

DAMAGE CONTROL  
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GLENN MAITLAND

# Dispatches: Damage Control

By Glenn G G Maitland

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“I didn’t get a chance to get to know the young Captain Evengii, but I understand his previous posting was to the C-in-C’s personal protective detail; he was apparently quite close to Admiral Knot as a result.”

Captain Baker, *USS FURY*  
Cor Coroli: Convergence

# MAITLAND



# COR COROLI: CONVERGENCE

## Dispatches: Damage Control.

The following priority messages were received by Starbase Thirteen and immediately brought to the attention of Commodore Hoek:

Message one:

*We have intercepted an unidentified, possibly cloaked vessel operating within the Mutara Sector, moving to investigate. Ordered rendezvous at Rigel VII may be delayed. Updates to follow. Evengii, Meni T'Pra.*

Attachments:

>Ship Logs (two entries) *USS MENI T'PRA NCC-18005* Mutara Sector. Captain Osip Evengii commanding.

>Sensor Logs (one file) *USS MENI T'PRA NCC-18005* Mutara Sector. Captain Osip Evengii commanding.

>Astrological Co-ordinates (one set) *USS MENI T'PRA NCC-18005* Mutara Sector. Captain Osip Evengii commanding.

Message two:

*Klingons discovered in Mutara Sector. Hostile intent confirmed. Request all available backup immediately. Evengii, Meni T'Pra.*

Attachments:

>Ship Logs (five entries) *USS MENI T'PRA NCC-18005* Mutara Sector. Captain Osip Evengii commanding.

>Personal Logs (nine entries). Captain Evengii, O. Commanding Officer. SSN 881-5851C: three entries. Commander Solvux. Science/Executive Officer. SSN 890-1293S: five entries. Lieutenant Palen, K. Science Officer. SSN 890-1309: one entry.

>Sensor Logs (twelve files) *USS MENI T'PRA NCC-18005* Mutara Sector. Captain Osip Evengii commanding.

>Astrological Co-ordinates (three sets) *USS MENI T'PRA NCC-18005* Mutara Sector. Captain Osip Evengii commanding.

## Damage Control

Rami Surros drew a deep breath and tried to keep his eyes fixed on the status board mounted to the bulkhead opposite the long, padded bench he and the rest of Damage Control Team 8 (DCT8) were perched upon.

He was a Specialist Second Class, two years out of Basic Non-Comm Orientation on Mars from one of the Academy's many satellite training facilities. He'd always been mechanically inclined and had thrived during his two year applied engineering courses and found himself at the top of his class and highly sought-after for deep-space assignments. He'd been a member of the *Meni T'Pra's* crew for nearly eighteen months.

Rami shuddered on his seat as the ship rocked hard to port. The sound of plasma being ignited and discharged from the main phaser chambers echoed off the bulkheads.

Commander Buccheri's voice blurted from the overhead public address speakers in a garbled static. Rami couldn't make out what the Commander was saying, but the status board flashed amber the same instant the Chief Engineer's voice crackled and popped above. The chief sounded...odd.

"Alright people, Code Two! Tags and bags, let's move!" Chief Petty Officer Tanya D'arc sprung to her feet and slapped the acknowledge actuator below the status screen. Code Two: radiation danger.

All five members of DCT8 pushed themselves up and clear of the bench in the staggering hold they'd been manning since the ship went to YELLOW ALERT. D'arc pushed her rubber-tipped, white radiation gloved hand into the long pocket tailored into the left chest of her white radiation suit and pulled out a dark grey radiation tag stowed within. As she jerked the tag free, she kept her dark hazel eyes on the young team she was charged with leading. Each of them jerked and wrenched free their own rad tags.

Rami fumbled getting at his tag. His white radiation suit was slightly too big, and his gloves bunched and doubled over on themselves as he tried to ram his hand into the long pocket sewn into his own thick white chest piece.

A panel beside the red door panel leading out onto Deck Five's main corridor fell open to reveal ten clear plastic respirator units. D'arc glanced at the status monitor to confirm where she was to lead her team. Yarnad and Davos stepped to the door and grabbed a respirator each. Pisha Zh'oshrialerh grabbed the oversized tool crate and then donned her own respirator.

"Junction twelve. ODN panel eight-nine-two! Move people!" Tanya read from the monitor. *Heading back to the far bulkheads of the Junior Officer's Quarters?* She questioned in her own mind.

Time was of the essence. “Kit Three!” shouted Ohm Stad, Chief D’arc’s second-in-command.

Tanya stooped to snap up the required tool bundle in a well-practiced motion and grabbed a clear plastic respirator of her own. They weren’t just patching something. They were rerouting power somewhere. In her mind, all Tanya could picture was the EPS conduit to the MCIDF (Mission Critical Inertia Dampener Feeds) at the aft end of Deck Five. *What else could it be?*

The five members of DCT8 charged along the empty corridor towards the specified junction, followed closely by Chief D’arc who adjusted her respirator as she hefted her tool bag awkwardly up to the chrome-coloured carbiner anchor affixed to the left hip of her white radiation suit. With her right hand shifting and pulling at the clear plastic mask she was fitting to her face, she managed to clip the latch on her tool bag to her hip, which helped with the load. Ahead of her, Pisha was taking long, loping strides along the corridor, easily toting the tool crate in one muscular arm. Tanya was envious of the powerfully built Andorian woman’s strength and grace.

The six of them pounded along the corridor in their thick-soled rubberized boots, adjusting their respirators as they moved, focused on simply getting to the affected junction in under sixty seconds. The team lurched in unison as the ship rocked again, this time to starboard. At the head of the column of white-clad engineers, Davos stumbled and nearly fell over. Each deck had a Damage Control Team assigned. They were it for Deck Five.

*The inertial dampeners must be reaching their limits,* thought Tanya as she watched the short, muscular man recover his balance and charge on undeterred leading the team towards Junction twelve just five more meters along the corridor and to the left.

Davos rounded the corner and slid to a jerking stop. Yarnad nearly slammed into Davos as he rounded the corner from the main corridor and came face to face with a raging plasma fire spewing from a blackened access port. Tanya and the others quickly joined the two specialists and though the team stood still for less than a second assessing what confronted them, time seemed to stand still.

The plasma burned whorey green.

The six-person team, clad in brilliant white radiation suits reflected the verdant conflagration in flashes between the crimson reflections cast off by the pulsing RED ALERT lighting.

*Time...there’s no time for this!* thought Tanya as the smell of acrid smoke crept past her respirator. She coughed and violently jerked on the silver activator dongle at the end of her facemasks trailing intake tube. The thick strap holding the mask to her face pulled fiercely at her short-cropped black hair.



Pisha dropped her crate with a loud thud and Davos sprang towards the emergency storage panel at the intersecting bulkhead leading off the main corridor down the junction point they'd been ordered to attend.

The foul odor of burning ozone and plastic faded as Tanya's respirator began working properly. Before she had to tell her crew to get to work; Davos and Yarnad were dousing the green flames with the emergency Class-C extinguishers Davos had pulled from the storage cabinet. Young Rami was donning a silver cowl Pisha had pulled from her crate and Ohm Stad, Tanya's second-in-command, was working his heavy-duty tricorder to assess the damage behind the flames.

"This literally just happened!" yelled Stad from behind his respirator.

*Right place, right time... thought Tanya. ...but if not fire control, why are we here?*

Pisha pulled down hard on either side of the silver cowl Rami had just pulled over his head. Beneath the protective silver hood, he grimaced as the strong Andorian woman mashed the top of his head into the crown of the silver head covering.

After quickly mating the silver fabric to the black rubberized collar of Specialist Surros' radiation suit, Pisha stood back and patted the young human's left shoulder twice to signal a successful seal.

Rami blinked hard and focused on adjusting to the unique visual properties of the silver fire fighting hood. He could see the plasma fire in hues of yellow and orange, and he could make out the two streams of deep blue liquid CO<sub>2</sub> his partners were smothering the fire with. He drew a quick breath then thrust his right hand towards Pisha and raised his thumb.

"Primed and ready, Rami. Remember: Five meters. Low and Steady," said Pisha in a forced mumble from behind her respirator. The boy nodded and extended his other hand. Pisha quickly handed over the FSD (Fire Suppression Device) which looked something like an Eighteenth-Century blunderbuss.

Rami accepted the FSD and felt the weight of the near half-meter-long cannon. Davos and Yarnad were starting to lose their battle against the plasma fire as their emergency extinguishers began to empty. Rami walked between his two partners, FSD in hand. He could see that the standard extinguishers had barely affected the burning plasma. In a matter of seconds, the fire would roar back stronger than before. Rami closed on the churning, roiling ball of green plasma. His radiation suit and silver cowl protected him from the intense heat. He was less than four meters from the bright yellow center of the fire.

"Clean break in the EPS conduit along the tertiary relay path!" barked Stad at Chief D'arc.

Tanya nodded and turned towards Pisha to be sure she'd heard the initial diagnosis. The tall Andorian was already prepping a hydro spanner.

