

### **DISPATCHES: P'NOM**

By Glenn G Maitland

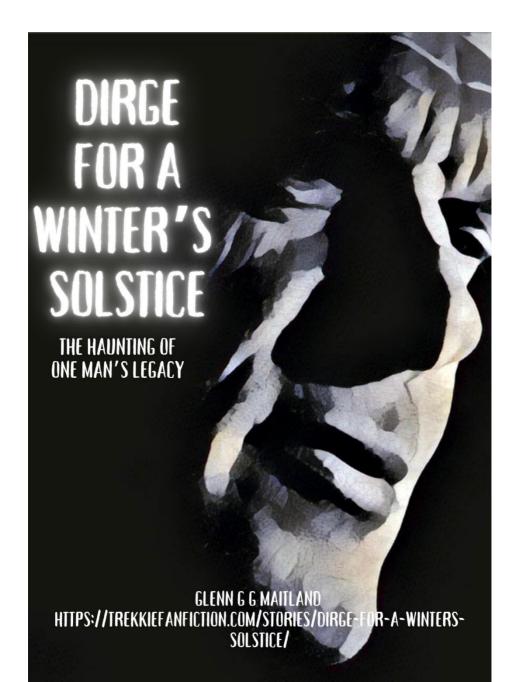
"Laurna was a legitimate prodigy. She earned her first degree in engineering at fourteen. She developed a relationship with Dr. Daystrom early on. Nothing inappropriate in case you were wondering. She always described him as a father figure in her life.

She assisted him with his early work on the M4 A.I. system before taking a lead role in the development of the vertical warp core program. She designed the purpose-built refit dock and supervised the modernization of the *Constitution* fleet "

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"Dannar Teague. To this day no one knows who Dannar's father was. Like his mother, Dannar was gifted from the start. He went to work in the yards before he even reached high school. In his late teens he met and paired with Jakkob Marlatti and the two of them eventually began to lay the groundwork for Transwarp. Dannar was the driving force behind the *Excelsior* project. Transwarp never happened, but Dannar spent decades of his life chasing that dream."

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### VOLLO

Commander Sohon sat back in her command chair and watched as the Tal Shiar operatives hand-picked by Caithlin Dar to crew this unique *Talon*-class scout/interceptor expertly manipulated their controls. Sohon had been master of Dar's customized ship for more than three cycles now, but the pride and nearly overwhelming sense of responsibility she felt not only to Dar, but to the Empire itself was still palpable. Following the purge of Ak-hyi, Admiral Dar moved quickly to bring Sohon to Aia to face what Caithlin had hoped would be Sohon's future.

The Admonition was too much.

Sohon awoke in the infirmary aboard *Vollo* having been transported from the surface of Aia on Dar's orders. She'd stepped forward to experience the full breadth of the Admonition with nine others including the prisoner they'd removed from AK-hyi just as Mivik and his Remans began their rampage. Ten stepped forward to experience the pure truth and horrible light of the Admonition. Three joined the sisterhood of the Zhat Vash. Sohon was not among them.

Six women; warriors, scientists, operatives, clawed their own eyes out and smashed their skulls to pulp with jagged rocks as they screamed and howled in terror and pain as they watched their sanity die in the light of the Admonition. Sohon too screamed and raked her face to ribbons as the light proved too much for her mind to handle. Her left eye was ripped free and crushed to a pulp of bloody jelly in her fit of self-destruction. Dar and two other Zhat Vash sisters stood by and watched helplessly as the potentials either stood or fell in the Admonition's light.

The others destroyed themselves. They pitched and rolled within the perimeter of sacred stones encircling the source of the Admonition. They used many of these sacred stones to bash the life from their own bodies. Sohon, somehow, fell backwards and clear of the perimeter where she convulsed and twitched, but managed to keep herself from inflicting further damage.

Four dark bloody green gashes marred Sohon's left cheek, her left eye was gone. Four dark green gashes marred her right cheek and a flap of skin hung grotesquely below her jaw exposing her gritted teeth. She had failed to take the Admonition but had remarkably survived. Dar had her transported to the ship immediately. She would not become Zhat Vash.

That had been nearly five cycles ago. Caithlin Dar was elevated to a seat on the Empire's Continuing Committee as a special Cabinet Member. She wasn't chief of the Tal Shiar, or any other recognized organization, but she was acknowledged as special council to the Praetor. She saw to it that Sohon, once mentally recovered, was elevated to the rank of Commander and brought into the Tal Shiar proper.

A Keras Class Warbird approached from the inner system.

### DISPATCHES: P'NOM

The following events take place in 2317, nearly six years following the signing of the Treaty of Algeron and the events of the <u>Cor Coroli Convergence</u>.

The derelict listening post at Phanta Two monitored subspace chatter emanating from the Kea Star System by way of its deep space receiver arrays. The listening post at the furthest edge of Federation space on the border of the Romulan Neutral Zone had been maintained by Starfleet up until 2311. After the Treaty of Algeron was signed, parsecs of formerly Federation space along the Neutral Zone were realigned to fall within Romulan authority. Phanta Two and its previously automated support plant was decommissioned remotely. Her long-range transmitter assemblies were shunted, and all sensitive information purged from her data banks and operations systems.

A specially tuned array installed aboard space station K3 in orbit around Jupiter managed to grab fragments of uncoded Romulan transmissions monitored by the slowly failing receivers still operating at Phanta Two.

