. Starbase 10 will coordinate. This is Outpost Four, signing off."

On the other side of the Neutral Zone, three Romulan warships heard Outpost Four's cry for help. They prepared to enter the zone. Before doing so, Commander tr'Contar sent a message to his superiors to outline his intentions. They would respond to the Federation distress call and request support.

Admiral James T. Kirk entered the office of Vice Admiral Stocker at a brisk pace.

"George, what the devil is going on? Spock just notified me Outpost Four declared an emergency for Detente. What is Detente? No one told me about any of this."

Admiral Stocker waved him down. "Simmer down, Jim." He passed him a folder marked "Eyes Only". "Here is the file on Detente. I have the following orders for you. You will take command of the ships responding to the distress call."

"You will form them into an effective force to deal with the problem. These are the ships that already answered the distress call:

USS STAR UNION

USS EXCALIBUR

USS BELKNAP

USS KRIEGER

USS KNOX

USS OBERON

USS ASSURANCE

This doesn't include the *Enterprise*, Jim. The *Krieger* is the closest to the fighting, seeing it is in the Neutral Zone. You are in command of this task force, even if there is a higher ranking officer aboard another ship. Take command and do what you see fit."

Kirk nodded his understanding. A job needed to be done and he never missed an opportunity to straighten out somebody else's mess.

"Get going, Jim. I know you are chomping at the bit for some action." Kirk left the Admiral's office and headed for the transporter room.

Admiral Stocker sent a message to the *Krieger* to await the task force under Admiral Kirk's command.

"Fire!" cried Perrelli. The heavy weapons opened up with a murderous roar. To his delight, the Klingons took heavy casualties in the first few minutes of their engagement.

Unfortunately, they recalled their Bird of Prey and regained the advantage. Captain Kasanee assumed command upon the death of Major Perrelli who had been taken out by a stray disruptor bolt. Without the Major's experience, the tide turned against the Federation Marines. Captain Kasanee called for a withdrawal to a more defensible position closer to the compound.

Kirk was glad to know that, in the bowels of the ship, Scotty was doing his best to wring every last erg of energy from his warp reactor. The *Enterprise* was set to break her own speed record.

"Admiral, a communication is coming in from the Romulan Fleet Commander."

"Put it on screen, Uhura." A brief burst of static cleared as the *Enterprise* computers deciphered the signal. "This is Admiral James T. Kirk of the *USS Enterprise*. I will stand by for your transmission."

"This is Fleet Commander tr'Riha of the *Rapier Talon*. We have intercepted a communication from your Outpost Four stating the Detente planetoid is under attack. We have assembled a relief force to assist your efforts."

"Do you have any information on the status of the attack force?" Kirk interjected.

"Nothing definite, Admiral, but we strongly suspect the Klingons are in this somehow. Admiral, we need to cross into the Neutral Zone to assist. I'm letting you know so we can avoid 'misunderstandings'. Let me remind you our personnel are at risk, too."

Admiral Kirk gave her the hand signal she knew meant 'audio off'.

"Spock, analysis."

Looking up from his science station, he replied: "I suggest we agree with the Romulan Commander. 'Operation Tradewinds' is to promote

Federation-Romulan cooperation, so it would be illogical to refuse their assistance."

"Audio on, Uhura." He noted her nod, then continued: "Fleet Commander tr'Riha, your assistance is welcome. Cross into the Neutral Zone at your discretion. Commander, since the intruders have positioned themselves between us, I suggest we accommodate them. Ever hear of the 'Zetarian Squeeze'?"

"We are familiar with your 'battle tactics', Kirk," tr'Riha dryly said. "We have been using that tactic for generations." Hearing this, Spock raised his right eyebrow.

"Thank you, Commander. We will advise you as we receive updates. We will contact you roughly eight hours. Kirk out."

Mac crawled through the entrance to his cave. Reaching the inner chamber, he quickly made sure of the delegates' status. He went to where r'Ven was standing with Sarek and asked, "Where are the rest of them, Ambassador?"

The Vulcan's stoicism had not shifted a micrometer. He answered calmly: "They refused relative safety and are helping press the battle against the Klingons."

Mac scanned to see who was missing. The only surviving Federation delegates present were Sarek and Amanda of Vulcan. The remaining Romulan delegates are tr'Riha and his daughter t'Renna.