“Radiation?” asked Tanya as she watched Rami quickly shimmy his way closer and closer to the plasma fire. Davos was moving back towards the emergency cabinet to stow his empty extinguisher and draw a second.

“Nothing in the theta-band...” said Stad as he continued to study his tricorder.

Rami blinked a bead of sweat out of his eye and raised his FSD. He could now feel the heat through his protective gear. He braced himself and leveled his tool. The FSD was a single charge delivery device for a variety of fire suppressing mortars. There was no actual targeting system, but Rami had trained long and hard at this aspect of his duties and he’d come to trust his muscle memory. He eyeballed the core of the plasma bloom and applied slow, steady pressure to his trigger...

FOOOM! PISHISSssssss!

The recoil from the FSD was nearly enough to knock Rami off his feet. As he struggled to keep his balance the dancing yellow and orange flashes of plasma he’d been watching through his hood, dimmed and fluttered wildly in shades of green and blue. In two seconds, Rami could barely see anything through the silver cowl. The plasma fire was extinguished.

## Three Hours Earlier:

### *IKS Akok*

The low bass chime of the internal communication system roused Captain Khoth from his light slumber. Khoth growled to himself and slammed his meaty fist against the illumination actuator built into the bulkhead beside his sleeping berth. Immediately the pitch blackness of the captain's spartan cabin dissolved in a dull red hue. Khoth, clothed only in his undergarment, swung his muscular legs off the ledge he'd been sleeping upon and deftly made his way to the intercom station mounted beside the sealed hatch leading to the rest of the massive new *K't'inga'Cha*-class Battlecruiser.

"Speak!" barked Khoth as he depressed the green transmit trigger.

"Captain Khoth, from bridge. Sir, the Federation battleship has turned to match our heading once again. They are now within two hundred and twenty-four thousand kellicams and closing."

Khoth snarled silently at the dark speaker screwed to his cabin's wall and balled his left fist. This was the third time the Federation vessel had shown unwanted interest in the *Akok*. He glanced towards the cabin's simple desk, where he'd laid his uniform only a few hours earlier. Once could have been a coincidence, twice dumb luck...but three times? No.

*Something is very wrong with this*, thought Khoth to himself as he returned his attention to the open comms channel and depressed the transmit trigger once again...

"Tactical status, Okas?"

"We are cloaked, sir. Proceeding on course at warp two, as ordered. The Starfleet vessel is closing on our relative position at slightly under warp two point five...I make contact within the hour."

Khoth was standing at the other end of his small cabin, pulling his boots on while listening to his Second Officer, Okas, Son of Cakov, deliver the requested status update. Hours earlier they'd detected the Federation ship at the very edge of their sensors. She'd been probing the space around the cloaked *Akok* with their own long-range sensors. Khoth had ordered a slight course change to put distance between his prototype battle cruiser and the older Starfleet ship, just to be safe.

Six hours later the Federation ship again came to the *Akok's* attention when she attempted to paint the new Battle Cruiser with their targeting beams. This had been shortly before the end of Khoth's duty shift and unlike the first encounter; this second incident deeply concerned both Khoth and his bridge crew. They'd altered course once again and reduced speed to gauge if in fact, the Starfleet ship had detected them despite their newly improved cloaking device and stealth improvements. Khoth had remained at his post for another two hours,

watching, waiting. The Federation ship did not match course, or speed. Half an hour after their second contact, the Starfleet dogs fell away from Khoth's long-range sensors.

Khoth rose and reached for his armored tunic and belt. Okas had stopped speaking and was awaiting the captain's orders. Khoth fastened the clasp of his heavy belt around his waist and growled once again as he hastily paced back towards his cabin's hatch. The door squealed open as Khoth triggered the proximity sensor, but before stepping out into the dimly lit corridor leading to the bridge, he barked: "ALERT Status; I'm on my way!"

The *IKS Akok* was one of two prototype heavy battlecruisers the High Council had agreed to fund and support in the Empire's efforts to rebuild their fleet following the disaster of Praxis and the still largely maligned Accords which many in the Empire saw as capitulation to the detested Federation. The *Akok* had started out as a standard *K't'inga*-class Cruiser, as had her sister ship the *IKS Abiv*.

The *Akok* had been given an all-new warp engine, modeled not so subtly upon the drives aboard the Federation's impressive *Excelsior*-class Heavy Cruisers. She'd also been fitted with uniquely long and slender nacelles meant to work in conjunction with her new engine. Bow-to-stern she was fifteen meters longer than a standard *K't'inga*.

The *Abiv* retained the tried-and-true engines which had powered the *K't'ingas* for decades and her nacelle arrangement was unchanged; however, she boasted a unique skin of armored plating inspired by alloy samples gleaned from those same Federation *Excelsior* ships which so impressed the Generals of the IKDF. *Abiv* also sported a unique, forked bow section which housed not only the standard forward torpedo launcher, but a host of secondary disruptor and high-intensity sensor arrays. Aside from this notably wider forward section the *IKS Abiv* held to standard *K't'inga* measurements. *Abiv* was classified as a *K't'inga-Vor*-class Cruiser.

Both prototype vessels were equipped with next generation cloaking technologies. Scientific advancements in the Empire had largely stalled over the last century as the rise of the Warrior Class within the governing bodies of both the High Council and various Municipal bureaucracies had placed military prowess and conquest far above scientific and even medical progress. Any "new" breakthroughs in strategic technologies were more likely than not the result of espionage or the spoils of conquest. The emergence of new, larger, more powerful vessels and technologies from the minds within the Federation had given the High Command pause. *Akok* and *Abiv* were to be the Empire's response to these new threats, even in the face of current Accords and *alliances*.

Stepping onto the bridge, Khoth immediately paced to the central command chair atop a raised plinth between the two duranium stabilizing beams

running between the bulkheads of the bridge module. Okas quickly rose from the seat and descended the opposite side of the plinth while his captain ascended to the seat of authority. A quick glance at the tactical readouts and status boards let Khoth know his ship was running exactly as she was meant to. Before the captain could issue his first commands the lift door on the bridge's port quarter squealed open and Commander Molkugh, Khoth's First Officer, stepped onto the bridge.

"Son of Arrh," growled Khoth as the one-eyed, heavily-scared commander took up his station at the raised status panel to the command chair's right.

"Son of Barak, I stand ready for battle," Molkugh snarled back at his captain.

"So do we all, brother. Okas!?" Khoth activated a series of switches along the right-hand arm rest of his chair and a periscope-like device slowly descended from the bulkheads above his elevated seat.

"Gunner, tactical update!" barked Okas, who had taken up his station as Second Officer to the left of the command chair.

## USS *Meni T’Pra*

“So, what have we got, exactly?” Osip leaned over Keith Palen’s shoulder and examined the raw data streaming across the ship’s secondary relay terminals at the Science Station.

“For just a few seconds sir, we had solid returns on a...well, on a mass,” said Lieutenant Palen as he wound back the sensor logs for the fifth time since first hitting on the unknown contact on the very edge of their long-range sensors.

Osip Evengii drew a long breath as his Science Officer searched for a better term to describe the contact the *Meni T’Pra*’s sensors had briefly seized upon. He was under orders to have his ship and crew at the Rigel VII shipyards in a little over seventy-two hours. The *Meni T’Pra* had been on active patrol for nearly eight years without a major overhaul. She’d already been nearly thirteen years old when Osip was promoted to captain and given command of her, following a major refit during the Fleet’s *Upgrade* program. Now, as the *Miranda*-class starship rapidly approached her twenty-first year in service, she was to be assessed by Starfleet engineers to determine whether she would be moth-balled or extensively overhauled.

“A mass? A mass of what, Mr. Palen?” asked Captain Evengii as he straightened himself up and rubbed his eyes. The streaming data sherds made little sense to Osip’s mind, and he was seventeen hours into an eight-hour watch.

The younger man pushed back from his computer terminal and turned in his seat to face his exhausted captain. Palen had been one of the hundred odd new recruits to come aboard the *Meni T’Pra* when Captain Evengii first took command eight years earlier. He’d been a raw ensign then, but over the years, Keith had earned a rank of senior lieutenant with a specialty in the sciences. He’d come to look at Osip Evengii as something more than just a commanding officer; he saw the man as a mentor, almost a pseudo father-figure. Two shifts had come and gone from the bridge since they first started chasing sensor ghosts. The captain had yet to take a respite.

“The first two contacts were more like sensor *echoes*; they barely registered as anything more than background noise. This latest hit...it had substance,” offered Lt. Palen.

“Substance?” asked Osip as he fought back a yawn. His rumpled maroon tunic hung open at the flap. He dearly wanted to get to his cabin to take a shower and grab some sleep.

“Yes, sir. Mass. We clearly captured readings of a substantial mass moving at warp speed.”

“A mass of what, Keith?” asked Osip in a defeated tone.

Palen turned back to his instruments and pulled up the extremely limited readings the ship's long-range sensors had captured. "From what we managed to catch, sir...a mass of complex alloys including tritanium and duranium, as well as several inconclusive returns, all moving at the furthest limits of our sensors in excess of warp two."