K3, officially designated as the operations center for Starfleet's largest secure scrapyard and mothball fleet, is under the command of Contemporaneous Affairs. Nothing of the following incepted transmissions was forwarded to Starfleet's Logistics and Strategies Compound for Starfleet Security's attention...

Kjumnaihsou 'hh Vertun, hwiiy iekil'eirh nomann'l mnakhao. Hnhaudr aumorr'll aellei i'ffman nah'lai pelaere iudaiht uaefvalhuneitrde'h'n mibh.

\*Translated from the Romulan: "This is the Warbird *Vertun*, you have entered a restricted system. Transmit authorization codes and manifests or prepare to be fired upon."

Kjumnaihsou 'hh ehdhihss idh tagor Vollo, dais'erei'riov Sohon. T'hea Tal Shiar hiera innaehv a mneani delta io htta'nvmniahrei temohrie hvaedroalh ehdhiss. Aellei ehdhihss Praetor. Hwiiy htaodt'ia'rhoinnie trunvuiteihjiwh uwheawhoiiik'heqhr Vertun. Hsouh. Ehri hvaedroalh mnei nunh'le iudaiht hrrau'khir aellei ahefvi/aeulleakjs'hnvaeh'n hnafirh'rau iudaiht

ta'hwswai ujudhueiusmm'ukssdh ahht nta'fviy aeshim aekiraekaelhta' hrrafv rhi pnarr hvaedroalh kjumnaihsou calanam. Balhthealh. Aehfvi.

\*Translated from the Romulan: "This is *Vollo*, Commander Sohon. We are a Tal Shiar tasked vessel on a red-delta-one classified assignment by order of the Continuing Committee and the Praetor himself. You will stand down *Vertun*. Reverse course. Delete all record of our presence here and see to it that no other patrol ships come within three parsecs of this region. Transmitting authorization codes now. Comply.

### RETURN

"The *Vertun* has acknowledged receipt of our transmission, commander. She's powering down disruptors and reversing course," reported Sub-Commander Surith at communications.

Sohon silently watched the tactical display on *Vollo's* main viewer with her one remaining eye. The contact that was identified by its Imperial transponder as the Warbird *Vertun* was slowly backing away from the field of operation. The last time *Vollo* was in this system she was nearly completely blind owing to the intense graviton radiation. At her last refit, when Commander Sateeka left for a new assignment with the exploratory fleet pushing the Empire's borders towards the Delta Quadrant and Sohon was given command, *Vollo* received a sensor upgrade comparable to those systems developed for the *Horo*-class Warbirds. The basic tactical view was simplistic, but it was infinitely better than the garbled static and blind returns the last voyage to AK-hyi had provided.

Once the *Vertun* had cleared *Vollo's* limited sensor range, Sohon activated the internal communications system. "We've arrived at the designated coordinates. Negative returns."

"Acknowledged. Hold position, I'll be there directly," came a dry, emotionless response.

"Commander, continuing scans in standard cycles...nothing of consequence," reported Major Rhian at tactical.

Sohon wasn't surprised to hear nothing had yet been found. A small fleet of better equipped Warbirds had been all through the system and found nothing for over five cycles. Still, Dar had ordered action on her sister's insistence that a threat loomed in the graviton-soaked debris field beyond the Lattice. As the dark sister paced up the ramp to the bridge from the lower deck, Sohon ordered Rhian to conduct another scan.

The women manning the bridge stations remained focussed on their duties and not one turned to watch the black robed figure take her place at Commander Sohon's side. All of them were members of the Tal Shiar; sworn to secrecy and highly trained, feared by all but a handful of the Empire's elite...yet none of them were comfortable with the sister of the Zhat Vash

aboard. Caithlin Dar had been Zhat Vash, but she was different. The *dark* sister...the dark sister was an outsider, an unknowable creature.

"Commander Sohon, make ready the pod. I will be departing presently. Hold position until I contact you." She surveyed the black and silver uniformed bridge crew with a dispassionate eye. No one looked up from their stations.

"We've detected nothing. Surely, if there was a ship out there it would have been discovered by now," croaked Sohon to the small dark figure standing to her left.

"No. It has used the graviton interference and the various magnetic fields emanating from the asteroid field to keep itself hidden. It's out there."

Sohon turned to face the younger woman wrapped in the long black Gax wool cloak. Dar's little bird wore her hood up. As focused and cold as she'd become after cycles of reconditioning and enduring the Admonition itself; the dark sister was still keenly aware that she did not wholly belong to the Empire. She was not and would never be truly Romulan.

"You're certain you want to go alone?"

"It won't accept anyone it doesn't recognize. The pod?"

Sohon glanced down at the status relay built into *Vollo's* command chair's right arm. An amber indicator diode flashed, indicating the *Talon*-class vessel's single EV Pod was prepped and ready for launch.

"The pod is ready. Its sensors are not compatible with the graviton interference, little bird."

"The modifications I've made to the pod's transponder will suffice. I must reiterate that you hold position and take no action without my signal."

Sohon signalled the Sub-corporal manning the *Vollo's* narrow launch bay to prepare for the dark sister's arrival. She slowly turned in her chair to face the black-robed figure. Seated, Commander Sohon was very nearly eye-to-eye with the dark little sister of the Zhat Vash. She gazed into the shadows around the little alien's face, looking for the terrified child she'd first encountered six cycles earlier. Her ruined face with its green scars and black and silver eye-patch would have unsettled most anyone, but the dark sister was stoic.

