

An Idiot's Guide to Gunboat Diplomacy

By Samuel Redfeather



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USS *Reykjavík*, Stardate 3066.9 (November 6th, 2321), Captain's Ready Room

The 3-D chessboard had been forgotten after the second round of Aldebaran whiskey had settled in.

Moments like these were rare for a starship captain. Nandi Trujillo was grateful to have Lt. Commander Glal as her executive officer, a man whose life was the personification of dedicated Starfleet service. He was a former enlisted rating who had risen to commissioned officer and climbed the ranks based on his intelligence, perseverance and raw stubborn pride. The seasoned Tellarite was renowned throughout the service as being one of the best XO's in the fleet, one who'd eschewed any further promotion and planned to retire from his present post.

He was one of those rarest of types, a first officer who could be counted on in every situation, but also one who could on occasion help share the captain's burdens. With Glal at her side, Trujillo was a little less isolated and the loneliness of her command was just a bit easier to bear.

It had been a good talk between command officers, to be sure, but also one between friends.

They discussed their senior staff, ship's operations, current events, and the ramifications some of those developments might have on their assigned duties.

"We're slated to conduct a sensor sweep of the Tzenkethi border next week," Trujillo revealed, sharing a sardonic grin with Glal as she sipped at her whiskey. "If nothing else, Garrett is making good use of that new science lab we installed for her."

"Lab?" Glal scoffed. "It's a damned science wing! Planetary sciences and astrometrics with a full stellar cartography suite. You've spoiled the woman, sir."

"We both know we needed her," Trujillo countered. "By incorporating those changes, we've vastly increased our utility to Command. In the past three months we've done more survey work than standard security patrols. Times, they are a-changing, my friend."

Glal grumbled into his now empty glass. "Bah, I miss gunboat work."

"There will always be opportunities in that regard, they'll just be increasingly rare. This latest wave of Federation exploration and colonial settlement is bound to spark some skirmishes. Look what we just went through with the Cardassians. Five years ago, we'd never even heard of them, and now they're the leading topic in this year's Tactical Threat Assessment symposium."

The Tellarite offered his species' version of a shrug. "You're just trying to cheer me up. Too much scut-work always makes me cranky," he grouched.

She spread her hands in a gesture of candor. "This is the new Starfleet. They're big on diplomacy now, slow to anger, slower still to react to obvious threats.

We either adapt to the new paradigm or *Reykjavik* gets mothballed and we get put out to pasture.”

“Something will come up soon,” Glal insisted. “It always does.”

“Bridge to Captain Trujillo,” came across the intraship.

She tapped her combadge reflexively. “Go ahead.”

The voice of the bridge duty officer, Lieutenant Jarrod continued, *“Priority orders from Command, Captain. Starbase 234 picked up a garbled distress call from the starship Zelenskyy in the Trelaka system. Zelenskyy reported they’d engaged unidentified raiders attacking a Boslic colony in that system but had suffered damage and gone on the defensive. Zelenskyy is now failing to respond to hails. We’ve been ordered to proceed to Trelaka at maximum warp, render assistance to our ship and take whatever actions you deem prudent.”*

Glal smirked at her through his scraggly beard, his tusks quivering with amusement.

“How do you do that?” she whispered *sotto voce* to her XO, before replying to the bridge, “Understood. ETA to that location?”

“At maximum warp, ETA is eighteen hours, twenty-seven minutes, Captain.”

“Have helm set course and engage at emergency speed, Lieutenant. Stand to yellow alert and initiate Level 2 diagnostics of all combat-related systems.”

“Aye, sir. Bridge, out.”

Trujillo finished her drink in a single swallow, setting the glass down as she eyed Glal with mock intensity. “You’re some kind of sorcerer, aren’t you?”

“On my world they’re called Soul Speakers, sir. As to whether I am one or not, I refuse to answer on the grounds that it may incriminate me.”

She shook her head with amusement. “Go see to arrangements, Commander. I’ll want Alpha watch at their stations when we arrive on scene. Got to have the first team in their seats if we’re looking at potential combat.”

Glal rose slowly out of his chair, his knees crackling and eliciting a soft moan from the older officer. “Aye, sir.”

“And for heaven’s sake will you go have Dr. Bennett check out those ancient knees of yours? I swear you sound like a mortally wounded Targ every time you get up.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, sir,” Glal snuffled with good humor as he exited onto the bridge.

* * *

The senior officers stood in unison as Trujillo stepped through the parting doors into the windowless briefing room just aft of the bridge.

“At ease.” She slipped into the chair at the head of the table, prompting the others to resume theirs. “This meeting is now in session.” Trujillo nodded towards

Lieutenant Arwen DeSilva, Operations officer. “What do we know about *Zelenskyy*?”

DeSilva toggled the tabletop LCARS interface in front of her, prompting a rotating hologram of a *Miranda*-class starship to appear above the center of the table. “Type nine variant of her class, launched thirteen years ago. Standard Class-IV armaments package. She’s primarily employed conducting light escort, perimeter patrol, and courier work. Crew compliment of two-hundred seventy.”

“Her captain?”

“Lt. Commander Eldred Withropp commanding. Academy class of ’05. *Zelenskyy* is his first commission as a CO.”

“The colony?” Trujillo prompted.

The bronze-hued Lieutenant Gael Jarrod from Security fielded that answer. In his slightly nasal, Oxonian-English accent he recited, “Boslic colony of Kiruta, established on Trelaka VII forty-eight years ago, Captain. Population at the time of the last Starfleet visit was a little over eight hundred thousand, scattered across about a dozen settlements on a single continent.”

“Known enemies?”

“The Boslic are non-aligned,” the Science officer, Ensign Rachel Garrett replied. “They trade openly with just about everyone. The Boslic home system has had run-ins over the past few centuries with the Nausicaans, the Orions, and the pre-Federation Andorians, but no notable conflicts within the past four decades, sir.”