"No identified power-source?" asked Osip, already knowing the answer.

"None detected, sir...and no sign of it now."

"Thank you, Keith. Continue your scans." Osip turned back towards his vacant chair at the center of the bridge and sighed quietly. A migraine was brewing.

"Orders, sir?" asked Lieutenant Commander Sero, the ship's Betazoid navigator.

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The first "sensor echo" occurred the previous day at just past 1800 hours. Commander Solvux, Evengii's First Officer, had been manning the science station and had attempted to suss-out what the old *Miranda's* sensors had hit upon with little success. Had Palen, or any other science officer been on duty, the fleeting contact would have been chalked up to misaligned astrometric pickups, or anomalous background particulate feedback, or just about anything. Solvux was a graduate of both the Vulcan Science Academy, Starfleet Academy and most recently, a successful doctoral candidate graduating from the Daystrom School of Astrological Studies. Something about the *echo* didn't sit right.

Long-range sensors had been refocused and a slight course adjustment ordered to investigate the "concerning phenomenon". Evengii had agreed that further investigation was warranted and though they were under orders to get from the far end of the Mutara Sector where they'd been hunting Orion marauders, to Rigel VII, there was a ten-hour window in which they could satisfy Mr. Solvux's *curiosity*.

An hour later they were within a parsec of where that first echo had flashed into existence. There was nothing to be found. Osip was satisfied they'd shown due diligence in investigating the "*echo*" and ordered a new course to put them back on schedule to Rigel VII. Just as the *Meni T'Pra* was preparing to depart, Solvux spoke up...

"Captain, the sensor anomaly we detected was unlike anything we might anticipate to run across in this Sector. As we still have a window of over eight hours in which to freely investigate matters before jeopardizing our designated arrival time at Rigel VII, I would strongly suggest we remain on-station and continue to investigate."

Osip turned in his command chair and looked over at his Executive Officer. “Mr. Solvux, we’re talking about a sensor ghost. It’s not like we’ve discovered some magical phenomenon...”

“Captain, we are referring to the contact at 1803 hours as an *echo* simply because we have no better term of reference available. It was something more than a simple anomaly. I do believe we chanced upon something substantial. Given the current political situation in this Sector between the Federation and the unaligned Acamar System, we should not dismiss this incident out-of-hand.”

Osip studied the stoic face of his First Officer. Solvux had come aboard five years earlier and had proven himself to be a competent and remarkably disciplined man, even by Vulcan standards. The bald Vulcan sat bolt upright at his station, waiting for his captain’s response.

“You believe Acamaran pirates might be operating beyond their borders?”

“I can not say, sir. I would be remiss in my duties though if I didn’t point out that we have an obligation to conduct a fulsome investigation into the matter. Our mission has been to police Orion marauders and as per the understanding between Acamar III and the Federation Council, we are expected to police any Acamarian pirates operating beyond their system—so as to prevent them from using Federation space to conceal their illegal activity.”

“Very well. We’ll get underway at low warp and set a parabolic course around Delta Vega to provide you the maximum amount of time to conduct whatever additional sensor sweeps you deem appropriate to investigate this, *echo*. Agreed?”

“May I have your leave to make use of the facilities in the Stellar Cartography labs on Deck Three?”

“Of course, commander. Keep me advised of any developments.” Osip offered his tall, bald, Vulcan Exec a friendly smile and a nod. Solvux simply offered a curt nod in return as he rose silently from his post and headed for the turbolift.

Evengii extended his watch into the late hours of the night as his ship made its way across the Sector at a languid warp two, scanning and sweeping as she cut through the vast nothingness. At 0006 hours, just as Osip was preparing to yield command to his Second Officer, the *echo* returned. Solvux confirmed the anomaly was moving at warp and attempted to lock on to the *echo* using the *Miranda’s* specialized targeting beams but, as with the first occurrence, just as they were about to make contact the *echo* disappeared. Osip altered course again and settled in for a long double shift.

Hours passed.

The window to make their ordered arrival at Rigel VII frittered away. It was just past 0700 hours as the ship cut close to the border of the Zalkon Sector near Delta Vega when young Mr. Palen called out a third contact with the anomaly.



Commander Solvux had been ordered to quarters three hours earlier—Osip wasn't prepared to over-extend his senior staff on what was proving to be a somewhat annoying wild goose chase.

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"Orders, sir?" asked Lieutenant Commander Sero, the ship's Betazoid navigator.

"Lay in an intercept course on Mr. Palen's mass. Have Commander Solvux report to the bridge," croaked Osip as he massaged his temples.

"Aye sir, laying in the intercept course. Speed?"

Osip focused his eyes on the viewscreen and considered the situation developing around them. "At our current speed, what's our intercept time?"

"At warp two, sir...just over four hours," reported Sero, who could sense the exhaustion radiating off his captain.

"I don't want to spook, whatever it is...but I don't want to waste time either..."

"May I suggest we increase speed to warp two point five, Captain? At that rate we can intercept the object in a little under three hours without appearing overly hostile and allow you to get a brief rest before contact, all while preserving an acceptable window to adhere to our orders."

Osip spun round in his seat to see Solvux standing in front of the turbolift and smiled. "Commander Solvux, you have the Conn."

Churik, son of T'Kor, the Akok's Senior Gunner and Junior Tactical Officer locked his targeting scanners onto the distant contact slowly closing on their position. "The enemy has closed an additional five thousand kellicams in the last quarter. They are well within our passive sensor range now."

Khoth let his thick brown lips curl up in a menacing sneer and grunted his acknowledgement of his gunner's report. Without taking his eyes from the narrow viewfinder in his executive tactical scope, the Klingon captain lifted his left arm and waved off his Second Officer from the redundant status board.

Okas secured his panel and grunted just loud enough to let his captain know that he'd seen and understood the direction. Stepping back from the dark board, Okas then turned sharply and exited the bridge to make his way to the reactor pit to supervise the powerplants and critical power systems the mighty *K't'inga'Cha* warship may soon call upon in battle.

Khoth slowly pushed his hanging periscope to the right and using the intuitive thumb toggle on the scope's righthand control arm he flipped through the limited menu of sensor returns his private scope could access until he found the basic tactical mode the fleet had used for almost fifty years. He growled low in his throat as his eyes adjusted to the two-dimensional red and yellow field now displayed. The Akok was represented as a yellow triangle set in the middle of a red and yellow grid. Panning to the right, Khoth found a round yellow marker representing the Starfleet contact. Telemetry streamed in three narrow bands along the bottom of the viewfinder's plain, offering the Klingon captain accurate measurements of speed, distance and attitude of the approaching enemy.

"Molkugh...suggestions?" Khoth nearly spat in a hushed voice as he flipped his periscope's control handles up into their locked position and sent the hanging pillar back up into the recesses of the upper bulkheads.

The tall, one-eyed warrior kept his focus on his status board. The cloak was functioning within proper parameters. The reactor was operating at eighty-nine percent efficiency. Secondary disruptor reactors were in standby and the four-man crew responsible for shuttling torpedoes from the armory fore and aft, were on station. Molkugh had served at Khoth's side since they were third-class gunner-yeomen aboard the Dahar Master Koloth's D7 cruiser, *Gr'oth*. They were barely past the age of ascension, little more than children in the shadows of great warriors. Though they came from different families, the two warriors were closer than most brothers could ever hope to be...or had been until Khoth was elevated to the rank of captain and Molkugh was not.

"If they can detect us, why do they not increase to flank speed and confront us?" spoke Molkugh in a low bass tone.

“Three times they have turned to follow...no, something is wrong.” Khoth turned to look down at his *friend*; the lust for battle rising in his throat and spiking his adrenal glands.

“It may not have been wise to venture across the border, my captain.” Molkugh checked their heading on his panel and called up the detailed star charts for the area of space they’d found themselves operating in.

Khoth let his mouth snap shut and narrowed his eyes as he considered his First Officer’s words. They were supposed to have run drills along the Empire’s side of the border with an assortment of standard *Birds-of-Prey* on patrol to test the new cloaking device. To Khoth’s mind “testing” their cloak against other Klingons was a waste of time. The only true “test” that could be trusted would be one against the *enemy* itself.

Okas would do whatever he was bid and did not concern Khoth in the least. Molkugh though...Molkugh would have protests to make if Khoth completely disregarded their orders. He and Okas had been stoic when their captain had made his proposal at the outset of their mission. Ideally, Khoth would have taken his new warship into the contested Romulan exclusion zones to truly test the *Akok* against a worthy enemy with deep knowledge of cloaking technology and tactics. There would be no chance Molkugh would let such a provocative, unsanctioned sortie proceed. The Empire was not ready for a full-scale war with the Romulans and Molkugh wouldn’t be the one to throw the Empire into chaos needlessly. Khoth knew this, so as a compromise he proposed they conduct a clandestine run into their new ally’s territory and test their ship against unsuspecting Federation patrols. The Mutara Sector was sparsely travelled, the risk acceptable.