The only others in the cave were the support personnel Yeoman Jones and T'Veth, Sarek's mission aide.

Mac needed to do this by the book and get down to business. "Ambassador, the battle is not going well. We have lost the command center, power generation facilities, shields, and phaser capacity. I have ordered our remaining troops to carry out guerilla warfare tactics. I hope to keep the Klingons distracted until reinforcements arrive. Casualties are extremely high. What are your orders, sir?"

"Chief MacPhearson, if the present situation continues, surrender would be the most logical alternative."

"Yes, sir, but in this case the Klingons are not taking any," Mac said emphatically. He noted the Klingon's aerial bombardment forced the two venerable sehlats inside. Just then, a nearby explosion rocked the cave.

Three Romulan Warbirds move into the Neutral Zone at maximum speed. Staying in their characteristic vee formation, they approach the Detente planetoid.

Suddenly, into the space ahead of the lead warbird materialized the massive form of a Klingon K'T'inga battle cruiser. Without warning, the K't'inga fired all his forward batteries at the lead ship. It is quickly transformed into an expanding

sphere of exploding antimatter, despite its shielding. The K't'inga then quickly disappeared from the sensors of the remaining Warbirds. A game of cat-and-mouse had begun.

While the Warbirds looped around for evasive actions, a second K't'inga materialized beside the new location of the first. Realising all too late their manoeuvre had been anticipated and committed to their course, the Romulan ships quickly shared the same fate as their hapless comrade.

"This is Outpost Four calling the *USS Enterprise*, Commander Timmons reporting. Sensors have picked up explosions and debris on the far side of the Neutral Zone. We have had no word from the ships we sent in or from Detente itself."

"What ships did you send in?" Kirk asked as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"We sent in the *Avenger*, the *Chandley*, and the *Darran*. All three have not reported in since initial contact."

"Admiral, we have a delayed message coming in from Starbase 10," Uhura said, all business.

"On screen, Commander."

The screen changed from the vista of space to play the prerecorded message. There was at least an hour's delay at this distance over subspace. "Admiral Kirk, transmitting this update to advise you that our support vessels left five minutes ago. The *USS LaGrange* is enroute, supported by three

corvettes and two cutters. The *LaGrange* is transporting the medical frigate *Nightingale*. This is Starbase 10 signing off."

Kirk cast a glance at the chronometer over the screen. No matter how hard he wished it, the time passing would not go faster. He just hoped that he would still find at least Sarek and Amanda alive.

Leaving the Ambassadors under the care of r'Ven, Mac scouted the area until he found a number of dead Klingons. He rumaged through the bodies' pockets, picking up anything he thought useful. He finally found a Klingon communicator in operable condition. Delighted at his good fortune, Mac started listening in to get tactical information. Upon gleaning what information he could, he redeployed the remainder of his guerrilla forces. His plan was to throw the Klingons off balance.

Lieutenant Kath contacted Commander Ketrek, advising him they were mopping up any final resistance.

Mac heard the Lieutenant curse when they heard an explosion from the direction of the assault ship. Mac's spirits rose with the explosion. He hoped they would be able to strand some of the Klingons on the planet. Unless they had a vessel in orbit, he had to admit to himself. With the limited

information at his disposal, hope was a tool he kept closest to his chest.

Mac continued to scout the area, trying to find a live patrol on which he could take his aggressions out on. Sneaking up on his prey, Mac struck silently at the rear guard. He fell with cloven head. With the noise the other Klingons were making trudging through the jungle, his death went unnoticed. Mac then continued up the line, beheading an number of Klingons. As he got through half of the patrol, he disappeared back into the woods, not wanting to push his luck.

Finally, the leader of the patrol turned around to rearrange his men and found half of them missing. He retraced their steps and found a number of decapitated bodies. The revelation turned the Lieutenant's blood cold.

"Entering the Neutral Zone in thirty seconds, Admiral," Sulu said.

Finally, Kirk thought to himself. "Uhura, hail the Romulan Commander on an open channel."

"Yes, sir. Response is coming in on visual."

"Commander tr'Riha, this is Admiral Kirk. Are we prepared to execute our strategy?"

"Admiral, begin. Call me when the war's over. tr'Riha out."

"ra'wI, DIvI'may'Dujmey 'el neHmaH," the Klingon at the sensor station reported.

"Send Karath and Qu'tsi to intercept them," Commander Ketrek barked.