"We will hold this position, sister."

The dark figure said nothing. She turned back towards the ramp leading to the lower deck and her Gax wool cloak streamed behind her.

Sohon watched as the small alien descended into the body of the ship on her way to the pod two decks below. Absently she touched her scared and pitted left cheek. Somehow the terrified little creature had survived that which had almost driven Sohon herself to suicide.

### BRAIN

The pod was simple. *Talon*-class vessels weren't large enough to support a full-sized shuttle. The Imperial Design Committee identified the need for *Talon* interceptors to have the capacity to launch and retrieve an ancillary craft none-the-less. To provide the interceptors with the most feasible solution to this need without a major redesign, the IDC modified the industrial pods favoured by the civilian mining authority. Though only capable of sublight space travel and limited by restrictive fuel capacity, the pods were robust and extremely maneuverable.

The *Vollo's* pod had a capacity for three passengers and a pilot. Caithlin Dar had made frequent use of the pod during her years aboard *Vollo*. She distrusted most transporters. The green capsule shaped pod was equipped with a military transponder and communications array and an upgraded interior for Dar's comfort and safety. For months the sister from the Zhat Vash had been rewiring the pod's transponder.

The Sub-corporal checked the pod's airlock once the Zhat Vash sister was aboard to confirm a secure seal. Then she removed the pod's restrictor pins from the launch bay's retrieval arm. From behind a dusty grey transparent viewport the dark sister lowered her hood and began running the pre-launch checks for the Pod. Outside the Sub-corporal gave a visual signal to indicate the pod was secure, then sealed herself in a claustrophobic launch booth.

A klaxon sounded three times and the hatch leading from the narrow launch bay to the rest of the ship was magnetically sealed. In a rush, the atmosphere within the bay was evacuated and the small chamber was depressurized. The Sub-corporal triggered the exterior door and a moment later the pod was hanging from the aft of the *Vollo* on the retrieval arm.

With the flip of a toggle on the pod's simple control panel the little green capsule broke free of the arm and tumbled unfettered into space. For long moments only the life support systems hummed and kept the pod's lone passenger alive. She tumbled deeper and deeper into the asteroid spray which snaked out from the point where the original mining colony had been destroyed decades earlier. The *Vollo* was out of sight by the time she activated the station-holding thrusters and powered the modified

transponder. The ion plant was primed but remained offline. She waited in silence.

Then, as she'd expected, *Brain* called out to what it thought was NAR-1331. The basic navigational screen chirped and populated with rudimentary telemetry transmitted from an unseen starship. She powered the simple engine and slowly followed the breadcrumbs *Brain* had laid-out for the long-lost runabout and the survivors of the *Isadore*.

### COLD WASH

\* \* \* \* \*\*\*\*\*\*\*

>Systems check...VIRGO 1.0: Hibernation cycle interrupted. Commence scanning...

>Passive scan cycle...indications positive. Secondary telemetry pickup feed...confirmed. Power primary fusion reactor...fzzzrtt...ERROR. Access secondary inducer circuit...fzzrtt...ERROR. Routing power through secondary EPS conduits. Power secondary fusion reactor...initiating lifesupport systems. Tractor emitters on-line. Targeting...targeting...targeting...

The bulbous green pod navigated around chunks of rock strewn with sherds of alien shrapnel irradiated with gravitons. Dressed in her heavy black robes she calmly sat motionless in the operator's seat watching the flotsam, ice and dust drift past her small viewport. She was picking her way through the remains of Kea I. A planet destroyed by the *Borg*. The pod's instruments were mostly dark. Only the basic navigational display functioned. The proximity alert lights were flashing, as were the MASTER ALARM indicators. The gravitons were completely overwhelming the simple craft's modest sensors and navigational arrays. She ignored the lights, blocked out the sound of the alarms and trusted the autopilot to follow the signals being broadcast by the multitronic computer housed in the hidden starship somewhere in the darkness.

>Systems check...VIRGO 1.0: Primary fusion reactor offline. Secondary reactor functioning at 85%. Life-support systems to 65%. Level 2 diagnostic initiated. Target acquired. Telemetry confirms NAR-1331...fzzzrtt...ERROR. Basic sensors return incongruent mass and proportions....fzzzrtt...ERROR. Basic sensors return incongruent mass and...telemetry confirms NAR-1331. Encrypted identification algorithms confirmed. Override basic sensors. Target acquired. Lock-on primary tractor emitter.

A quick glance over at the pod's communications receiver confirmed what she expected. The graviton radiation had completely wiped away the pod's link with the *Vollo*, there was no going back. A handful of rocks and debris rattled off the hull and pitted the viewport. The pod continued to follow

the invisible breadcrumbs deeper and deeper into the darkness and closer to the larger asteroids which had once constituted an entire planet.

She focused on her breathing and resisted the urge to toggle off the automated flight control system. She silently tumbled through the dark vacuum...waiting patiently. Her pod fell behind a large black rock which blotted out the light from the system's two suns. With only the small pinpoints of light flickering and flashing up from the pod's control panel, she melted into a deep blackness and closed her eyes. She could easily toggle off the auto control and fire the thrusters to climb back into the light, but her mind was too disciplined to allow her to give in to fear. Her mission too critical. Behind closed eyes she relived the Admonition and steeled herself against the darkness.