“We could put this new engine to the test, Molkugh. We could *run back* to the border and let the Starfleet fumble around in the nothingness...” offered Khoth in a carefully measured, goading tone.

Blood brother or no, Molkugh was the First Officer and by even suggesting that his captain may not have made a wise decision in venturing into Federation territory without leave, he was walking the line of challenging Khoth for command.

“The Federation contact closes at a cautious rate, Captain. They may only suspect our presence. If we engage the new engines and ride the new nacelles at power...it is likely they will detect us, sir.” Molkugh looked up from his panel finally and met his captain’s flinty glare with his own single, clear eye. He had no desire to unseat his brother, but his duty was to his ship, his crew and most importantly, to the Empire.

“So, you don’t suggest engaging the *maqDar* Federations, then?” Khoth relaxed his glare and slowly sat back in his command chair. He knew what was in his brother’s heart; passed over for promotion, jealous.

Molkugh shook his head. "That would be glorious, brother, but no..." Molkugh yelled a command at the young warrior seated towards the fore of the bridge manning the navigation/helm station and the star chart he'd just called up on his status board, filled the main viewscreen.

"What is this?" asked Khoth at his usual volume.

"The Acamar System. It is a cluster of four planetoids orbiting a *h'voquim*-class star. Only Acamar III is populated. They are not affiliated with the Federation," said Molkugh, expecting his captain to understand what he was proposing.

"Unaligned, eh? We could take up a strategic position around one of the unpopulated planets and rightly deny any possible offence to the Federation, should we be detected. Very good, *brother*. Set course immediately!" roared Khoth in a triumphant tone.

## Unaligned

“Commander, we’ve completed the sensor search pattern, no contacts.”

Solvux glanced down at the simple controls mounted to the right arm of the *Meni T’Pra’s* command chair to confirm what Mr. Palen had reported. The search grid was far from extensive; however, the Vulcan First Officer had calculated the most efficient and far-reaching search pattern he could manage, given the time constraints and the speed at which the old *Miranda* was cutting through the Sector. Nearly two and a half hours had passed since the captain yielded the bridge to Commander Solvux to catch a few hours of rest.

“Very well lieutenant, thank you. Helmsman, make your course for the...” Solvux stopped midway through his directions to resume a course to Rigel VII when a shrill audible suddenly began chirping from the science station to his right.

Palen nearly fell over when his instruments began sounding off without warning. He recovered his balance upon his narrow stool while simultaneously triggering his station’s attenuated viewfinder. In the half second it took Commander Solvux to turn in the command chair to look over at the science station, Palen had his face buried in the augmented sensor scope.

“New contact, sir! Solid readings on mass and speed...she’s increased speed to warp five and is heading directly for the unaligned Acamar System!” shouted Palen excitedly as he dialed in the ship’s long-range sensor array.

“What do you make of her, Mr. Palen?” asked Solvux in a phenomenally cold and level tone.

“She’s got to be cruiser-size at least and her acceleration is...” Palen half-stood at his station and frantically began snapping toggles and madly dialing in various focus modulators.

Solvux watched the young science officer gesticulate frantically at his station for two heart beats, then asked in the same cold, level tone: “What appears to be the issue, Mr. Palen?”

Keith drew a long hissing breath in while he spun his view scope’s primary actuator one last time in a futile gesture. “Gone.” He huffed as he drew himself up and away from the computer controls and turned to face his commander. “It’s gone, just as suddenly as it was there.”

“You’re certain you observed an actual contact, Lieutenant?”

“Commander, you can run the sensor logs back for yourself. It was there. Plain as the...” Keith caught himself and managed to holdback *...as the ears on your head*. “Plain as day, sir.”

“I will indeed review the sensor logs, Mr. Palen. Mr. Kinsmere, what are the most up-to-date tactical details concerning the Acamarian space-faring assets?”

Lieutenant Maggie Kinsmere, stationed at the security board and tactical station on the opposite side of the bridge from Palen's science station, quickly began a library search...

"The Acamarian's have a modest fleet of warp-capable ships, roughly the same size and tactical abilities as the *Raider*-class scout vessels employed by the Andorian Imperial Guard, sir," reported Maggie.

As the security officer spoke, Solvux reviewed the telemetry his science officer had just captured and confirmed what little information had been reported. "As the Acamarians do not operate light-speed capable vessels anywhere as large as the contact we've been following, it stands to reason that it is unlikely we are dealing with one of their ships."

"Orion pirates, then?" offered Junior Lieutenant Kinsmere from her alcove.

Solvux looked up from his own small viewer and consulted the navigational telemetry currently displayed on the astrocompass recessed between the helm and the operations stations just ahead and slightly below the command chair. "Unlikely, all the Orion craft we've observed over the course of our last tour have been little more than modified shuttles and the occasional scout-sized marauder. Mr. Palen, please review the radiological values recorded just as our contact vanished."

Kieth returned to his stool and spun around to face his main computer terminal. The status monitors and playback screens available to Commander Solvux through the command chair, were limited in functionality. In a matter of ninety seconds, Kieth had called up the complete sensor package he'd manage to record of the fleeting contact. He switched over to the diagnostic software the computer used to analyze everything from astrological phenomenon to trace radiological particles left behind from weapons fire, warp jumps, or any other high-energy event which the *Meni T'Pra* might come across in the vast emptiness of space.

"Commander, there are traces of Chernekov radiation amongst elevated levels of electromagnetic particles!"

"A cloaking device," said Solvux quietly.

"A cloaking device, yes sir..." said Keith as he continued to analyse the scant readings.

"Mr. Kinsmere, bring the ship to YELLOW ALERT, Commander Sero, all stop."

"Yellow Alert, all hands, all decks, Yellow Alert," transmitted Maggie across the general public address system as she energized the ship's defense screens and triggered a ship-wide status-alert.

"Showing all stop, Commander," reported Sero from his seat at the Miranda's helm.

Solvux depressed one of the white toggles on the left arm of his command chair. "Captain Evengii, to the bridge. Captain Evengii to the bridge, please." Transmitted Solvux in his emotionless tone.

"Bridge, this is the captain. Report?" came a weary voice through the command chair's speaker.

"Captain, we are at YELLOW ALERT. You are required on the bridge," answered Solvux.

"They've detected the warp trail and the EM spill," said the black-uniformed operative manning the sensor console.

"Position?"

"Grid twelve-thirty-two by seven-eight-eight, half a parsec outside of Delta Vega. They've dropped out of warp and are holding position."

"Likely preparing for a significant course correction. Are we good?"

A quick glance at the status panels and lateral sensor returns... "We remain secure from both ends, sir. No active contacts from either bogie."

"Our sensor drones are on station?"

"Confirmed. All drones running silent throughout the System. Five tactical drones on station and awaiting activation."

"Maintain silent running and put us over the northern pole of Acamar II. We should be able to monitor everything securely, from there. If the *Meni T'Pra* happens to fall into the credible operational envelope of one of the TAC drones, loose a single burst in the general vicinity of the hostile." The short, broad-shouldered man wrapped in a black leather tunic tailored to mirror the maroon standard officer uniforms of the Starfleet, leaned back in his chair.

They couldn't pierce the Klingon's cloak per se, but they could roughly estimate where the warship was using the electromagnetic tracking software they'd acquired from the Romulans. One way or another they would gather the required telemetry and disappear without anyone knowing they were ever there.

"Confirmed, sir. Making course for Acamar II."

The ship which was little more than a shadow slowed from its warp five burst of speed to warp three. The shadow moved silently against the pitch blackness of space at more than three times the speed of light. Neither the distant *Miranda*-class starship, the cloaked *K't'inga'Cha* prototype, nor a distant Acamarian *Kilic*-class patrol ship detected it. In the vast silence of nothing, the *N12* was a ghost.



## YELLOW ALERT

Osip sprang off his bunk and stepped into his boots, which he'd left paired and waiting in the middle of his cabin's floor. Drawing a deep breath, he stooped low and scooped his uniform tunic from the back of his workstation's chair and effortlessly slipped his right arm through the sleeve while his feet propelled him towards the door. The *Meni T'Pra's* captain emerged from his dim cabin more exhausted than he'd walked in just hours earlier. The main corridor on deck four was bustling with activity. As Osip shirked up his tunic to thrust his left arm into a waiting sleeve, a pair of young crewmen sprinted past him, nearly knocking him over. They were dressed in black and yellow fire suits and were scrambling to man their fire control station. Evengii caught the concerned, backwards glance one of the young men cast over his shoulder as the pair passed. The crewman looked horrified at almost slamming into the captain. Osip waved the fire control specialist on and made for the turbolift opposite his cabin with haste.

Stepping into the waiting lift, Osip closed his tunic and stabbed the key on the car's control panel that designated the bridge. The doors closed and the lift swelled into motion. As Captain Evengii hoisted his uniform's bib up to the "closed" position the lift slowed and the doors opened onto the busy bridge. Osip stifled a yawn as he stepped off the lift and towards the bald Vulcan who'd been entrusted with watching over the ship.