"ra'wI, Qum 'el yuQ ghor."

"poSmoH Se'." , Commander Ketrek replied.

"Commander, all Federation Ha'DIbaH'er have been Qaw'Im. Sensors are not picking up any life forms other than our own. Would you like to inspect the area?"

"I will be down shortly. Ketrek out." He hefted his armour feeling the glory of a job well done. His enemies had been vanquished. His place in Sto'vo'kor among the honored dead was assured.

Mac saw the blue dot flashing in the upper right quadrant of his right lens. "Computer, show visual only on MI-TAC.", Mac thought.

The computer displayed: "Voice analysis complete."

"Show voice of Centurion."

The computer carried out his order and showed a waveform diagram of the Centurion's voice pattern..

"Show single most likely match."

The computer replied again.

"Overlay voice prints." The computer's analysis was a 97% correlation. Mac agreed with the analysis. "Computer, is there a name for the match?" The computer printed the name on the lens of the MI-TAC. Mac realized one of his

vendettas was about to come to fruition. He crouched behind a rock and waited for his chance.

Commander r'Ven wondered what happened to Mac. She instinctively was chomping at the bit to get into the fight, but her responsibility was here, guarding the survivors. The cave was still warm as the fire crackled quietly and, tired from the day's exertions, they had all fallen asleep. Even the venerable Sarek had rested against the wall with his wife snuggled against his chest and allowed his body to slumber.

Worry for her kin finally won out and she could not restrain herself any longer. She slipped out into the night.

Ketrek beamed down to the surface to take a look around. There seemed little remaining of the outpost he had been sent to destroy and suited him perfectly.

Satisfied, he authorized the remainder of the Imperial Marine forces to beam up to the two D-7Cs orbiting the planetoid. The three guards at Ketrek's side continued to scanning the area with their equipment.

Mac sat behind the rock desperately trying to control his raging emotions. He had no idea why he was feeling this way, but he had to gain control. When he finally settled down so he could think

rationally, he became an emotionless cold-hearted machine-like being.

Determined on his course, he checked all his equipment before going into what could be his last battle. Mac knew he would probably die and intended to see his parent's assassin die first.

Mac adjusted his MI-TAC before getting up. He picked up his claymore and placed it on his right shoulder, appreciating the steel as it caressed his back. It was more than a weapon, it had become a beloved friend.

On his trek down the hill, he noticed a pack of sehlat's gnawing on dead bodies. His morbid curiosity temporarily overcame him. Upon realizing whose corpses they were, Mac wondered how they could stomach Klingon flesh. They didn't smell too good when they were alive, after all.

As he walked towards the compound, the stench of death permeated his nasal cavities and would not leave him.

Ketrek was walking around the rubble when called by his ship.

"Sir, all ground force personnel have transported to the remaining ships. You and your escorts are the last," reported the communications officer.

"Very well, I will beam-up shortly," said Ketrek.

"Sir, the Federation starships are closing," replied the officer, reminding him his place was on the bridge.

"You have your orders!" Ketrekk snapped. "I will savor this victory a while longer. Make one last sweep over this area. We must make sure there are no survivors. Ketrekk out." He turned to his guards eyeing them coldly and growled, "That means you. too."

The guards took out their tricorders and started scanning while fanning out. After a short while one of them called out: "Sir, I have a life-form reading bearing 213.71 at 2 kellicams." The others echoed the same a few seconds later.

Ketrekk looked at the two late-comers. He growled, "Find out what it is and kill it."

A short time later, Ketrekk heard two short explosions. He expected to see his guards shortly after. He got impatient after a moment's silence and asked: "Do you still have the being on your scanner?"

"No, Commander."

Ketrekk smiled. He loved the smell of death in the morning.

Behind him, one of his companions burst out of the underbrush. "Sir, I don't have the other two guards!"

Ketrekk spun around and growled, "What happened? Where are they?"

"I don't know, sir. One second they are there and the next, nothing. Just about the same time as the explosions."

Ketrek muttered angrily to himself. "This can't be happening to me again." As his mind considered the possibilities, he looked up and saw a lone figure standing on the far side of the creek. Ketrek rubbed his eyes to get a clearer picture. He saw a bare chested being in a kilt with a large sword on his shoulder. A second later a rain of disrupter fire hit the area where the being stood. His remaining guard had opened fire.