“Piracy activity in local sectors?” Trujillo asked, clearly in brusque efficiency mode today.

“Typically low-level and infrequent,” Jarrod answered. “A few known pirate groups, raiding small outlying colonies for supplies and fuel. Most pirate bands would avoid a colony the size of Kiruta, especially since the Boslic aren’t known to be pushovers. That colony has a fully functioning orbital defense grid and a sizeable self-defense contingent.”

Trujillo nodded soberly, mulling over all she’d heard. “Very well. We’ll be in-system in a little over two hours. Dr. Bennett, I want you to continue familiarizing your staff with Boslic physiology, as we may be stumbling into a mass-casualty situation. Use whatever resources you need, to include converting cargo space and spare cabins into medical wards.”

She turned to address the Chief Engineer, the Zaranite Lt. Commander Kura-Ka. “Commander, please ready your staff for assignment to emergency repair teams. From what little we gathered from Command, it appears *Zelenskyy*’s taken quite a beating. If she’s still intact by the time we reach the system, we’ll doubtless need to affect some significant repairs.”

“Aye, sir,” Kura-Ka replied through his face-concealing breathing apparatus.

Trujillo then polled the senior staff, confirming the readiness of their individual departments.

“Anything else before we arrive in-system?” she asked.

There was nothing, so Trujillo stood. “Very well, this meeting is adjourned. Resume your posts, maintain yellow alert and set defense condition two.”

The others followed the captain to their feet and moved to depart, gathering up cups and data-slates they’d brought with them.

Rachel Garrett nudged her fellow ensign, Flight Control officer Farouk Naifeh, as the more senior officers exited the compartment. “How often does this happen? Running to the defense of missing or jeopardized ships, I mean?”

He grinned in response. “Why do you ask?”

“This is the third time since I’ve come aboard that we’ve been tasked with this sort of mission. The first time, when we found the *Esau*...” she blanched, traumatic memories bubbling up.

Naifeh reached out to grasp her shoulder, sensing her sudden unease. “Yes, we do get sent to the rescue quite often. We’re fast and we have teeth, or so Commander Glal is always saying.”

She gave a curt nod of understanding, words failing her.

“I don’t know what we’ll find when we get there, but I can almost guarantee that it won’t be as bad as what you found aboard *Esau*.”

She held his gaze. “I hope you’re right, for all our sakes.”

* * *

Dropping out of warp within a star system was a risky proposition, as the overlapping gravity wells of the system’s planets and star could play havoc with a starship’s warp field. This could result in anything from exploding nacelles to a warp-core breach to destabilizing the integrity of the local star itself.

Reykjavik did it anyway.

“Warp deceleration complete. We are at one-third impulse speed, approximately one AU from the colony planet. All engine systems read nominal,” announced Naifeh from the helm.

“Weaps,” Trujillo called, using her established shorthand for the Tactical station. “Give me eyes.”

In accordance with her wishes, Jarrod displayed a three-dimensional tactical overlay of the star system on the viewer.

DeSilva at Ops reported, “Three vessels detected in orbit of Trelaka VII, four more are holding at various positions in close orbit of the system’s seventeenth planet, a gas giant.” Icons representing each of the ships came to life as ship’s sensors painted them. “No sign of *Zelensky* in system, Captain.”

Trujillo was on the cusp of asking who their new friends were when Garrett spoke up from the Science station. “Three of the ships register as Nausicaan *Fang-*

class corsairs, sir. Two are Xepolite *Rantha*-class destroyers, and the last two are Alshain *Talon*-class combat skiffs.”

“An eclectic mix,” Glal grunted from his post at the aft of the bridge.

“Just so,” Trujillo muttered in reply. Then, more forcefully, “Helm, engage course for that gas giant, full impulse. That’s where we’ll find our missing ship.”

DeSilva risked a glance back at the captain from her post. “And the colony, Captain?”

“The colony can wait, Lieutenant. We don’t know what we’ve warped into. If *Zelenskyy*’s intact, they may be able to provide the necessary context to this situation. We need answers before we start kicking peoples’ teeth in.”

From behind her, Glal gave Trujillo an assaying look. The captain was notoriously impatient when her orders were questioned, most especially when the possibility of combat was present.

Perhaps she’s starting to mellow with age, he wondered. Then an unsettling thought struck him, twisting his innards. *By the Great Hoof, maybe she’s... evolving!*

As *Reykjavik* raced towards the gas giant and its accompanying nine moons, Garrett set to work scanning the apparent threat vessels, running a series of comparative analyses on their power and weapons systems to assist Tactical should it come to a fight.

“Ops, open a channel in the clear,” Trujillo said.

“Aye, sir. Channel open.”

“Unidentified vessels, this is the Federation warship *Reykjavik*. We are answering a distress call from another Starfleet vessel that originated from this system. Identify yourselves and your reason for being here, or you may be presumed hostile.”

A full minute ticked past, and the enemy’s silence was deafening.

“Picking up signs of debris in high orbit of the gas giant, sir,” DeSilva noted, breaking the lull.

“Confirmed,” Garrett added too quickly. “Duranium and tritanium composites in sufficient quantities to suggest they came from a Starfleet hull.” She looked at the captain, her expression somber. “Not enough mass to constitute an entire starship, sir.”

DeSilva sent a smirk over her shoulder in Garrett’s direction that went undetected due to the younger woman’s intent focus on numerous displays. The ensign had just stepped on DeSilva’s incomplete report, but the lieutenant empathized with Garrett’s raw intensity and her overwhelming desire to contribute. They’d all been eager young ensigns once.

Trujillo nodded wordlessly, already having deduced that the gas giant was where *Zelenskyy* had gone to ground.

“We are being scanned, sir,” Jarrod alerted from Tactical. “The ships are ascending out of the gas giant’s atmosphere and appear to be bunching up, a diamond tactical formation. Their shields are raised, and their weapons systems are armed.”