"Report." Evengii moved up and into the command chair nearly as quickly as Solvux had vacated the seat.

"We are at Yellow Alert, Captain. Approximately five minutes ago we reacquired the sensor anomaly we've been looking for..."

Osip quickly consulted the status panel built into the right arm of his command chair and saw that all compartments reported ready-for-duty. The bridge flickered and swelled with the amber lighting associated with the YELLOW ALERT visual indicator lamps. The ship was in a station-keeping attitude and Sero looked to be eagerly awaiting direction.

"What did our *echo* get caught doing this time, Commander?" asked Evengii as he turned to regard his First Officer.

"We have concrete readings that indicate this is no sensor echo, Captain. Mass and composition indicate we have been following a vessel of at least cruiser-class size. More concerning are the readings of electromagnetic particles intermingled with a trace warp trail Mr. Palen was able to detect during this most recent encounter," said Solvux in a deadpan tone.

"Electromagnetic particles inter...a cloaking device?" asked Osip, understanding lighting his face.

"It seems likely, given the difficulties we've experienced in securing concrete sensor readings."

"Heading?"

"The warp trail leads directly for the Acamarian System."

"The Acamarrians don't have cloaking technology, do they Mr. Solvux?"

"No, Captain. Neither do they operate space-faring vessels larger than what we would class as small scouts. The latest intelligence has it that Acamarian patrol craft have not yet managed to break the warp five threshold."

Osip glanced over at Maggie, who was busily checking and rechecking the ship's tactical status boards. "If it is a cloaked ship we've stumbled across, then we're possibly dealing with..." The captain returned his focus to his First Officer.

"Given the evidence we have so far, it is not wild conjecture to speculate that we very well may have happened upon either a Romulan, or Klingon vessel, sir."

"This deep into Federation space?" Osip felt the weariness drop away from his mind as he began calculating next steps.

"Indeed. Our distance from the Romulan Neutral Zone and the Star Empire's demonstrated adherence to the Treaty of Algeron these last eight years would make the likelihood of this contact being a Romulan vessel, statistically remote."

Osip had had the same thought. The Treaty the Federation had signed with the Romulans was in too many ways a major coup for the Star Empire. The Federation had lost territory and agreed to abandon any and all attempts at developing cloaking technology to rival their Romulan neighbours. In exchange the Romulans pledged to respect the borders and had, in fact nearly completely withdrawn from interstellar affairs with the Federation altogether. The Klingons seemed a more likely possibility.

"If it's the Klingons, why would they be operating out here without letting Starfleet know? The Khitomer Accords established clear protocols for cross-border transit."

"Unknown, Captain. If indeed our contact is Klingon."

"Station please, Mr. Solvux."

The bald Vulcan nodded and moved silently to relieve Mr. Palen at the science station.

"Mr. Christopher, encode and send to Starbase Thirteen, Priority One to the attention of Commodore Hoek: *We have intercepted an unidentified, possibly cloaked, vessel operating within the Mutara Sector, moving to investigate. Ordered rendezvous at Rigel VII may be delayed. Updates to follow.* Attach our present coordinates and all relevant log files to the transmission."

"Aye, Captain." The young, blond-haired ensign manning the communications terminal began keying in the priority update as ordered.

"Mr. Sero, set your course for Acamarian System, make your speed warp four. If they've not detected us yet, maybe they'll think we're locals."

"Course set, Captain," reported Sero as he waited for Captain Evengii's command to execute.

"You intend to enter the Acamarian System to seek out our contact?" asked Solvux as he called up various files from the ship's library.

"I do. Are there any political concerns around us entering Acamarian space?"

Solvux had the most recent treaties between the Federation Council and the Governing Council of Acamar III already displayed on the main screen at his post. "The Acamarians have granted Starfleet vessels free and unobstructed passage through their space, sir. They only specify that Tellarite vessels, not specifically supervised by Starfleet, are to respect their borders and remain outside of their space."

"Tellarites?" asked Osip with genuine curiosity.

"Yes, Captain. There was an incident seventy-three years ago where a mining vessel was discovered harvesting obstherna ore from the second planet in the system without permission."

Obstherna was a mineral unique to Acamar II which could best be described as "poor man's dilithium". The Acamarians guarded the ore fiercely as it was their primary fuel source for the less sophisticated warp engines their ships utilized, and the key catalyst used in their planetary fusion reactors. In large quantities the ore was radioactive enough to disrupt sensors.

"I see. Mr. Kinsmere, tactical status?"

"Defensive screens energized. Phaser crews report ready. Torpedo bays manned and ready, sir," reported Maggie from her station.

"Very good. Mr. Sero, execute."

"Aye, sir. Making for the Acamar System, warp four."

The old *Miranda* cruiser flared her impulse engines and fired the maneuvering thrusters along her port lateral bow and port bow ventral ports. The *Meni T'Pra* dipped and turned sharply in an expertly executed motion to bring her bow around to the distant point of light that was the Acamar star. Two seconds later the *Meni T'Pra* slipped into subspace in a blinding flash.

In a flash of brilliant white light an old, white and grey Federation battleship suddenly appeared within the borders of the Acamar System. The slight tear from subspace which the Starfleet ship exited flared for less than a second and was gone, but every sensor aboard the mighty *Akok's* bridge sounded in alarm and notified the warriors of an approaching enemy.

"The Starfleet warship has arrived in the system, Captain. One hundred thirty-two thousand kellicams and closing!" reported the tactical officer.

"That is within range of their weapons, Captain!" reported Molkugh before ordering the ship to full alert.

Khoth growled and leaned forward in his seat. Molkugh was the First Officer, but Khoth's dear blood brother was too quick to assume the wishes of his commander. "What is their speed and heading!?" Khoth roared not bothering to hide his annoyance.

"They are closing at one quarter sub light standard, Captain," answered Molkugh, reading the telemetry off his status panel.

"What fool strolls into battle at low impulse?" asked Khoth to no-one in particular.

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"Captain we are now operating within Acamarian space," offered Sero from his seat in front of the helm controls.

"Thank you helmsman, make your speed one quarter impulse and maintain YELLOW ALERT. Mr. Solvux, commence your sensor sweeps for this...contact." Osip slowly unfastened his tunic's bib and let it fall open. He was too tired for this and found it difficult to get comfortable.

Since beginning their most recent assignment within the Mutara Sector, every soul aboard the *Meni T'Pra* was cognizant of the hellacious events that had played out decades earlier between the legendary crew of the *Enterprise* and another *Miranda*-class vessel pirated and ultimately destroyed by an evil madman bent of vengeance. It was the stuff of modern legend. Generations of Academy cadets had told and retold the tale of battle of the Mutara Nebula with awe and reverence.

To Captain Evengii's mind though, it wasn't the clash between Kirk and Khan that was of foremost interest. It was the aftermath of the Genesis detonation and the brief creation of an actual planet out of the waste and flotsam of the nebula and ruined hulk of *Reliant* herself that concerned Osip. A Klingon nobleman had crossed undetected into Federation space, penetrated the static defenses and warning nets of the time and managed to surprise and destroy a science vessel in an attempt to capture the Genesis Device for the Klingon Empire.

One Klingon *Bird of Prey* was able operate with near impunity and vicious efficiency. If not, almost absurdly, for the *Enterprise* as pirated by Admiral Kirk this time, the Klingons may very well have been successful in seizing what they saw as “the ultimate weapon”.

*One Bird of Prey*, thought Osip to himself as he watched his viewscreen and listened to the instruments at Solvux’s science station sweep, scan, ping and chime away at the empty space all around them. *One Bird of Prey. What could another do? What could a K’t’inga do, or a fleet for that matter?*

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Aboard the *Akok*, Molkugh’s commands were followed without question and the warriors responsible for stoking the prototype warship’s forward and aft torpedo launchers were hard at work. The secondary reactors responsible for powering the great vessel’s disruptor cannons were primed and carefully kept just back of maximum output so as not to risk breaching the cloak. Most of the *Akok* was empty. Their mission was to test the new cloaking device acquired through bloody means from the Romulans. While they carried a full complement of torpedoes and sufficient power cells to keep the disruptors firing without worry, she had a skeleton crew aboard. No damage/fire suppression teams. No real cooks or butchers. No auxiliary warriors to replace any dead or wounded. No additional warriors for boarding parties.

Khoth triggered the periscope mounted above his raised command chair and immediately began sweeping the emptiness between the *Akok*’s stationary position and the approaching Federation contact. “I see no targeting beams, no sign of energy shields...” spat Khoth as he focused on every scrap of data projected through his viewfinder.

“They are running with screens, Captain. Now closing to one hundred twenty-eight thousand kellicams,” called out Churik, the gunner.

“Grrrrr...something is not right. Do they see us, or are they as a drunkard stupidly managing to find his way to the brothel?” Khoth thumbed through his sensor menu and risked a high energy scan for anything anomalous in the higher frequencies.