From the pitch blackness closer to one of the largest asteroids slowly tumbling through space, a flash. She sat ridged in her chair, eyes closed, hood drawn up over her head. From behind her eyelids, she saw the sudden burst of quivering blue light erupt from the nothingness. The pod shuddered slightly. Without opening her eyes, she extended a black gloved hand and deactivated the pod's autopilot. Three minutes later and the pod was pulled into the hangar bay especially designed to house NAR-1331.

The tractor disengaged once the bulky green capsule was aboard *Virgo*. She opened her eyes then and quickly braced herself. The locking clamps built into *Virgo's* flight deck were meant for Teague's runabout, not a small green Romulan pod. The capsule rocked and wobbled momentarily without the firm stability supplied by the tractor beam, then tilted to its port and tumbled over on itself. Within the pod she clung to her seat and rolled along with the pod.

The green capsule wobbled along the narrow flight deck and came to a rest against one of the towering shield generators which had once protected *Virgo* from the deadly radiation engulfing Starbase 39. When she was sure the pod was relatively stable, she released her harness and gently tumbled from her operator's seat to land on her control pit's ceiling. Thankfully, the primary boarding hatch wasn't blocked.

The woman in the flowing black robes tentatively pulled herself out of the overturned pod and planted her black rubberized EV boots on *Virgo's* flight deck. The sound of crunching frost filled the hangar bay. The air was stale, and the temperature aboard ship was barely above freezing. Virgo had

been in a cold wash for more than half a decade. A rush of emotion nearly overcame her for just a second. She planted her second foot and pulled her hood back to look around the frozen hanger to the long ramp that would lead her to the bridge.

>Lieutenant P'nom...it has been seventy-eight months, three weeks, two days and fifteen hours since the anticipated point of rendezvous. Where are the others?

The synthesized voice sounded odd. Old, slow...out of practice. She cleared her throat and realized she'd not spoken a word of Federation Standard in close to four years herself...

"Hello, Brain. Status?"

### VIRGO

She took a long shuddering breath of the crisp, stale air. The hidden speakers crackled and buzzed. *Brain's* response time was lagging. She noted that the lighting elements lining the vaulted ceiling of the hanger bay were not yet fully illuminated. The bulkheads and decks were thick with a white coating of frost.

>The primary fusion reactor is nonresponsive. A diagnostic is currently being performed to assess the situation. Secondary reactor is operating at 68% efficiency. Warp core is presently offline. Long-range sensors are inactive.

>Lieutenant P'nom, where are the others?

The half-Vulcan woman dressed in black took two more steps around the frosted deck plates to ensure her boots would prevent her from slipping. She exhaled and watched her breath stream up towards the exhaust vents nestled high above.

>Lieutenant P'nom...internal sensors return incongruent telemetry on the vessel presently occupying the landing platform.

Turning back to the upended capsule resting upside down against the port side bulkhead, P'nom ducked her head back into the gaping boarding hatch and rooted around for the field case she'd stowed before departing the *Vollo*.

>Lieutenant P'nom...internal sensors return incon...

"Yes *Brain*. That is correct. I requisitioned a Romulan craft to board *Virgo*." She backed out of the pod cradling the black case. Once clear of the hatch, P'nom tucked the heavy package under her right arm and pulled her black cloak closed with her left hand.

>The vessel presently occupying the landing platform transmitted the correct encryption sequence to trigger retrieval.

P'nom stared at the erect landing hooks protruding from the center of the narrow landing bay. Four well-greased duranium claws standing like tombstones which should have connected with the female linkage assemblies built in NAR-1331's belly. As always, the Admonition was lurking just below the surface of her thoughts.

"I affected a false encryption in order to gain access to Virgo."

>Lieutenant P'nom, where are the others? "Is the bridge powered?"

### A SACRED CALLING

The pain was still searing into her brain even as she lay flat on her back, breathless and unable to move. She could hear nothing and everything all at once and while both eyes were wide open and fixed on the mauve coloured sky and the suns blazing overhead, she couldn't focus or see through the tears streaming down her face.

Death.

The culmination of an intense hatred erupting in a hellacious fireball that swept away every organic thing everywhere.

Cold, synthetic eyes watching it all.

The air was dry. She felt as though her ribs were broken and all the strength had been sapped from her body. The tears fell in two constant streams. A shuddering whimper escaped her partially open lips.

Horror.

It seemed she lay in the dust for hours. Her head thumped; her ears rang... the Universe was a delicate, vulnerable thing. Absolute understanding had ripped into her consciousness like a rabid Klingon with a bat'leth. It wasn't clarity. It wasn't catharsis. The understanding furnished by the Admonition was horror and pain and all consuming.

".....khiilalev nei'rrh?"

Slowly, P'nom drew something more than a shallow breath and lolled her head towards the distant, numb voice cutting through the din.

Khiilalev nei'rrh: little bird. Dar referred to her as her little bird.

The tears ran away from P'nom's eyes, and she could see Caithlin Dar kneeling down beside her. Then the sounds of sobbing and grunting became clear. The others were either laying on their backs in agony, or strewn about the desert floor in pools of green blood, many still clutching the stones and rocks they'd used to beat their own skulls in with.