As the dust cleared, Ketrek watched the area and thought, "That's the end of him." He turned towards his guard and prepared to leave.

r'Ven heard the noise of, what she knew was, an antiquated weapon. She headed towards the sounds. She finely came across the bodies of two dead Klingons. She noticed that both had a hole in their heads right between the eyes just above the bridge of the nose. She turned one over and found the back of the skull missing. The experienced soldier in her stove off the revulsion she instinctively felt.

She thought, "At least he is still a live. Who else around here would have, let alone use, such archaic weapons?" She then heard the disruptor fire from the direction of the compound again. She moved quickly towards the new sounds. When she arrived she spotted Mac at the creek and moved to join him.

Two D-7C cruisers raced toward the oncoming Federation ships, cloaked. They hoped to catch them off guard again. This was not to be the case. They knew that it was a sacrifice for time.

"To die in battle is a most honorable death," they told themselves. They intended to take as many Federation dogs as they could. There were seven starships before them, led by none other than the famed *USS Enterprise*!

Oh, what a victory if they could best him!

Ketrek's second in command wanted to scan the approaching ships, but knew if he did so it would give away their presence and position. Much better to take them by surprise. It had worked well for them so far.

"Range to *Enterprise*," he barked.

"One thousand Kellicams," was the reply.

He wasn't about to take any chances. "Drop cloak, raise shields, arm weapons, then fire everything!"

The screen shimmered as their ships became visible to their opponents. He expected little from them, but his eyes went wide as, before the screen stabilized again, that all seven ships opened fire with phasers and photon torpedoes!

His ship rocked at the massed weaponry that had hit their hull before they could raise shields.

To his continuing dismay, he heard a report that finished the matter. "Commander, there are three Romulan ships decloaking aft!"

The Commander smiled. "Today is a good day to die," he said, quoting Kahless.

Thirty seconds later he got his wish.

Mac called out, "Centurion, I have come for you. Let us do battle."

Ketrek turned around to face his challenger. What he saw was a being covered from head to foot in dirt and blood. It wore a kilt and carried a large, steel sword. Ketrek looked at his guard. The guard nodded his head, no, and shrugged his shoulders. He had no idea what was going on, either.

Mac called out again, "Why do you make me wait, Centurion? Come let us do battle. Have you lost that much honor that you are afraid to die when I call?"

The two Klingons advanced slowly towards the creek. Ketrek tried desperately to recall why he was being called Centurion.

He then recalled he had been given a code name by a Federation Officer for a mission to this planetoid. This was a similar mission, but it had fewer problems. Finally, they stood no more than five feet in front of the insolent human.

"Who are you?" Ketrek sneared.

"Who do you think I am?" Mac paused seeing Ketrek's face show a glimmer of recognition. "I am your worst nightmare."

Mac noticed the guard's hand inching toward his disrupter. Mac jerked his head, staring straight at the man. "You would be dead before your hand even touched your weapon." His words brought the guard up short.

"You have three options. First, you can go for it right now and die. Secondly, you can stick around and die after your commander. Thirdly, you can return to your ship to face its crew and the Federation. Make your decision now for a possibility of life or certain death."

Ketrek turned to his guard and said, "Qam nom."

Turning back to Ketrek, Mac said, "Do you wish a subordinate to see your complete humiliation?" Mac paused again, expecting a reply from Centurion. He then spotted the Klingon guard going for his blaster. Mac's arm snapped back and pulled from his back an ancient forty-four auto-magnum and fired at the guard, point bank. Mac placed the round between the eyes just above the bridge of the nose.

The guard's disruptor had barely cleared his holster when his hand no longer received instructions from what remained of his brain. It dropped to the ground, quickly followed by his corpse.

Mac turned to Ketrek, shrugged and said, "He made his own choice." He dropped the weapon on the ground and stepped back from the creek.

Nearby, Mac's cold-bloodedness startled r'Ven. She stayed hidden to await the outcome of the subsequent fight. She knew it was his alone and her Rihannsu code – their code – forbade her interference.

"Centurion, I challenge you to a duel. My choice of weapons is swords. If the sword at your side is not your forte, send for one that is. If it is, let us get on with it." He spoke with absolute confidence.

Mac realized that the odds were uneven, given the Klingon's weapon was only a relatively short doubled-bladed that reminded him of an ancient Roman gladius. He needed this to be a fair fight, something the assassin had denied his parents.