“The ship stands ready for battle, Captain,” Molkugh reported in a low, gruff tone, barely loud enough for Khoth to hear.

“Hrmmm...”

“Should we not move to a more tactical position, Captain? The fourth planet is within an easy distance. We could take position on the far side and...”

“Silence!” hissed Khoth, pulling his face free of the periscope and glaring down at his First Officer.

Both Molkugh and Khoth kept their voices low, but everyone on the bridge was suddenly aware of the tension between their captain and his blood brother.

The approaching Federation ship was a concern. The rapidly escalating situation between the captain and the first officer was becoming an imminent threat. In the scant few seconds Kloth had pulled his attention from his high-powered scans to stare down Molkugh and a possible challenge to his authority, the wrath of Fek'Ihr flared and their destiny was writ in fire.

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"Energy surge starboard-bow, captain!" called Maggie from her tactical station.

"On screen!" Osip ordered.

The view switched over to the coordinates Kinsmere's tactical sensors had detected a sudden, violent energy release. For a fleeting instant, Osip, Solvux, Sero and the rest of the bridge crew watched a point of yellow/red plasma streak away into the darkness. Commander Solvux quickly set to analyzing the readings cast off by the retreating lightning bolt. At her console, Maggie Kinsmere was doing the same...but none of it mattered. Before Osip could be told that the streaking bolt of plasma which had suddenly appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, was a short phaser burst; an odd looking *K't'inga* cruiser decloaked and charged towards the *Meni T'Pra* at maximum impulse.

"RED ALERT! SHIELDS!" bellowed Osip as he threw himself forward and upright in his command chair with so much force that he nearly launched himself into the Conn.

"Disruptors, Captain!" yelled Maggie, but it was too late.

The shields had just formed as the angry green missiles of destabilizing plasma slammed into the *Meni T'Pra's* starboard quarter. The ship lurched violently as the RED ALERT klaxon blared, and the Master Alarm panel flashed with damage reports and systems status checks.

"Evasive, Mr. Sero! Return fire!" ordered Osip, steadying himself in his seat and hyper focusing on the rapidly approaching warship.

"Their disruptors are incredibly powerful, sir! Easily twenty-five percent stronger than anything we might have expected a *K't'inga* to have; we're out gunned!" shouted Kinsmere from her tactical post.

The *Miranda*-class starship had suffered a direct hit. Her shields had barely held, but her inertial dampeners had shown their age and were failing under the sudden and violent shock of the impact. *Akok's* forward torpedo port began to glow as she primed her launch tube. She was closing the distance between herself and the Federation ship rapidly. As the *Meni T'Pra* spun on her axis and put on speed to create distance between herself and the Klingon warship bearing down upon her, the Klingons let loose with a second disruptor volley from her forward emitters.

Kinsmere managed two clean shots from the starboard ventral phaser turrets before Sero's evasive maneuvers pulled her targeting scanners off-target. The first barrage slammed into the *K't'inga's* port nacelle's shields. The second passed beneath the Klingons and off into the blackness of space.

The second disruptor attack slammed into the ventral shields just behind the bridge module. A shower of hot plasma rained down over the communications station. Ensign Christopher yelled and threw himself to the deck to escape the hot shower of sparks.

"They're too close now for torpedoes, Captain!" called Maggie from her terminals as she worked to reacquire a target.

"Phasers, lieutenant, now! Sero, get us clear!" shouted Evengii as he signalled for damage reports to be called in to the bridge.

The *Miranda* moved along her X-axis to maximize the clearance between herself and the charging Klingons. Two more phaser blasts were loosed from the *Meni T'Pra's* portside turrets which caught the *K't'inga* along her ventral axis as she passed.

"I recommend speed, Captain. Klingon tactics will have them firing aft torpedoes as they pass," said Commander Solvux in an unnervingly calm tone.

"Thank you, Commander, I am aware," quipped Osip.

“They have damaged our artron dissipation transducer!” called out Okas over the comms link from the reactor pit.

For all the effort spent on replicating the Federation warp engine and adapting the stolen Romulan cloaking technology into the *K’t’inga’Cha*-class warship; the shield generator remained standard *K’t’inga* kit. This meant that the strength of the ventral shields midway between the (oversized) nacelles was inconsistent. The phaser hits had penetrated the energy barrier and slammed into the heavily armoured floor of the reactor pit. Without the transducer, channelling power seamlessly from the reactor to the cloak would be impossible.

“Gunner, ready aft torpedo!” ordered Khoth, still unsure how the starship had managed to detect them and why their attack approach had been so...clumsy.

The sound of the discharging disruptor chambers rumbled through the bridge.

“Direct hit, Captain! Their ventral shields are near collapse!”

Khoth snarled and furled his lips. The Federation had good shields. If not for the Starfleet technological baubles, *Akok* would have pounded the white and grey ship into dust with her first crushing barrage. The needed repairs to the transducer, like the situation with Molkugh, would have to wait until after the battle.

“Target their weapons pod once we clear their bulk. Then bring us around...for the kill.”



## Fight or Flight

"Options people, now!" called Osip as he watched the strange Klingon battlecruiser coast by over top of them on the static-filled viewscreen. Dampeners were failing. Ventral shields were nearly gone.

"Acamar IV, Captain! One-seven-three by two-nine," said Solvux from the science station where beads of perspiration had broken out across his bald brow.

"Sero, we need to move!"

Feeling the waves of anxiety, anger and fear washing off everyone around him was nearly overwhelming, but Lt. Commander Sero understood what his captain wanted and quickly adjusted the Conn to match Commander Solvux's coordinates. "Aye, sir. Here comes the *hop*!"

As the *Akok* rumbled over the sinking *Miranda*-class starship the light thrown by the nearby Acamarian star was momentarily blocked out and the *Meni T'Pra*, fell into darkness. For a few seconds neither ship was in a position to bring their arsenals to bear, so close had they passed one and other. The starship's maneuvering thrusters fired, and the brim of the old *Miranda*'s saucer pitched and rolled slightly to bring her into a line-of-sight orientation to the relatively nearby Acamar IV.

"Captain, reading a power surge from their aft quarter!" reported Kinsmere. For the moment there was nothing she could do; none of her targeting solutions could line-up on the Klingon warship lurking just above and behind them.

"Now Mr. Sero!"

As an angry red ball of death belched from the *Akok*'s rear torpedo launch tube, a blinding flash of light swallowed the *Meni T'Pra* and the wounded *Miranda*-class ship was gone.

"They fired..." breathed Maggie in a matter-of-fact tone. Her stomach roiled and heaved in nauseous waves. The trip through subspace had been brief, but extremely rough.

"Damage reports, now! Mr. Christopher?"

The young man was pulling himself off the deck with arms that felt like rubber. "Aye, sir?"

"Status?" Osip spun round in his chair and watched the young ensign climb back into his station's chair and run a quick diagnostic.

"Primary comms circuits are intact, sir...we're good."

"Quickly, encode and send on Starfleet Emergency Channel: *Klingons discovered in Mutara Sector. Hostile intent confirmed. Request all available backup immediately. Evengii, Meni T'Pra.* Attach present coordinates and copy logs and sensor readings."

Ensign Christopher immediately began encoding the captain's message as ordered. Evengii pulled himself out of the command chair and quickly moved over to join Commander Solvux who'd moved to the Master Systems Display terminal situated beside the science station.

"The inertial dampeners are failing, what else have they done to us?" asked Osip as he sidled up next to the tall, bald Vulcan commander.

"Yes, the dampeners will need to be taken off the mains and tied into some lower amplitude auxiliary feed to ensure even minimal operation. Several junction connections have gone offline, and the ventral shield generator is badly damaged..." With each point Solvux pointed a long, slender finger at the corresponding location on the MSD. "It will not take the Klingon's long to discover we only warp jumped behind Acamar IV, Captain."

Evengii drew a quiet breath and studied the flashing alert icons across the MSD. "Agreed, can we warp out of here and get closer to reinforcements?"

Solvux studied the panel himself, then turned to say something when...

"Engineering to bridge, Captain Evengii?"

Osip leaned over to the science station and opened a channel with Main Engineering. "Commander Buccheri, go ahead."

"What have you done to my ship!? I've got men down all over the place. I nearly lost Winslett down the gravimetric field displacement manifold!" Commander Dante Buccheri was the longest serving member of the *Meni T'Pra's* crew and was largely regarded as one of the best engineers in the fleet. He'd proudly tell anyone who asked that he'd studied advanced warp drive mechanics under Montgomery Scott himself.

"We're playing hide-and-seek with Klingons at the moment, Dante. I'd like to get us to friendlier environs in a hurry," said Osip, doing his best to sound nonchalant.

Solvux drew a breath himself and quietly folded his hands in front of himself to listen for the Chief Engineer to deliver the same update he himself was just about to...

"The dampeners are cooked, Captain. We've got to reroute their power supply to a lower amplitude otherwise we'll fry them and end up as salsa against the bulkheads. Even we do I wouldn't push it any faster than warp five at most; warp three should be alright." The best way to go about rerouting power would be to cut into the secondary EPS leads, but that would take at least an hour.