“Acknowledged,” Trujillo answered. “Who’s manning these ships?” she asked as she pulled her swing-arm command display up and over her lap.

DeSilva caught Garrett’s eye and pointed to herself while delivering an ‘it’s okay’ wink to the junior officer before answering. “Sensors reading a mix of Nausicaan, Chalnoth, Orion and Xepolite lifesigns aboard those craft, sir.”

Trujillo grunted dourly. “The usual suspects, then.” She then toggled the comms open from her own interface. “Unidentified vessels, you have failed to respond to my challenge. Unless you do so in the next thirty seconds, you will be identified as hostile. You will lower your shields and disarm your weapons, or I will disable your ships. If you take aggressive action against us, I will destroy your ships. This is your final warning.”

“Captain,” Garrett spoke up from Sciences. “The power readings on those ships are way off their baseline. I’m seeing significantly enhanced weapons capabilities and reinforced shields, and their power plants are generating upwards of thirty-percent higher output than would be expected.”

“Auxiliary power to forward shields,” Trujillo commanded in response. “Weaps, target their weapons emitters and shield generators. Thirty percent yield on photorps to start, fifty percent phaser power.”

“Aye, sir. We’ll be in weapons range in twenty-three seconds.”

“Noted. They have fifteen seconds yet to reply.”

A volley of missiles swarmed away from one of the Nausicaan ships, angling towards *Reykjavik* from different quarters.

“Merculite missiles,” Jarrod noted laconically.

Trujillo raised one finger, a signal to Jarrod to take countermeasures.

“Engaging phaser point defenses, sir.”

Their phasers lashed out in quick succession, annihilating the incoming ordinance thousands of kilometers from their hull.

“Their time’s up, and I believe we have their answer,” Trujillo announced, cocking her head slightly. She reached to close the open front flap of her maroon tunic, fastening the shoulder clasp. It was a dead giveaway to the bridge crew, a silent tradition that spoke of impending combat.

“Their funeral,” Trujillo mused. “Mister Jarrod, increase weapons yield to maximum and open fire.”

Trelaka System, Alpha Quadrant In orbit of Trelaka XVII

Reykjavik dove towards the planet, using the gas giant's gravity for added acceleration as the starship disgorged a dozen photon torpedoes from her three forward launch tubes. These raced away, three crimson antimatter warheads arcing towards each of the ascending threat vessels.

"Delta-Seven approach pattern complete," Naifeh advised from the helm.

"Hard starboard, then come back to 181-mark-350. One quarter roll to port, slow to one-sixth impulse as we pull behind the raider," Trujillo instructed. "Weaps, transfer twenty-percent ventral shield power to dorsal grid as we show them our back."

Her orders were carried out and from Tactical Jarrod noted, "One target destroyed, one damaged. The other two managed to outmaneuver our 'torps, sir."

"That was some inspired flying on their part, sir," DeSilva observed with genuine admiration.

Reykjavik's phasers cycled again, intercepting another wave of enemy missiles and two inbound photon torpedoes.

As the ship slid behind the wounded Alshain skiff, Trujillo commanded, "Weaps, cripple them. I want some prisoners to interrogate."

Pinpoint phaser strikes disabled the smaller craft's warp and impulse engines, then tore into their weapons arrays, leaving the skiff tumbling end over end.

"The last two are coming around for another run at us," DeSilva advised.

Trujillo spared a glance back at Glal. "They should be running. Pirates don't stand their ground, and they sure as hell don't chase down Federation starships."

Glal looked up from his sensor scope to meet her gaze. "And those evasive maneuvers, sir. Those were textbook Kor's Hook and Needle."

"Shit," Trujillo breathed just loud enough for Glal's ears. The captain's expression hardened, and she called to the Science station. "Mister Garrett, give me another sweep of that damaged skiff. Are there survivors?"

"Standby, sir... scanning."

The first volley of enemy fire to reach *Reykjavik's* shields sent a shudder through the ship.

Jarrod said, "Impacts, port and port aft. Shields holding, no hull damage."

Garrett eyed her sensor return skeptically. "Captain? Now I'm reading... seven Klingon lifesigns." She checked her results again. "Exclusively. No sign of the other species we detected earlier."

A low growl sounded from deep in Glal's throat. "They spoofed us. Clever."

Trujillo issued a string of orders to the helm, bringing *Reykjavik* around to drive straight between the oncoming raiders.

“Head on?” Glal asked quietly from behind her.

“Time is an issue,” she replied in an equally conspiratorial tone. Then, louder, “Weaps, drop six of our stealth mines aft and target phasers on the enemy’s sensor nodes as we pass.”

“Blind and Grind, aye,” Jarrod confirmed.

Torpedo volleys slashed back and forth, followed by flurries of phaser and disruptor fire as the ships closed with each other. As *Reykjavik* flashed between her antagonists, collimated beams of energy lanced out towards the sensor nodes of both raiders, impacting their shields in a brief maelstrom of energies that left them momentarily sightless.

Thrusters on *Reykjavik*’s gravitic mines kicked on, driving them into the path of the enemy craft where they detonated brightly, their destructive charges overwhelming the already taxed shields of both raiders.

Consoles flickered on *Reykjavik*’s bridge along with the lighting, victims of the enemy’s closing barrage. Red tell-tails flashed across the Engineering board’s displays as power and data systems suffered overloads and automated cutovers sought to compensate.

The ensign at the Engineering station held his tongue, knowing from experience that Trujillo would ask for ship’s status updates only after the enemy had been neutralized.

“Both threat vessels destroyed, sir,” Jarrod exclaimed, a hint of pride bleeding through his reserved façade.

“Kahless,” Trujillo muttered under her breath, “count your children now.”

“I hope there are vacancies in *Gre'thor*!” Glal spat, pounding a fist on the bridge’s safety railing.

“Damage report,” she ordered.