He started looking around for the claymore that r'Ven had dropped in the area earlier. Mac spotted it and went to pick it up. He returned to Ketrek handing it to him.

"With this sword, we will be more evenly matched in weaponry."

His chivalry was lost on the Klingon. Ketrek grinned broadly. He thought his foe fell for his trap. He started seeing things more clearly. He said, "You aren't who I thought you were. You must be his son." He snarled: "You know you are going to die." Ketrek drew his own sword from his side and tossed it to the ground.

"Not if I can help it, Centurion," said Mac. He moved several steps farther away to get out of Ketrek's striking distance. Mac paused a

moment, took up his fighting stance and then said: "Begin."

Ketrek looked at him with a face of bewilderment.

Mac switched to Klingonese and said "Lay on."

Commander r'Ven moved from her spot and moved away from the area. Much as she wanted to be near Mac, she realised her charges might be wondering what had happened to her. She headed back towards the cave to check on the Ambassadors.

The sound of colliding metal resounded through the meadow like thunder claps in a cruel sky. The combatants aggressively attacked each other with savagely accurate blows. What flustered them most was not being able to inflict major damage on his opponent. Both swords seem to attract one another.

During one of Ketrek's attacks, Mac stepped on the hand guard of Ketrek's personal sword. The blade swung up and scratched Mac's left knee.

Ketrek saw this and smiled. He believed the battle would be over shortly. He had poisoned the blade.

The length the combat raged on surprised the experienced Klingon warrior. He had yet to face a being will skill that approached his own.

Quiet prevailed in the meadow when r'Ven returned to her hiding place. She looked at her chronometer, which showed one and one-half hour's passage of time since she had left. Her heart soared as she saw Mac was still on his feet. Sure, he was bleeding from some close calls, but he was still going! The man's stamina amazed her, but she reminded herself that her own green blood flowed through his veins. A Vulcanoid could battle for days if they had to. She strained to listen to their conversation.

"Are you going to yield or are you ready to die?" challenged Mac.

Sweating profusely, Ketrek shook his claymore at his opponent. "Yield? What is that?"

"Surrender," replied Mac.

The Klingon laughed. "Surrender? No! I am just waiting for you to die. My sword has poison on it that kills Klingons in a heartbeat. You have lasted longer than I expected. Why?"

Mac wasn't going to be so accommodating. "If you do not intend to yield to me, then resume fighting!" Mac drew his sword to start his attack. Ketrek took this opportunity to advance his point. He beat Mac to the apex of the swing. Mac blocked the blow with his sword and stepped out of the way. "I will answer your questions if you answer more of mine, seeing that both of us are not getting off this planetoid, just yet."

"What do you mean? I have a ship waiting for me in orbit!" Ketrek said confidently.

Mac wasn't so certain. "How do you know? Have you spoken to them lately?" He stepped back a pace and allowed his adversary to check.

Ketrek put the point of his sword in the ground and tried to contact his ship. Horror and rage was apparent on his face when he got no answer.

"Well, what is it going to be?" Mac taunted. "Yield to me or wait for who ever shows up looking for survivors?"

Ketrek's rage swelled at the idea of surrendering to a dead man. He violently swung his blade to silence Mac's tormenting voice.

Mac fended off this attack – just barely. The battle then continued at a slower pace due to their fatigue.

After blocking a number of Ketrek's blows, Mac spotted an opening. Mac's blade whipped around to catch the side of Ketrek's left knee. The momentum continued through the joint, ligaments and muscle. The shock dislodged the sword from Ketrek's hands and it clattered to the ground. Ketrek slumped to the ground in agony, his hands trying to stem the flow of blood.

Mac brought his sword down so he could lean against it. His last swing sapped more of his strength than he expected. "Now, will you yield?" he said, almost casually.

Ketrek figured they would be dead before anyone started searching the planetoid. He then said, "Yes, but tell me one thing. How come you are still alive, even after exerting yourself?"

The highlander smiled quietly. "I have blood purification modules inside my veins. Complements of a former employer." Mac tried to sit down, but his strength gave out and he collapsed next to Ketrek in a semi-conscious delirium.

Seeing an opportunity to finish off the human, Ketrek reached for a hidden knife in his remaining boot. He paused when he heard bushes rustle and saw a female Romulan officer crawl out of her hiding place.