"How long?"

"Ordinarily..." There was another way, via junction twelve, but it wouldn't be the EPS lines they'd be tapping into and they'd be risking a ship-wide contamination.

“The Klingons will be on us anytime, Dante. I need this done, now!” He knew what he was ordering Dante to do, but there was no time. Without saying another word, Osip signalled a radiation hazard warning. Across the ship crewmen were donning dark grey radiation tags as a precaution.

“I have a team, sir. Sending...sending them now.”

Solvux said nothing. He returned to his scans for the *K't'inga*. Solvux knew, as Chief Buccheri did, that the only readily available source of lower amplitude power to keep the dampeners from overloading would have to come from the resin circulation injector feed. The ramifications of sending a team to tap that feed, were dire. A grey radiation tag hung from the Vulcan's tunic.

## Search and Destroy

"Gone?! What do you mean gone?" roared Khoth.

"They jumped to warp just as the weapon was triggered, Captain!" answered Churik in a tone of agitation mixed with disappointment.

"We had them, by Khalis! They were ours to finish!" Khoth sent the periscope back up into the bulkheads with an irritated and violent thrust.

"They've shown their cowardice. We should repair our cloak and return to..." Molkugh quickly fell silent when his blood brother cast his wild eyes down at him.

Khoth very much wanted to kill his First Officer. Molkugh had made a habit of stepping to the brink of insubordination and blood brother or no, he'd exhausted all the good will Khoth was prepared to extend. On a Klingon ship there could be only one captain. Molkugh clearly had forgotten this fact, or else he had worked himself up to the point of seizing the command for himself. This would not stand...but first, the enemy...

"Full sensor sweep. We struck that *baktag* barge too hard for them to have gotten far!" Khoth swept down from his command seat and strode over to where young Churik worked furiously.

Molkugh almost protested but caught himself.

"Their drive plasma indicates a lineal course, Captain..." said Churik as he flipped from one sensor panel to the next.

"Where?" purred Khoth. His *D'k Tahg* hung from its scabbard, which was tied around his left thigh. *First, I shall smash the Federation ship. Then I shall reassert my honour and right to command,* thought Khoth to himself as he watched his young gunner work quickly to seek their quarry. He could feel Molkugh's eyes upon him.

"The plasma trail seems to lead directly to the fourth planet of the system, Captain. I have no clear readings on any target, though," said Churik as he looked up from his panels and faced the ghoulish grin on his captain's face.

"Sooo...the Federations have run to ground. So be it."

Khoth backed away from the gunner's station and returned to his command chair slowly. The ghoulish, cold grin fixed to his face was a gruesome mask. He met Molkugh's eye with his own and for the first time in his life, felt nothing for the one-eyed warrior he'd considered closer than a brother.

"They may be sheltering behind the planetoid, Captain. Hoping not to be detected," offered Molkugh. His own *D'k Tahg* was sheathed and secured on his right thigh.

"Yes, my *brother*. They may well be. We shall approach them from the opposite face of that rock, then swing around and wipe them from the stars!" said

Khoth calmly as he drew closer to Molkugh's station to the right of the command chair.

"Qapla'," offered Molkugh as his captain drew closer and closer.

"Qapla'? Is that all you can muster after so many battles? After so many victories? Qapla'? No, no...be a warrior. QAPLA'!" roared Khoth, now just arm's length from where Molkugh stood.

Molkugh watched as his blood brother and captain smashed his right fist against his chest and then thrust his arm skyward in an Imperial salute. Things had been tense, strained even, for a long time between the two men. Molkugh had become concerned for his friend, but seeing the enthusiasm and hearing the passion in his blood brother's voice was buoying.

"QAPLA'!" roared Molkugh in response as he beat his own massive fist against his chest and stretched his strong right arm up and away from his body...

The sound was slick. Metal pulling free of heavy leather then singing through the air only to be silenced by the thick, wet jolt of a blade penetrating fabric, leather, skin, fatty tissue, muscle...

"Qapla'. Brother," cooed Khoth, as he jerked his blade up and twisted it home in Molkugh's sternum.

Molkugh made no protest. Molkugh made no sound. His arms fell limp to his sides as his life's blood poured from his torso as from a faucet, running hot and pink along his brother's blade and soaking his brother's hand before pooling on the deck of his brother's ship.

Khoth watched the light go out of Molkugh's eyes and savagely withdrew his knife. Molkugh collapsed in a bloody heap to draw his last few shuddering breaths. No one said a word.

Without bothering to clean the blood from his hand, Khoth ascended to his command and roared at the other warriors manning the bridge: "I am Khoth, son of Barak. Captain of the *Akok*!"

"Khoth! Khoth! Khoth!" chanted the younger warriors who'd witnessed their captain's display of honour and dominance. He was the son of the great Barak, hero of the Empire. He was unchallenged as their captain.

Khoth ordered his helm to proceed to Acamar IV at full sublight speed to stalk the prey awaiting them behind the barren planetoid. Churik was ordered to prepare a full spread of torpedoes and disruptor fire. They would crush the enemy this time and return to the Empire as heroes.

"First Officer Okas, report to the bridge and take up your post," growled Khoth over the *Akok*'s internal comms channel.

Molkugh's body lay at Khoth's feet.

## Damage Control

As Rami fell back having extinguished the plasma fire, Pisha and Davos hustled forward to begin clearing the access panels and conduits associated with ODN feed eight-nine-two.

"Where are we at, Ohm?" asked Tanya. She still wasn't entirely sure what they were supposed to be doing. The fire had been a freak occurrence they'd just happened upon at the right time.

Stad let his heavy-duty tricorder hang from its strap affixed to one of his radiation suit's silver clips and quickly drew his dedicated communicator from its secure pouch sewn into his suit's right hip. The simple device was paired to Commander Bucerri's own unit and allowed the Chief Engineer failsafe communications with any one of the ship's fifteen Damage Control Teams (DCTs).

"Priority One, we have to reroute power to the Inertia Dampeners from the mains to the...the..." Stad thumbed the small communicator's screen to scroll down the detailed instructions.

"The *what*, Ohm?! The EPS feeds?" asked Tanya trying to assemble the necessary tools for whatever it was they were supposed to do.

"No, no...chief needs us to uncouple the dampeners from the mains and feed them from the shielded resin circulation injector feed..." Ohm lowered his communicator and looked up at his commanding officer with a look of shock.

Tanya stared at her long-time friend with a blank look, processing what he'd just said. *Time, there's no time for this. Move*, she thought to herself.

"Alright...alright. Pisha, get the access panel to the EPS couplers off, now! Davos, shunt the flow to the Inertial Dampeners!"

They all stood slack-jawed for a second; not believing what they were being asked to do.

"Those Klingons will be back on us any second people! The whole ship is depending on us!" roared Tanya with a depth of feeling she'd never known before.

They all stood silent, frozen. The sound of metal crashing to the deck broke the spell. "Panel's off, Davos let's go!" called Pisha from the blackened wall of melted wires and scorched metal.

Her voice wasn't nearly as strong as it usually was. As an Andorian, her friends and coworkers took for granted her cold determination and strength; but where Tanya had somehow found the voice of a goddess, Pisha seemed diminished and afraid. The magnetic transition spanner in her strong blue hand trembled. The rest of DCT8 realized their strongest, fiercest member, was afraid.

The standard white radiological engineering suit (RES) was designed to protect against the effects of deadly gamma radiation warp reactors created during the matter/antimatter intermix. They'd proven effective for decades. They

were not rated against the particularly toxic radiological effects of trillithium resin. In fact, starships as a matter of routine, reported to specialized facilities to have their drive systems purged of the deadly resin that accumulated as a waste product from matter/antimatter reactions their warp engines depended upon.

To best manage the build up of resin during regular operations, starships employed a specially shielded system of secure conduits and injectors which kept the resin flowing slowly in a long circuit to prevent it from collecting and becoming dangerous. The system only ran along a few central decks close to main engineering and ended at a reservoir tank which could be used by properly equipped personnel to collect the resin for removal. Though startlingly toxic, the resin did have energetic properties very similar to low amplitude EPS feeds.

"The dampeners are off the mains," said Davos dryly as he stood up and backed away from the ruined panel.

Tanya looked over at Rami, the newest member of her team. She watched him as he retrieved a simple dynamic resonance cutter from Pisha's large crate. Yarnad stooped and retrieved the splice kit and patted the white clad shoulder of young Rami and walked with him towards the panel.

"Before we do this, Ohm you're sure of the Chief's orders?" asked Tanya as she fought back tears.

Stad extended his communicator towards his team lead. "Chief Dante...says he's...says he's sorry, Tanya. Says it should have been him."

A single tear spilled over the lower lid of Tanya D'arc's left eye and ran down her cheek until it struck the clear plastic of her respirator. She nodded. The tear dripped off her mask and fell to the deck.