“Moderate systems outages throughout the ship, Captain. Three of our shield generators have experienced non-catastrophic overloads and will have to be repaired.”

“Acknowledged. Helm, come about and close on the wounded raider. Ops, inform the transporter room that I want the ship’s crew beamed straight to the brig, *sans* clothing. Make sure they locate and disable every weapon they can find in transit. Make it quick, I want to catch them before they have a chance to self-destruct.”

A chorus of affirmatives followed, and Trujillo deactivated her chair’s restraint system and stood to approach the Science station. “Mister Garrett, status of the other three ships in orbit of the colony?”

Garrett ran a concentrated sensor sweep of the seventh planet’s orbit, informing Trujillo of what was already apparent on the display. “They’re withdrawing, sir.”

“Very well,” Trujillo assessed. “Track them. I want to know where they’re headed from here.”

She approached Glal, concern registering on her features. “This changes things.”

“Yes, sir,” he agreed.

Trujillo favored him with a small smile. “I need you to talk to your friends in Intel, the ones whose opinions don’t necessarily make it into the sanitized fleet-wide updates.”

He nodded fractionally. “What do you want me to ask?”

“Klingon piracy is commonplace nowadays with the empire’s military cutbacks, but I’ve never seen Klingon pirates or even separatists disguise themselves or exclusively use someone else’s ships. Hell, they *want* people to know they’re facing Klingons; most times their victims surrender without a fight.”

“They certainly don’t pick fights with a *Shangri-La*-class attack cruiser.”

“No,” she confirmed emphatically. “They don’t. None of this adds up.”

“Anything else, sir?” he asked.

“I want to know if any Klingon bands in this region are known to operate with these tactics. Interrogate our prisoners first and use anything you get to corroborate Intel’s analysis.”

“Aye, sir,” Glal replied, spinning on his heel and heading for the turbolift.

DeSilva turned in her seat to face Trujillo. “Sickbay reports six casualties, sir. Five minor injuries and one serious from a coolant line rupture in Engineering.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Trujillo said as she returned to her seat.

Jarrold advised, “Transporter room confirms seven Klingon survivors have been materialized in the brig. My people are telling me two of them require medical attention, sir.”

“Fine. Have Dr. Bennett and his team attend to the Klingons in the brig with security escort.”

Trujillo brought her swing arm console up to open a comms channel on an encrypted Starfleet channel. “This is the starship *Reykjavik* hailing USS *Zelenskyy*. If you are hiding within Trelaka XVII’s atmosphere from the raiders, I am pleased to inform you that they have been neutralized. I am transmitting priority authentication codes now. We stand ready to render engineering and medical assistance.”

As the message transmitted, Trujillo turned back to Jarrod. “Lieutenant, take a forensic analysis team aboard that raider and get me anything you can find on who these Klingons are, and where they came from.”

Jarrold affirmed his orders and as he transferred Tactical control to his deputy at another console in preparation to depart, a scratchy comms signal was broadcast through the overheads. “*This is Captain Withropp of Zelenskyy. Is it ever good to hear your voice, Reykjavik. Your assistance is gratefully accepted.*”

“Sensor contact, Captain,” DeSilva reported. “*Miranda*-class vessel rising out of the gas-giant’s upper stratosphere.”

“On screen.”

And there, battered, battle-scarred but intact, was the ship they’d come to rescue.

This, Trujillo mused, despite the unwelcome discovery of the attackers’ true identities, had turned out to be a rather good day.

* * *

DeSilva came to attention in front of Trujillo’s ready room desk.

“At ease, Lieutenant. What do you have for me?”

The senior Operations officer proffered a data-slate which Trujillo took from her. “Information from the Boslic colony, sir. They report minimal damage, and it appears the Klingon raiders were probing the colony’s defenses, likely in preparation for a larger assault.”

“How many ships in total?” Trujillo asked.

“Nine, sir. *Zelenskyy* destroyed two before being forced to fall back to the gas giant. The three left in orbit of the colony when we arrived were getting pummeled by Boslic orbital defenses and had to pull back out of weapons range of the planet.”

Trujillo nodded distractedly as she scanned the contents of the data-slate. “Good old *Mirandas*. Enough firepower to get themselves into trouble, but rarely enough to get themselves out of it.”

DeSilva feigned insult. “Begging the captain’s pardon, sir, but my first posting was to a *Miranda*-class. I may take umbrage.”

Trujillo offered a grin in response. “Mine too, as it happens. The *Akaar*. My assessment stands, nonetheless,” she said, returning the tablet to DeSilva.

“So noted, sir.”

The door chime sounded and both women looked to the hatchway as Trujillo called, “Enter.”

Glal stepped through, followed by a human male of average height in his mid-to-late thirties. He had wavy brown hair just beginning to grey at the temples, and a sharply defined face with an angular nose and well-defined chin. His left arm was supported in a sling, and he had multiple bandages on his face and neck. His disheveled uniform tunic still bore numerous scorch marks and a dark patch of dried blood below his left shoulder.

By way of introduction, Glal announced, “Captain Nandi Trujillo, this is Lieutenant Commander Eldred Withropp of the *Zelenskyy*.”

Trujillo stood and shook hands with the younger man across the desktop while nodding to Glal and DeSilva. “Thank you. XO, Lieutenant. You’re dismissed.”

As the two departed, Trujillo gestured for Withropp to sit. “Please, make yourself comfortable, Captain.”

Withropp seated himself gingerly, wincing as his slung arm inadvertently bumped the corner of the desk.

“Are you quite alright, Captain? I can summon a medic if you’re in need of further treatment.”

Withropp raised his good hand in a gesture of abeyance. “No, thank you, sir. I’m patched up for the moment, but I’ll wait on further care until all of my people have been tended to.”

Trujillo nodded at that, her measure of the man rising several notches. “A drink, perhaps?”

“Now that I will accept, Captain. Thank you.”