R'Ven moved toward Mac and Ketrek with blaster at the ready, making the Klingon pause. He watched her as she bent down to see if Mac was still alive.

She gritted her teeth, grateful, but still worried. He was, but just barely.

Her anger at the situation found its focus on the Klingon. It was time for some justice, Rihannsu style. As she sighted on Ketrek, Mac surprised her with his whispered: "No, he is my prisoner."

Mac's continued ability to talk surprised r'Ven.

"Why not? He's probably responsible for all this," she said.

"Because he is Centurion and he is under my protection. Revenge is something to savor, but

only when complete. Mine is only halfway there. Bind his wounds, cover the severed leg and keep it cold. Call for help." whispered Mac, as he gave his communicator to her. "I suspect there are Federation starships in orbit."

R'Ven did what first aid she could for the both of them. She then tried contracting anyone on her communicator and then on Mac's. She got no immediate reply, which she found odd. Even the Klingons were silent.

To her delight, Yeoman Jones answered R'Ven's call on Mac's communicator a moment later. R'Ven informed her of the situation and short time afterward Yeoman Jones and a Romulan guard appeared with some medical assistance. Yeoman Jones quickly scanned Mac to see what his condition was.

"Heartbeat slow, blood pressure almost nonexistent, toxicity level eighty point nine units. No major structural damage, though. That's good.

"What in the elements bit him?" she asked.

"Poisoned Klingon sword," whispered Mac.

Jones moved to Ketrek and repeated the process. "Just shock and a loss of blood." She looked up. "Where is his leg?"

R'Ven jerked a thumb over her shoulder. "In the creek," she replied, uncaring.

Jones considered the situation. "We can't do much more here aside from keeping both of them warm. The only place for that is the cave." Jones

turned to r'Ven and said: "We need to make more litters."

"We only need one if we kill the Klingon," said the guard.

Both Jones and r'Ven looked at him with displeasure, even though they silently agreed with the sentiment. Commander r'Ven responded to the comment saying, "You will do what she asks. The Klingon is a Federation prisoner. Hang onto the large swords. Now get on with the task."

The guard picked up a nearby sword and headed off to complete his orders.

The Commander took one of her daggers out and removed Ketrek's scabbard. She took it and placed Ketrek's sword in it, being careful of the blade.

"It might be interesting and helpful to see what the poison is," she said at Jones' questioning glance.

As she picked up the rest of the weapons the guard returned with the limb. They quickly made stretchers out of anything they could find from the compound's rubble.

In orbit, the battle was not going well. "Gunner, fire on the target," ordered Quarsul.

"Sir, Commander Ketrek is close by the target area," said the gunner.

"I said fire!" Then the gunner fired. "Sensors, scan the area for Commander Ketrek and party."

"Sir, sensors show no life forms in the area," the sensor operator said.

"Are all Klingon remains scattered into space?" asked Quarsul.

"Yes, sir," replied the transporter operator.

"Good, our mission is complete. Helm set course for home at fastest speed possible. Notify all ships: Well done."

Mac slowly became aware of his surroundings and tried to get up. Yeoman Jones and t'Renna restrained him, however. Mac moaned, "Computer beacon" over and over.

Jones looked around and asked, "Has anyone seen a computer around here?"

The others looked around and found nothing.

Mac realized his MI-TAC was still operating and he could activate the beacon himself. He slowly mumbled, "Activate homing beacon code distress SOS." Mac then passed out again.

Yeoman Jones noted his condition and went to report to Ambassador Sarek. She said, "Sir, I have done just about all I can do for Chief MacPhearson. I am feeding him plasma and had to risk a few drops of cordrazine. That should stabilize him until help arrives. His toxicity level worries me. I gave the Klingon cordrazine to keep him stable. The only thing to do now is keep them quiet."

Sarek cast a glance over to where Ketrek lay still. R'Ven had searched him thoroughly and

removed all of his hidden weapons, which lay in a rather large pile off to the side. She sat near him watching him carefully. "I have no concern regarding the Klingon, Yeoman," he said stoically. "If he moves, I believe the Commander will silence him permanently."

The only two remaining Klingon vessels raced through the corridor out of the sector at top speed, just ahead of Kirk's task force. The Romulans were setting up to obliterate anything that Kirk's forces flushed out.