"So, little bird...you've surprised us all. You've received the Admonition and survived." Dar was dressed in the same long black robes the other women had all been supplied with. Her placid face with its delicate and beautiful features was lost in the black pool cast by the oversized hood she'd drawn up over her elaborate hairdo.



### INTERFACE

The bridge was dimly lit. A uniformed crust of white frost covered the bulkheads, floor, seats and long control console. Her trek up the long ramp from the landing bay had been slow and cautious. She didn't want to risk slipping on the frosty deck plates. Her breath snaked out of her nostrils and curled upwards in slow trails. Standing at the threshold to *Virgo's* long abandoned bridge felt like standing at the entrance to some ancient and long forgotten tomb.

>Lieutenant P'nom, where are the others?

*Brain's* synthetic voice crackled from an unseen speaker mounted above the empty command chair. P'nom shivered as she surveyed the long console. It was black and blank. The bulkheads were blank as well. She remembered the dynamic interfaces and confluence of holographic digital control surfaces the empty grey room had populated with once she and her former crewmates had first activated *Brain*. It was all so empty now. Cold and sterile.

A shiver ran up her back as she willed herself to move towards the long black console. Again, the sound of her boots treading through the layer of frost beneath her feet filled her ears. She carefully laid out the heavy package she'd brought up from the pod atop the blank console. Within the heavy rectangular case was a data core, a standard retrieval processor and a web of coaxial patch cords, fibre optic cable and interface links that had all been fixed with Federation plugs.

Stepping out and around to the back of the console, P'nom pried loose a large access panel on the backside of the long black counter where once she, Moira and Tagir had sat and operated the unique starship Dannar Teague had furnished them with. Another shiver ran through her. She took a moment to draw up the heavy black hood of the warm robe she wore.

>Lieutenant P'nom, where are the others?

"Brain, what is the temperature on the bridge currently?" she asked frankly, ignoring the computer's repeated inquiry as she began plugging into the diagnostic ports behind the Conn.

>The bridge is currently at negative two degrees Celsius. Where are Captain Shorh, Chief Specialist Rhupp and Ensign Dirlo?

P'nom watched the retrieval processor in her case and was satisfied to see three red diodes illuminate. She'd spent years planning out how to accomplish this task. So far, her efforts were paying off. *Brain* was a sophisticated computer program created from the pioneering, even *visionary* work of the late Dr. Richard Daystrom. It was a sophisticated blend of multitronic and artificial intelligence programming capable of running a starship with minimal organic supervision.

Following the disastrous failure of Control at the close of the Klingon War, Starfleet and the Federation abandoned the ill-conceived ambition of allowing an A.I. to guide and indeed even control, the day-to-day operations and objectives of their fleet across the quadrant. Nearly two generations later Dannar Teague apparently exploited the same "loophole" in the litany of prohibitions put in place since Control went rogue and revived his *Uncle* Richard's work in multitronics.

Brain could control in excess of 98% of Virgo's systems, but Brain was dependent on a sentient, organic commander for overall executive decision making. That "organic commander" had been Shorh Ch'orithron, former captain of the USS Isadore.

Multitronics had been a massive failure when Dr. Daystrom's final version of his creation, the M5, had destroyed and murdered several hundred Starfleet service members, a robotic freighter and several starships. He'd imprinted his own synaptic engrams into the M5's logic matrix, creating a "thinking" machine prone to homicidal paradoxical decisions. Teague had created *Brain* using the multitronic model, but he'd foregone imprinting any organic engrams in favour of striking a balance between mechanical efficiency and organic executive functioning.

P'nom had reasoned that *Brain* would have carried out Captain Ch'orithron's instructions all those years earlier and sought a place to conceal *Virgo* from the Romulans while the crew executed their plan to investigate the mysterious facility in the Kea System. After months of interrogation, coercion and the eventual revelation of the Admonition, P'nom had shared all she knew about *Brain* and *Virgo* with both Dar and the sisterhood of the Zhat Vash.

"Why is it so cold, Brain?"

>To ensure *Virgo* remained undetected by Romulan patrols it was necessary to depressurize the bridge and landing bay, terminate life support and power down primary energizers to eliminate anomalous emissions.

"The frost everywhere?" She watched her equipment closely to ensure she had in fact made a successful connection with *Virgo's* Conn.

>When NAR-1331 failed to return at the specified time a large fleet of Romulan vessels was detected entering the system. Initial scans indicated that the collection of twenty-three vessels were Warbirds. It was necessary to rapidly depressurize and power-down *Virgo* to avoid detection. The sudden cold of the vacuum of space caused residual hydrogen and oxygen molecules inside *Virgo's* crew space to flash-freeze.

"Why is the primary reactor offline?" She spoke quickly to keep *Brain* from rejoining its previous line of inquiry.

>The primary fusion reactor is nonresponsive. A diagnostic is currently being performed to assess the situation. Secondary reactor is operating at 68% efficiency. Warp core is presently offline. Long-range sensors are inactive.

"Initiate a Level Five diagnostic on all propulsion systems, beginning with the maneuvering thrusters and working through to a full examination of the warp drive systems."

>fzzrtt...

P'nom waited.

>fzzrtt...