She moved to a concealed cabinet set into the bulkhead, the hatch sliding up to reveal a fully stocked bar. “Name your poison.”

“Vodka, if you have it, please.”

Trujillo riffled through her stash, bottles tinkling. “Stolichnaya or Kástra Elión?”

“The Stoli, please. I’m a bit of a traditionalist.”

She produced the bottle and two glasses, pouring measures for the both of them. “Russian vodka. That’s a bit ironic, given the name of your ship.”

“A fact my crew delights in reminding me of constantly,” he said with a smirk as he accepted the drink.

They clinked glasses in a toast, with Trujillo offering, “Salud.”

Withropp replied with, “*Qapla Batlh Je.*”

Trujillo sipped at her drink. “Speaking of Klingons, when did you become aware that’s who you were facing?”

The younger officer downed half his vodka in a single swallow, closing his eyes for a moment. “I had my suspicions something strange was going on when they didn’t turn tail as soon as we arrived in orbit. Then we discovered they were packing more firepower than they had any right to.” Glass in hand, he gestured to his left shoulder. “My suspicions were confirmed when we lost shields just shy of the gas giant’s gravity well and they beamed a strike team aboard. I took one of their giant knives right here for my trouble.”

“Your crew?” she asked, watching his reaction closely.

Withropp’s eyes took on a distant cast, the proverbial thousand-meter stare. “They fought like... like heroes. The whole bridge was a giant brawl... knives, phasers, disruptors. My first officer incinerated three of them before being sliced practically in half with a... oh, hell—what do you call them?”

“*Bat’leth*,” she provided.

“Yeah, one of those.” He shook his head. “They’d sent another team to our Engineering deck. They got the jump on the security team I’d stationed there. By the

time we'd dug them out, we'd..." He trailed off, swallowing hard. "We lost a lot of good people."

"I'm sorry for your losses, Captain," Trujillo offered. "Your people are receiving the best care we can give them."

He nodded fractionally, eyes still boring a hole in the bulkhead.

"How long between that fight on your bridge and when you descended into the gas giant's atmosphere?"

Withropp blinked, seeming to force back the images he was replaying in his mind. "Perhaps ten minutes. Why?"

"We stumbled blindly into the same situation you did. Fortunately for us, this ship was built specifically for combat. Were you aware of which Starfleet vessels were closest, which would be responding to your distress call first?"

He shook his head fractionally. "No, Captain."

Trujillo took a sip of her drink, her eyes still carefully inspecting Withropp over the lip of her glass. "It would have been enormously helpful if you had dispatched message buoys alerting relief forces that the raiders were actually Klingons. Had the next ship on scene been a patrol vessel or a scout, more lives may have been lost."

Withropp blanched, his expression growing slack as the import of her words settled onto him. "I—I didn't even think about it, Captain. I was so fixated on my ship and crew."

She nodded understandingly. "Of course. Would I be correct in surmising this was your first taste of combat as a CO?"

"Yes, it was." Withropp's drink sat on his thigh, nearly forgotten, the fingers of the hand holding it drumming an almost silent cadence against the glass.

"Then I will impart this wisdom to you, as it was imparted to me by a more senior commander after similar circumstances. It is your duty to think not only of your own crew, but also those who will be coming to your aid. Someday it will be you riding to the rescue, and you will want to be armed with the most complete information possible."

He nodded wordlessly, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. The distant stare had returned.

"Captain," Trujillo said gently. "Give me your eyes."

Withropp seemed to force his gaze back to meet Trujillo's. "Sir?"

"You've done good work here today. You came to the aid of a colony under attack. You defeated two ships crewed by Klingon warriors and bested those sent aboard to seize your ship. You have taken casualties, yes, and you've been wounded yourself. In spite of those losses, you and your crew have performed in the finest tradition of Starfleet. My report to Command will emphasize that."

He sat a little straighter in his chair, mustering an unconvincing smile. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

“Remember that you will have time for grief and recriminations later, but right now your crew needs their captain to be a pillar of strength. Regardless of what you’re feeling, you must project that.”

Another nod. “I understand, Captain.”

“Good. Now finish your drink, that stuff was damnably expensive,” Trujillo said with a wry grin.

* * *

Trujillo stepped into the brig, giving her eyes a moment to adjust to the dim lighting scheme. Large Klingons dressed in form-fitting jumpsuits sat, stood, or paced in their detention cells as security personnel kept close watch over them.

Glal was conferring with Jarrod at the central data terminal and paused his conversation to step over to Trujillo. “I have an update for you, Captain.” He gestured to the corridor beyond.

They stepped out into the passageway, moving just beyond the doors.

“They won’t talk, no surprise there. They’re obviously mortified to have been taken prisoner. One of them’s already attempted suicide, and I anticipate he won’t be the last.”

Trujillo appeared to ponder that. “Anything from the forensic analysis of the ship or their equipment?”

“That’s where we’ve made the most progress, sir,” Glal acknowledged. “Their gear is all recent issue, top of the line, none of it bearing the typical manufacturing stamps. The ship’s weapons systems have been enhanced by some talented technicians, as has their power plant. It may have been an old Alshain castoff at some point, but when we crippled her that ship was as powerful as someone could make it. The ship’s computer operating systems are all Klingon, and the interface architecture has been extensively modified for ease of use.”

“Well,” Trujillo snorted derisively, “that’s not suspicious at all.”

Glal continued, “No pirate crew desperate enough to attack a well-defended colony would have access to the kinds of resources necessary to modify a vessel so extensively.” He held up a torn tunic of rough-hewn material. “The crew was dressed in a mix of military uniforms and civilian clothing, but none of them were wearing any rank insignia or house sigils. That’s nearly unheard of, even from Klingons not actively serving in the military. Your clothing is a testament to battles won and family honors accrued. A Klingon warrior without such adornment might as well be a shopkeeper or a sanitation worker.”

“What I hear you saying, Commander, is that someone *really* wanted them to look like unaffiliated pirates.”