"Alright people...this is going to have a kick. Rami, you're cutting in. Pisha...Pisha you're backing Rami up. Stabilize his shoulders. Once he gets through that conduit...." The thought of what would happen next was overpowering for Tanya at that moment. She couldn't speak for the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat.

"Once he cuts in, that *smeg* is going to come out like a geyser on Denobula II. You need to hold him steady to finish his work. It must be a clean cut, Rami," said Ohm looking into both Pisha and Rami's frightened eyes.

Yarnad stepped forward with a length of shielded conduit. Davos was beside him with the multiplex joiner in his strong gloved hands.

Tanya drew a shaking breath and composed herself. "Good, yes. Ohm will backup Pisha. Rami, if you can't finish the cut, Pisha will take over and Ohm will have her back. I'm backing up Yarnad and Davos. Clear?"

They all nodded. Rami ignited his cutter and with Pisha and Ohm Stad at his back. As a team they moved forward, braced one and other and Rami began making his cut.

Black, hot, sticky trilitium resin jetted out of the shielded conduit Rami held his tool against in an angry spray. Resin hissed up and stuck to the corridor's ceiling, splattered across the deck and stuck to the opposite bulkhead. Rami's white suit was soon dark and slick. Alarms rang out. At the head of the junction corridor a solid duranium radiation door crashed down and sealed the junction and DCT8 from the rest of the ship. Rami didn't stop cutting.

Pisha could feel the young human's muscles working and straining through the thick, useless radiation suit. She felt weak. Her stomach was churning, and her vision was beginning to blur. She held the boy's shoulders square though and braced him against her lithe, muscular body. The resin was pouring out now. Behind her, Pisha could feel Stad supporting her.

Rami grunted. His knees shook, but he remained standing right up until his cutter finally worked its way through the thick conduit spewing toxic black resin. Behind his clear plastic respirator, Rami smiled, then vomited. His eyes rolled back in his head. He collapsed to the black, trilitium soaked deck, dragging Pisha and Ohm with him.

"Move, move!" called Tanya as she pushed against Davos, who pushed against Yarnad.

The second team moved into position and Yarnad fumbled with the coupler he'd readied. Davos steadied his partner's shoulders and watched as Stad pulled Pisha out of the pooling filth the first team had fallen into. Rami didn't look to be moving. Davos could see that the boy's radiation tag was a deep scarlet colour. Pisha's was a deep, burnt orange and fading towards scarlet fast. Stad's was orange, on its way to the burnt hue Pisha's radiation tag sported. Yarnad grunted and pulled his coupler's router spigot to the dead dampener feeds.

"Ughhh!...Joiner, JOINER!" called Yarnad over his shoulder.

Davos let his right hand fall away from Yarnad's shoulder to retrieve the tool, but the second he let go of his friend, Yarnad collapsed just as Rami had. He landed face up in the resin. His radiological tag was a deep scarlet. Without thinking, Davos charged towards the spewing mess and set to work with his tool and tightened the coupler-bypass Yarnad had only barley managed to slap in place. Thick smoke filled the confined chamber. Davos vomited in his mask but continued to sloppily join the coupler to the split conduit and dead feeds. He focused on stemming the trickling founts of resin. His eyesight faded rapidly.

He raised his joiner so Tanya could see, then soundlessly toppled over to join his friend, dead on the floor. Tanya grabbed the tool just as Davos failed and quickly moved to finish the job. Her own radiological tag was already a deep scarlet. The world around her was a hazy, foul swirl of greys and blacks. Vomit had pooled in her respirator, but she couldn't smell anything. She couldn't taste anything or hear anything. She could barely see to work, but she pushed the joiner



over the curves and bumps of the hastily rigged bypass over and over and over again until she too, slumped and fell...

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"The Klingons are approaching from the opposite side of the planet, Captain," said Solvux dryly.

Osip didn't ask if his first officer was certain of what could only be limited sensor readings. Time was up. "Mr. Kinsmere shields up. Mr. Sero..."

"Engineering to bridge, inertia dampeners online! Dampeners are online!" came Dante's voice over the internal comms channel.

"Mr. Sero, warp five! Get us out of here!" yelled Osip and the *Meni T'Pra* jumped into subspace. "Emergency medical and Hazmat teams meet me on deck five, junction twelve. Mr. Solvux, you have the bridge."

“Gone-qa’?!” said Churik on a ragged exhale of foul breath.

“WHAT!?” roared Khoth as he launched himself to his feet from his command chair above his bridge crew and the body of his blood brother.

“They...they jumped to warp just as we rounded the planet, sir...” offered Okas from his new place at the status panel to the right of the captain’s dais.

Khoth stood open-mouthed staring at the field of empty stars displayed on the *Akok*’s main viewer. His fists were balled so tightly that the skin stretching over his knuckles had turned white. His left hand, sticky and still coated in Molkugh’s blood, dripped like a dirty sponge giving up the last of its filth before it dried out completely. His heart was pounding, his fever peaked. His enemy...gone.

“Track them!” Khoth shouted to no one in particular.

“Their warp trail leads directly to their space port at Cygnet XIV in the Rigellian Sector, Captain!” answered Churik as he made safe the disruptors and torpedo controls he’d been preparing to loose on the old Federation battleship.

“According to our intelligence, Captain, that port is the berth for four additional Starfleet battleships. Two of which are of *Excelsior* design...” reported Okas, having called up the relevant files to best inform his captain.

“Whaaa! Then we shall run them down with our new engines, intercept course! Maximum speed!” Khoth yowled in frustration, nearly blinded by bloodlust.

“Sir, at maximum speed we won’t intercept until we are well within the tactical envelope of the other Federation warships. We cannot jeopardize the *Akok*!”

At that instant, had Khoth a disruptor pistol, he’d have happily vaporized Okas. Not for insubordination, not even for cowardice...but for being right. The *Akok* couldn’t be captured. Bad enough they’d been spotted at all...they’d failed to prevent the Starfleet cowards from sending priority messages. Khoth had planned to destroy the Starfleet *nuch* and be gone before anyone could find the *Akok*. Now the hunter was the hunted.

Khoth slumped back into his chair. *How...? How had they been detected at all? And why had the Starfleet commander taken such an odd tact in their engagement?* thought Khoth to himself as he let his pulse subside and tried to focus on getting his ship and crew home. There would be much to report and much to answer for...

“Pilot, put us in a polar orbit...Okas, get the transducer back online. We must cloak and...return to Klingon Space to preserve our ship,” growled Khoth, son of Barak.

"The *Meni T'Pra* just warped out of the system, Captain Xillion," reported the operative manning the Mission Ops station on the bridge of the *N12*.

Xillion narrowed his eyes and nodded. They still had their sensor drones deployed. He was gratified to hear the old *Miranda* had escaped, but he kept his composure and remained stoic. "Our telemetry?"

"All drones showing five-by-five, Captain. Retrieval shouldn't be a problem once the Klingons leave," answered the black-uniformed operative.

The odd *K't'inga* warship missed the *Meni T'Pra* by a matter of seconds. She hung in space behind Acamar IV for a few moments, then moved into a polar orbit. Speculating about what the Klingon commander might be up to was moot. Doubtlessly the warriors aboard the warship were incensed at losing their quarry, but what the Klingons were doing now was what interested Xillion.

*Meni T'Pra* had managed to send two priority communiques back to Starfleet, complete with sensor records, about an unauthorized, unidentified, hostile Klingon warship operating inside Federation space. Clear violations of the Khitomer Accords. Why the Klingons were lurking around the Mutara Sector was something of a mystery to Captain Xillion, but his orders were to draw them out and gather intelligence, not interpret their motivations.

From what Xillion had been able to glean from the *N12*'s sheltered blind above Acamar II the reports that the Klingons had stolen and adapted warp technology from the *Excelsior* Program seemed well-founded. The intelligence concerning a modified cloaking device based on Romulan designs also appeared to have merit.

"Are the Klingons still holding station over Acamar IV?"

The operative at Mission Ops consulted a secondary sensor feed before responding. "They are still in a polar orbit, running with no cloak. I'd speculate they're conducting repairs before they get underway, Captain."

Xillion rose from his seat and glanced around the bridge quickly. "Maintain our position. Silent running until the Klingons are gone. I'll be in the Ready Room. Inform me immediately if there's any change in the Klingons' disposition."

"Aye, Captain."

Xillion walked silently off the bridge to the spartan Ready Room where he could make a secure transmission to Admiral Bautlin back at K3 in orbit around Jupiter. Once the Klingons were gone, the sensor drones would be retrieved and Contemporaneous Affairs could start analyzing the latest Klingon advancements.

Following the recent Cardassian occupation of Bajor and the emergence of their new heavy battleships, intelligence was more crucial than ever in the never-ending fight to defend the Federation. Data from the *USS Fury* concerning

the Cardassian ships was still being scrutinized. The Admiral would be pleased to review substantial data about the Klingon ships as well. Happier still to know relations between the Federation and the Klingon Empire would be strained as a result of this strange sortie.