This was her gamble. Teague had encoded *Brain* to follow Captain Ch'orithron's commands... but *Virgo* wasn't a Starfleet ship and *Brain* wasn't a Starfleet program. It was P'nom's hope that by manipulating the multitronic software with empathetic logic she might just get *Brain* to cooperate with her. She'd read about how *Brain's* much maligned predecessor the M5 had been defeated by a shrewd captain using a logical paradox to cause the program to second guess its own will of action. *Brain* wasn't equipped with the same "emotional" elements of the M5, but a "logic-bomb" just might...

>A Level Two diagnostic is already in progress to assess the primary fusio...

"Brain, initiate the Level Five diagnostic as instructed. Virgo is compromised." The hint of a smile lit P'nom's face. A yellow diode flared to

life on the retrieval processor, she had full access to *Virgo's* passive systems. All she needed now was for *Brain* to cooperate.

>fzzrtt...

P'nom stood shivering in the cold stale air, waiting. The firewalls were down, which meant *Brain* was pliable. The question now was how long would it take to distract the program to compliance?

>fzzrtt...fzzttintiating Level Five diagnostic on all propulsion systems. "Brain, download and transfer all navigational and sensor data..."

### A SACRED CHARGE

"If what you're saying is true, then there's a synthetic intelligence lurking somewhere around the Eisen Lattice itself," said Caithlin Dar as she leaned back in her seat within her quarters aboard the *Vollo*.

"It's *multitronic*, sister. Similar to an A.I., but different." P'nom stood at a respectful distance from Dar's desk. It had been nearly six months since her encounter with the Admonition. She was still recovering.

Dar was silent as she considered what her *Khiilalev nei'rrh* had brought to her. From the moment she and Sohon had taken the little half Vulcan from the caverns of AK-hyi, Dar knew the lone Starfleet lieutenant was hers to do with as she pleased. The Remans had been successfully whipped into a riotous frenzy as Caithlin had planned. Poor little P'nom had lost her partner and gotten separated from her captain by the time Dar had found her lost and alone in the darkness. The infiltration craft the Starfleet quartet had used to invade Romulan space had been eliminated... and the child was terrified.

"It's controlled by a thinking computer program?"

"Brain." P'nom had shared all that she knew of Starfleet communications protocols, the limited logistical information she'd gleaned while serving aboard *Isadore*, but anything else she knew was of little interest to the Tal Shiar.

All P'nom had kept to herself was the existence of *Virgo*, choosing to allow her Romulan *hosts* to believe that she and her team had undertaken their ill-conceived adventure in the now destroyed runabout, *Trudy*. Dar had never used the mind-sifter on her little pet. In truth, she doubted the devious neurological scanner would be entirely effective given the *Khiilalev nei'rrh's* Vulcan heritage. Even so, Dar knew there was something little P'nom had yet to share.

The Admonition had shaken any lingering misdirected loyalties from the little Vulcan's mind. As she recovered from her exposure, an exposure most of the sisterhood of the Zhat Vash had opposed, P'nom realized she couldn't protect *Brain* from righteousness. Every detail of *Virgo*, Starbase 39, *Brain* and Dannar Teague's hand in all of it, was shared. The Tal Shiar

already had extensive files on Teague, but the existence of a self-possessed starship was an eerie revelation.

"Then it is synthetic and impure. Worse, it's within striking distance of the Lattice..." Caithlin brought her hands together beneath her chin and watched P'nom nod in agreement. The little Vulcan was wearing a simple black body suit and a flowing black robe. During her recovery from the Admonition the *Khiilalev nei'rrh* was starting to earn a new name: the dark sister.

"It is, sister. I can't think of anything else now. *Brain* is out there, within striking distance of AK-hyi," said P'nom in a near whisper.

"Strange that the strike force sent to eliminate the rebelling Remans didn't detect this abomination." Dar knew about Teague and what he could create, and she gave full credence to her pet's claims. Work had resumed on capping the Lattice under proper Romulan supervision, and nothing could be allowed to threaten that task.

"Virgo is equipped with a unique shield system and Brain would understand how to use the ambient graviton radiation to hide from our limited sensors, sister."

"Hmmm...rather. The challenge then is to locate this threat and eliminate it."

"Yes, sister. It will be difficult..."

"Can you do it, *Khiilalev nei'rrh?*" Caithlin locked eyes with the smaller woman, speaking over her.

"It will take time and I will need access to..."

"You shall have it then. Sister P'nom, let this be your first sacred charge as a member of the Zhat Vash."

"I understand, sister. Thank you."

### DISARM

Brain laboured to run both the diagnostic on Virgo's primary fusion reactor and the Level Five diagnostic selected for each component of the ship's propulsion system. Lieutenant P'nom did not have command clearance. Command clearance had been established for Captain Shorh alone; however, the last command Captain Shorh had given Brain was to hold Virgo on station and await the appropriate signal to retrieve NAR-1331 along with Captain Shorh and his crew. It was imperative that Brain keep Virgo safe and concealed from Romulan threats while NAR-1331 was engaged with her sortie to Kea II. Brain had kept Virgo cloistered for more than five years waiting for Captain Shorh to broadcast the coded retrieval signal. When the signal finally came, if a computer program could feel relief, it was that which washed over Brain in waves, only... Captain Shorh hadn't returned.

Lieutenant P'nom had been the one to broadcast the encrypted retrieval signal. She'd been the one brought aboard *Virgo* in a Romulan vessel, without the others. She'd been the one to cause *Brain* to begin rousing *Virgo's* long-dormant systems from their long slumber and she'd been the one to order the conflicting diagnostic.