The Tellarite bobbed his head. “Affirmative, sir. This whole mess stinks of covert Klingon military action.”

Trujillo frowned. “So, you think we’re looking at the Klingons probing colony defenses secretly? Advance intelligence gathering in preparation for an actual attack by imperial forces?”

“My friends at Intel believe so, sir. There’s been a slight but noticeable increase in pirate raids in this and adjoining sectors, almost exclusively against non-aligned systems. Coincidentally, the colonies that have been spared attacks from such pirates are those whose governments do extensive business with the empire.”

“Okay,” Trujillo said with an irritated grunt. “I’m going to go have a chat with Command and see what, if anything, they want to do about this. In the meantime, you keep at the members of the Plausible Deniability Club in there. I’ll take a hard confession over conjecture any given day.”

Glal gave her an inscrutable look. “I don’t have a lot to work with here, sir. If we’re playing by the rules, the Seldonis Convention would seem to apply.”

Trujillo offered him a smirk laden with menace. “The convention only applies to prisoners of war from an identified signatory government. These are non-aligned pirates, as someone has gone to great lengths to establish. If we can’t get them to talk, perhaps the Boslic down on the colony might want a crack at them, eh?”

Glal’s answering smile was as genuine as it was feral. “I will do that straight-away, sir.”

USS Reykjavík Captain's Ready Room

"You've had an opportunity to review the information I sent, sir?" Trujillo asked, directing the question at Vice-Admiral Markopoulos via a subspace comm-link with Starbase Earhart.

The legendarily garrulous older human with his wild shock of white hair and bushy beard glanced to a data-slate held in one hand. "I have, Captain. I've also had our Intel analysts pouring over all the evidence you've collected. They agree with your assessment that this certainly appears to be Klingon expansionism disguised as common piracy."

"With their government so dependent upon ongoing Federation technical support to help repair the ecological damage to Qo'noS, a covert expansion of their territory is the only way they could pull it off," Trujillo reinforced.

"Agreed," Markopoulos replied noncommittally.

Trujillo held her tongue for a moment hoping that Markopoulos would suggest a course of action, but the admiral said nothing.

"With respect, Admiral, I would recommend this is something we should act on sooner rather than later. If we cut this operation off at the knees, it will serve notice to the High Council and their military that the Federation won't stand for renewed aggression."

Markopoulos leveled an incredulous look at her from across subspace. "They're *Klingons*, Nandi. The fact that their dependance upon our largess has kept them in check for thirty years is a miracle in and of itself. We always knew they'd swing back around to military adventurism eventually."

"So, we let them run roughshod over the Boslic and anyone else they like, sir?"

The admiral's patience in the face of Trujillo's outburst was laudable. "Starfleet's retooling for a renewed exploratory push as we speak, Captain. A full fifth of our heavy cruisers are undergoing refit in preparation for deep-space exploration assignments. Meanwhile, we've had run-ins with the Tzenkethi, Tholians and the Cardassians in the past eighteen months. The Romulans are still watching us from behind the Neutral Zone and refusing all diplomatic overtures. This isn't an ideal time to start a renewed conflict with the Klingons."

"Again, sir, smothering this faux-piracy program of theirs now may preclude just such a conflict. The empire would still retain plausible deniability and could cut their losses without overt dishonor."

“Are you proposing something, Captain?” Markopoulos asked, clearly determined to drag it out of her and seeming to enjoy every excruciating moment of her discomfort.

She kept a resigned sigh in check, but only just. “Yes, sir. I would like to assemble a task force to track down and neutralize the threat this group poses.”

“You, Captain?” Considering that much of his face was hidden behind his beard and unkempt hair, Markopoulos’ expression was still able to convey an impressive range of emotions. He now radiated skepticism.

“Unless you have a better candidate in mind to lead such an operation, sir?” Trujillo rejoined, keeping her voice carefully neutral. “I am, of course, willing to assist in whatever capacity you might wish.”

Markopoulos held her gaze from across the lightyears for a prolonged moment, then appeared to come to a decision.

“Okay, Captain, cards on the table. Despite your undeniable qualifications for leading such a mission, you managed to piss off Admiral Langford and the Diplomatic Corps during that business with the Cardassians and Task Force Hadrian. You came dangerously close to insubordination, and don’t think that I and others at Command don’t know that Captain ch’Valos took a lot of heat for that fiasco that should by rights have been directed at you.”

Trujillo’s expression froze for a moment before her face drew into a reluctant frown. “I acknowledge that I earned that rebuke, Admiral. I allowed my concern for possible Starfleet POWs to trump my better judgement in those circumstances.”

“Yes, you did, and in so doing you did serious damage to your reputation. I need commanders I can trust in delicate situations, not hotheaded zealots.”

She nodded slowly, her plans and aspirations burning down around her. “I understand, sir.”

Markopoulos referenced his tablet again. “You are exceptionally lucky, Captain. If it were solely up to me, I’d have Olaf Kiersonn taking point on this. As it stands, Admiral Saavik and the sector’s standing Rapid Response Committee decided three hours ago that your name topped the list of prospective candidates to lead just such a reaction force. I’m forced to defer to my superior’s judgement in this matter.”

Trujillo blinked, experiencing a moment of cognitive whiplash. “I’m sorry, sir... did you say—”

“Yes, damn it, Nandi. We’re giving you a task force to run these Klingons down. Don’t screw this up, or I’ll have your guts for garters, *after* Saavik gets done eviscerating *me!*”

“I—uh, thank you, sir. I’ll certainly keep—”

He waved off her awkward reply. “I’m sending you *Shras*, *Hathaway*, *Vespula*, *Feynman*, and *al-Ashtar*. If we can scrape up any more combat-worthy ships, we’ll send them your way as well. What do you plan to do with *Zelenskyy*?”