Captain Qoloth sat in his command chair listening to the communications of the joint battle. Qoloth grinned and laughed uncontrollably. He turned to Aaroc asking, "Where would you like to be let off?"

"Anywhere close to home will be just fine, thank you."

Qoloth turned to the communications section and said, "Contact all ships and tell them to head home." Turning to helm and navigation, he said, "Plot a course for home through the triangle. Engage when ready." Qoloth chuckled to himself thinking about his coup de gras.

Mac groggily awoke from a drug-induced sleep. Standing next to his bed were three people resembled one another enough to be kin to one another.

"Will he survive?" asked the male.

"Yes," said the female to his left.

"Good, I dislike to give awards posthumously. We have to leave," said the male.

"Thank you Tabitha. Please take care of him," said the other female.

"I will, mother," said the first female.

As Mac fell asleep again, he realized who two of the persons were.

Mac awoke to find himself in a room containing only one medical bed. As he looked around, he spotted an orderly sitting down by the door. When the orderly noticed Mac stirring, he got up and exited. Within moments, Mac saw a black doctor and nurse enter the room, moving to his bed. Boy, is that nurse good looking, thought Mac.

"Chief, my name is M'Benga," the Doctor introduced himself with a handshake. "I am the Doctor in charge of your case. You are a unique person, for many reasons. It is a good thing you had those filters in your system or you would be dead."

The vulcanoid Scot had little time for hospitals and their staff – nurses excluded, of course. "Do you intend to poke more needles in to me to find out more about my blood idiosyncrasies? If you are, I will walk out of here now."

M'Benga had read his file and smirked at his orneriness. "No, I have all the information I need.

We already completed surgery on your wounds and received all the blood you need. The donors were interesting."

Mac's face showed some concern. He hoped the doctor would continue this line. Mac looked at the nurse. She seemed to be familiar.

Doctor M'Benga spotted Mac's interest. He said, "This is Nurse T'Beth. She solved your blood problems. She will also take care of your needs from here out. She will also accompany you to Vulcan for your recuperation."

Mac didn't understand. "Vulcan! Why Vulcan? My home world is Earth," Mac objected.

"Because we can handle your medical and mental needs better than anyone on Earth," T'Beth said with a serenity that reminded him of t'Renna.

"Chief, not only were you poisoned, mentally exhausted, and in a mad rage, you also went into Pon Farr. Now, do you see why you are going to Vulcan?"

"Yes, Doctor" Mac said in surrender, even though he wondered if the blood madness had passed due to his combat with Ketrek.

M'Benga turned to leave. "If you need anything, just ask T'Beth."

Mac caught the corner of his sleeve in a vice grip, bringing the man up short. "Doc, I have three questions. First, where am I? Second, who gave me blood? Third, where is my prisoner?"

M'Benga could see the man wasn't going to take no for an answer. "You are presently on the UHS Mercy attached to the USS LaGrange. Ambassadors Sarek, tr'Riha and t'Renna supplied the Vulcanoid factors. We had some O+ in stock which made the mix work." M'Benga walked out not saying another word.

T'Beth perused her patient with a slightly tilted head staring into his eyes as if peering into his soul. "Chief, if you want anything, please let me know. You need more rest. I will leave you to rest now."

He brought her to a halt. "There are a number of things I need, nurse. Since I will be incarcerated under your care, please call me Mac. Chief is so formal." Mac grinned as he said 'incarcerated.' The humor did not register with T'Beth. "Secondly, I could use a shower, a shave and something to eat. Lastly for now, what do I call you? Nurse, Nurse T'Beth, or just Tabitha?" Mac thought Tabitha fit her just right.

T'Beth's left eyebrow went up at the last name and her cheeks greened. She said, "My name is T'Beth. For the rest, the orderly will get what you need." She turned and left the room.

Days later, Mac sat alone on the observation deck of Starbase Ten. For hours, he looked out into space, wondering if he would ever see his family intact. The question she had answered did

not equal the new questions that arose. He sat there thinking and plotting his revenge. He eventually fell asleep.

Mac awoke when touched by a soft hand and the smell of perfume. He turned to see Yeoman Takara standing next to him.

"The *Enterprise* is waiting for you to beam aboard. I guess it's time to go," she said. "The grapevine around here thinks congratulations are in order, Lieutenant."

"Thank you," said Mac as he got up and slowly walked out the door thinking: 'What are they going to do to me next?'