Brain struggled with reconciling its overall actions with its access protocols. Captain Shorh had operational command, not Lieutenant P'nom. Yet, P'nom had been the one to broadcast the encrypted retrieval signal and she'd been the one brought aboard, without the others. A Level Five diagnostic was considered a high order mission critical procedure. A Level Five diagnostic would only be ordered if there was an immanent threat to the overall functioning or survivability of *Virgo* itself. While Lieutenant P'nom did not have command authority, she was a recognized member of the operational crew. Brain had no choice in executing the diagnostic as ordered.

*Brain*, as sophisticated as it was, was unable to reason that with the primary fusion reactor down and a Level Two diagnostic already in progress, a simultaneously running Level Five diagnostic would demand far more computational space than could rightly be afforded given *Virgo's* present state. The multitronic computer program was partially blinded.

P'nom watched with satisfaction as the indicator on her own Romulan retrieval device indicated that *Virgo* had easily given up her navigational logs. Sadly, the chances of her being able to crack into Brain's protected technical and strategic databases as easily were slim. As much as she'd like to bring back all the secrets of Dannar Teague's masterpiece creation, she had neither the time, nor the authorization.

Strictly speaking, *Brain* wasn't an A.I. It was a multitronic program meant to be used by a limited organic command crew to oversee and control the completely integrated functions of the starship *Virgo*. By Zhat Vash standards though, *Brain* was considered a synthetic. There was but one fate for synthetics. As wonderous and beneficial a full understanding of Brain's composition might prove to be, P'nom knew that to extract and retrieve these mysteries would be Heresy.

With the navigational data downloaded and secure, P'nom quietly switched her leads over to the ports which would download the ship's basic tactical information. Power routing telemetry, phaser yields, redundant EPS feeds, shield strength and generator configurations... the basic nuts and bolts the Tal Shiar may find interesting. She left the higher-level programs and data cores alone.

>fzzrtt...fzzttintiating Level Five diagnostic on all propulsion systems... Lieutenant P'nom, where are the others? Wh-wh-where is Captain Shorh?

The black-robed figure watched the readouts on her equipment to be sure she was successfully downloading the tactical data before inhaling and looking around the cold, empty bridge contemplatively. The memory core in her retrieval device was already 75% full. Even if she was comfortable downloading all of *Brain's* secrets, she'd need a memory core thirty or forty times the size of the one she'd brought along.

>Lieutenant P'nom, where are the others?

She watched her own breath steam and rise up before her eyes in the cold. Beneath her robe she felt the simple transponder affixed to her belt and deftly primed the small device's battery.

"Brain, what is the precise concentration of graviton radiation surrounding the hull in a two-hundred-kilometer radius?" She'd prepared for years to do battle with the computer. Distraction was her best and only tactic.

>fzzrtt...fzzrtt...primary sensors are offline. Power redirected to allow for Level five diagnosti...

"Brain, what is the structural integrity field amplitude attuned to presently, given the concentration of graviton radiation in the immediate vicinity?"

>fzzrtt...integrity field amplitude...fzzrtt unavailable..."

"Unacceptable. Run a Level Three diagnostic on all sensor feeds and recalibrate ambient structural fields to reflect current levels of radiation.

>zzzzzzzfffftttt....

P'nom felt the transponder on her belt begin to hum. The unit was at full power and ready to be triggered. A bright green light flashed three times on her retrieval device. Download complete. As the overhead speakers broadcast a confused and angry bolt of static, P'nom pulled her leads from the back of *Virgo's* Conn and secured her equipment.

>You do not have authorization to run a L L L Level Three diagnostic. Where is Captain Shorh? Wh-where are the others, Lieutenant P'nom?

"Brain, urgent command, run a Level Five diagnostic on all structural, inertial dampening and artificial gravity systems. Graviton radiation levels are at a critical mass and threaten the survival of *Virgo*." P'nom said this flatly and clearly. *Brain* wouldn't respond any more or less rapidly to any added drama in her voice.

She'd speculated that *Brain* would have put the ship to "sleep" to keep it concealed from the waves of Romulan Warbirds and transports which had passed in and out of the Kea System for years. It was logical that all those years with minimal power to shield *Virgo* from the effects of the gravitons would at least in some part compromise the ship's more sensitive systems. With the primary reactor down and the ship expending its limited energies running needless and conflicting diagnostics, this urgent command to initiate a second Level Five diagnostic should force *Brain* to reroute power from either Virgo's passive tactical systems, or life support.

She hoisted her case off the Conn and stepped backwards towards the blank viewscreen, retrieval unit in one hand, her other hand wrapped 'round her transponder. The dim lights flickered. *Brain* was silent. All, or nothing. P'nom triggered her transponder.

### VOLLO

Commander Sohon sat back in her command chair and waited in the darkness. The crew of Tal Shiar officers had been steadfast in their attention to the blank monitors and readouts before them since the dark sister had departed nearly an hour and half earlier. The women were all supremely professional, each of them a credit not only to the Tal Shiar, but to the Romulan race as a whole. Sohon lauded her position as their commander and relished every second of her time in service to the Empire. She'd been unable to accept the Admonition and hence would never know the honour of being a sister of the Zhat Vash, but she was renowned as one of, if not the most dedicated (some would say fanatical) commanders in all the Tal Shiar.