“We’ll effect repairs to her as best we’re able, sir, and then we’ll bring her with us. Any chance you can attach a long-range tender to the task force?”

A few more keystrokes on his tablet were followed with, “Done. The *Falmouth* has been tasked to your group.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “We’re giving you a brevet promotion to commodore for the duration of this mission. Enjoy it while it lasts.”

“For what it’s worth, sir, I appreciate Command’s vote of confidence in my abilities.”

“You should,” Markopoulos retorted. “There’s a lot riding on this, and if you foul this up you might plunge us into another war with the Klingons.”

Despite her earlier reprimand, Trujillo had to smile at the statement. “To quote Professor Markopoulos from his academy Intraspaces Astropolitical Science class, ‘there will always be another war with the Klingons’.”

“Yes, I said that. However, I never inferred that I’d be the one starting it.” Markopoulos set down the slate, once again directing his full attention to Trujillo. “Coordinate with Captain Muchumba at Sector Ops to make rendezvous arrangements with your ships. This will be Operation Venatic. Your task force designation?”

“Scythe, sir,” she answered simply.

The corner of Markopoulos’ mouth twitched. “Naturally. Very well then, good hunting with Task Force Scythe, Commodore.”

The screen winked; the admiral’s visage replaced with the Starfleet Command delta. Trujillo sank back into her chair, her cumulative tension escaping in the form of a long sigh. She toggled a call button to the bridge, summoning her XO.

Glal stepped into the compartment, favoring Trujillo with an expectant look. “And how did that go, sir?”

“Better than I deserve, frankly,” she admitted.

“Command still fretting about that business with the Cardassians?”

“Oh, yes,” she confirmed. “Very much so. Saavik green-lighted my task force proposal over Markopoulos’ objections, apparently.”

“Well, sir, you’ve never gone out of your way to avoid aggravating the Chic Greek. It was bound to come back around to bite you sometime. And I would remind you this advice is coming from a Tellarite.”

Trujillo actually laughed at that, a much-needed release of stress. “I yield to your wisdom, Commander.”

“What did they give us?”

“Seven ships, including *Zelenskyy* and a tender.”

He raised a bushy, skeptical eyebrow. “Starships or warships, sir?”

“An *Andor*-class missile cruiser, a *Constellation*, two destroyers and a frigate. They’ll hold their own.”

Glal nodded approvingly. “And what are we calling this party, sir?”

“Task Force Scythe.”

That elicited a snort from the older officer. “Oh, very good sir. Very subtle. May I presume Task Force Death Orgy was already taken?”

She pointed emphatically to the exit.

“I’ll see myself out, Commodore.”

Captain’s Personal Log, Stardate 3122.9

As Operation Venatic approaches the three-week mark, we have disappointingly little to show for our efforts. Feynman and al-Ashtar engaged three raiders a week ago near the Tarius Pulsar Creche, with one raider destroyed and another badly damaged ship escaping into the severe gravimetric shear of the creche, almost certain suicide. Aside from that encounter, we’ve found no additional clues as to where the Klingon pirates are staging from or what their next targets may be.

Our Klingon prisoners still refuse to talk, and four of them have begun starving themselves in protest of their confinement. The Boslic whose colony they attacked refused to take custody of the Klingons or interrogate them after discovering their true identity, and I can’t really blame them. Who wants to draw that kind of attention to themselves?

The lack of results is discouraging and is clearly testing the Admiralty’s patience. Markopoulos has been hounding me for updates almost daily, and if we can’t locate and dig out the raiders soon, he’ll be only too happy to reallocate Task Force Scythe’s ships elsewhere.

I’ve decided to keep two-thirds of our ships on patrol in this sector, checking in with Federation and non-aligned colonies alike to make sure they’re seen to be protected by anyone watching. We’ve also been rendering assistance in upgrading some of the non-aligned colonies’ orbital defense systems. We’re not sharing Federation weapons technology with them, just making sure their own systems are working at peak efficiency, providing replicated parts and technical expertise where applicable.

Meanwhile, I’ve tasked Reykjavik, Zelenskyy and Vespula to visit local outposts and commercial stations, hoping to find someone somewhere who knows where the Klingons are based, or who might be supplying them.

If it turns out that the imperial military is funding and supplying the operation completely, this may be yet another waste of time. I'd hate to come up short on this mission, seeing as it was my own idea. Failure here would mean another personal loss of face with Command, and another nail in the coffin for the quickly dying idea of dedicated Starfleet warships.

As much as this assignment may impact my career, I'm embarrassed that I have to remind myself that there are lives hanging in the balance here.

* * *

Harksea Trade Station, Gamma Galadtonia System

The Xepolite trading outpost was over two centuries old but was well maintained, giving it a kind of exotic classical quality. The interior bulkheads were inset with pergium and nillimite, decorated with intricate scrollwork and flourishes that one seldom encountered in more modern structures.

The visiting Starfleet personnel had been given limited R&R privileges by Commodore Trujillo, and the senior staffs of both *Reykjavik* and *Zelenskyy* had the added duty of hunting for any information on the Klingon raiders.

The crews had quickly discarded the idea of trying to go undercover, given that they were largely of known Federation member species, and both looked and carried themselves as Starfleet personnel. Generous portions of gold-pressed latinum had been issued from ship's stores to the senior officers as bribes for actionable intelligence on their quarry.

Gael Jarrod, Arwen DeSilva, and Rachel Garrett walked through the commercial ring of the station, passing exotic store fronts and kiosks selling all manner of goods. Ligonian holo-sim dealers hawked their wares next to Klaestron bladesmiths and Orion weapons merchants. The enticing scents of dozens of different foods from countless different species mingled in the air and diverted visitors' attention. The smell of freshly cooked hasperat from a Bajoran refugee's food stall sought to overwhelm the aroma of Acamarian parthas souffle.