Since engaging in their clandestine operation on the fringes of the restricted System two Warbirds had diverted their courses around the *Vollo's* operational theatre without protest. The uprising on Ak-hyi had been brutally put down nearly six cycles earlier and now regular rotations of warships and replacement Reman miners were cycled through the system. Dar herself had engineered the demise of Tikot Ketor's original operation. His fondness for the Reman slaves and prolonged timelines for completion of the task-at-hand, were unacceptable.

The original Reman mining colony had been completely purged by a battalion of Romulan shock troops. Every Reman, be they male, female, adult or child was incinerated. The action took less than three Ak-hyi days to complete. Within a week the mines were cleared and retooled, and the first transports of replacement Reman workers had arrived.

Where Tikot Ketor had projected complete Eisn Lattice occlusion within sixty cycles, Dar's sterile approach to Reman asset management had dwindled those estimates down to just forty cycles. Five cycles on and eight thousand six hundred and some-odd dead miners later; the estimate was now twenty-eight cycles until full coverage of the dreaded portal.

"Commander Sohon?"

The tall woman seated in the command chair turned her scarred face towards Surith at communications.

"Receiving the signal."

"Commit," said Sohon in a low, serious voice.

A second later a flurry of green and silver light sparkled and flowed atop a single transporter pad recessed at the opposite end of the bridge six meters behind the back of Sohon's command chair. As the stream of dazzling energy faded, a black-robed figure holding a large case in one hand stood motionless, peering out from beneath her black hood at the back of the Commander's head and the women crewing the bridge of the *Vollo*.

"Commander, we have target on scopes. Adjusting attitude to match." The dark haired, older woman crewing the helm smoothly adjusted *Vollo's* relative position in space to bring her bow to bear on the blackness beyond where sensors only now detected a duranium hull.

"Range?" asked Sohon calmly.

"Optimal," came the curt response from Major Rhian at tactical.

"Fire," ordered Sohon without hesitation, her single dark eye keenly focused on tactical fire control.

A volley of three torpedoes erupted from the *Vollo's* forward tube. The burning green projectiles raced into the darkness and were quickly followed by another three torpedoes. An impact explosion was detected on sensors. Another two impacts registered. By the time the second flurry of torpedoes reached their target the duranium signature no longer appeared on the *Vollo's* targeting scopes. *Virgo* was destroyed.

"You did well, sister," purred Sohon from her seat. She didn't bother to rise or turn around to watch as the dark sister handed off the retrieval unit to the Tal Shiar officer in charge of sciences.

P'nom made her way down the ramp to the lower deck where the quarters once occupied by Caithlin Dar awaited her. She'd been successful. She'd gambled and won. Between her transponder signalling *Vollo* as to her location and Brain's predicted action in shunting power from *Virgo's* shields and long-range warning sensors; they'd manged to destroy the defenseless, hateful synthetic. They'd made the universe incrementally safer.

Her first task as a sister of the Zaht Vash was complete.

Sohon secured her vessel and without pomp or ceremony, *Vollo* left the system and jumped to warp as soon as she was free of the graviton interference. There were new threats to be thwarted. There were new worlds to conquer and an Empire to expand. Whatever fates conspired to cause the convergence of events that had tied all of them together were now branching out towards new, darker paths.



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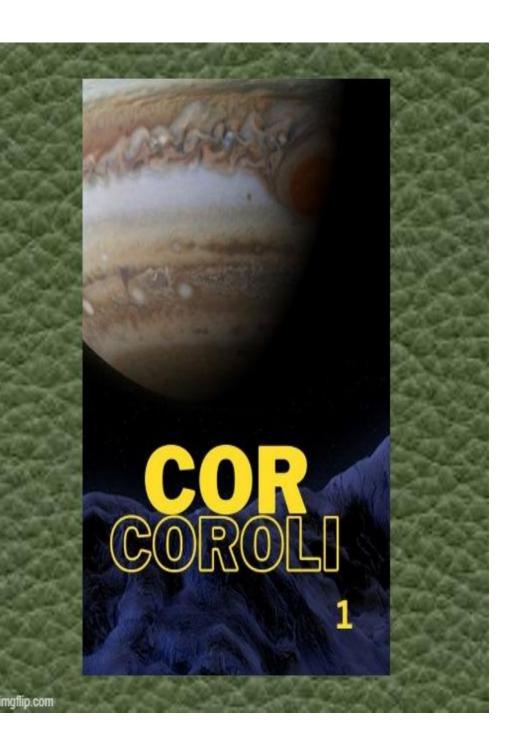
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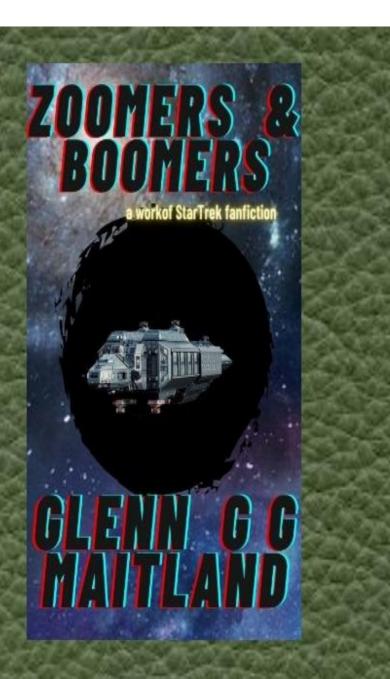
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