"So, how are you finding the position of executive officer?" Jarrod asked DeSilva. *Reykjavik's* Operations officer had been temporarily transferred to *Zelenskyy* to serve as Captain Withropp's XO, owing to the deaths of several of his senior officers in the battle at the gas giant. Other ships from Task Force Scythe had also contributed replacement crew to help fill *Zelenskyy's* open billets.

"Challenging and..." she cast a glance over her shoulder to ensure no *Zelenskyy* crew were within earshot, "...awkward," she finished. "They've been through a lot, and it was a fairly new crew to begin with. Trying to get all the replacements settled in and situated in their departments has been a headache, but Captain Withropp's been supportive and easy to work with."

Jarrood nodded, pausing to inspect a Kreetassan dagger in the display window of the bladesmith's shop. "It's great experience for you. You're practically a shoo-in for when Glal finally calls it quits."

Both DeSilva and Garrett's heads snapped around in unison at that statement.

"You know something I don't?" DeSilva inquired. She was aware that Jarrod and Trujillo were romantically involved and guessed that some privileged information may have come his way.

"Only that he's not getting any younger. Glal's been in uniform for forty-two years. He was on the cusp of retirement before the commodore poached him away from Captain Sulu, and that was four years ago. I figure he's done his bit for king and country. Besides, his family's very involved in politics back home, and rumor has it they're wanting him to run for a seat in the Ministerial Conclave."

DeSilva cocked her head, appearing thoughtful. "I mean... I wouldn't turn it down. Gods, those would be big boots to fill, though."

"Tellarite cloven feet are actually rather smaller than hum—" Garrett offered helpfully, only to be cut off by a sharp look from DeSilva.

"Hush, Ensign, the adults are talking."

The junior officer held up a belaying hand with a smirk. "Just kidding, sir. Gosh, you're really getting salty in your old age, Lieutenant."

DeSilva's jaw dropped open, and Jarrod had to turn away, his shoulders shaking in silent laughter.

"Swear to the Great Bird, Ensign, I'm going to find a way to transfer you to waste management. I'll have you scrubbing the waste conduits with your own toothbrush!" DeSilva mock growled.

Garrett looked at Jarrod. "Oh, that really wasn't half bad. Lower her voice a couple of octaves and make her left eye twitch a little and she could almost pass for Commander Glal."

DeSilva rolled her eyes and walked away to the sound of Jarrod's now audible laughter.

Garrett mimed gripping something at the sides of her mouth with the thumb and forefinger of both hands. "You need tusks, though, but I'm pretty sure there's a body-mod shop around here somewhere..."

DeSilva glanced back to recommend stopping at a nearby confectioner's storefront in time to see Jarrod ducking into the doorway of the bladesmith's with Garrett following in his wake.

She followed them inside, pausing to scan an almost overwhelming variety of cutting implements from a score of different worlds.

DeSilva was about to fire off a jibe about Jarrod shopping for his own collection when she spied what must have caught the security officer's attention. At the back of the store an employee was sharpening a Klingon *bat'leth* sword on a spinning grinding stone.

“Say, I’m something of a collector, and a genuine Klingon *bat’leth* is almost impossible to find,” Jarrod said by way of greeting to the young man behind the counter. “Is that the real thing?”

The dark-complected man, human in appearance, grunted. “It is, in fact,” he said over the whine of stone on metal, a fount of sparks showering him. He paused the work to examine the fine edge of the weapon. “Real composite baakonite, not those shoddy tritanium knock-offs the Orions are always peddling,” the man replied.

“How much?” Jarrod inquired, his expression radiating an enthusiasm that was all too genuine.

“Not for sale,” the man countered. “I could make you one, but it’ll take the better part of a week. A little less if you don’t want all the ornamentation.”

Jarrod could see the painstaking craftsmanship that had gone into the blade, replete with bloodgrooves fashioned into Klingon glyphs and other elaborate adornment.

“We’re only in port for a day,” Jarrod pressed. “You sure this one’s spoken for?” He held up a small satchel of latinum strips, jingling the bag for emphasis. “I’d make it more than worth your while.”

“I can guarantee the owner of this blade would use many of the other weapons you see in here to make her displeasure known to me,” the smith replied. “I wouldn’t live to spend your coin.”

Jarrod’s disappointment wasn’t feigned. “Okay, I understand. Can you tell me when she’s due to return to pick it up? I’d like the opportunity to try and purchase it from her.”

The younger man laughed. “Why so eager, Starfleet? You can buy a replica nearly anywhere.”

“I don’t want a replica,” Jarrod insisted. “I want the genuine article, and I haven’t seen anyone anywhere else in this sector who makes them by hand. The only other way to get a real *bat’leth* is to slay its owner in combat and seeing as we haven’t fought a war with the Klingons in sixty years that’s not likely to happen anytime soon.”

“Its owner is a very private person, unfortunately,” the man responded.

Jarrod reached into the bag, producing two slips of latinum. He held them up. “I’m serious about this. All I want is the chance to negotiate for the sale of that gorgeous weapon.”

The bladesmith sighed, his expression torn. “Fine, but it’ll cost you four slips, and you absolutely cannot let her know I told you when she was going to be here.”

“That’s a deal,” Jarrod enthused, fishing another two slips out of the satchel.

Nearer the front of the shop, Garrett unslung her tricorder from over her shoulder and began scanning the vicinity, pretending to peruse the various cutlery on display.

“It really is some of my finest work,” the man noted proudly, holding it out toward Jarrod for him to examine. “I am one of only a handful of non-Klingon artificers allowed to make and sell these beauties to the *tlhIngan*.”

“That’s quite a testament to your skill,” Jarrod noted, leaning in to study the sword’s artistry.

The bladesmith flipped the sword up with surprising speed and delivered a slashing strike towards Jarrod’s throat. The security officer flinched back, bringing up an arm that only partially blocked the strike and caused the blade to bite into his forearm and slice across his jawline rather than his neck. Though not the deathblow his attacker had hoped, the force and speed of the attack was sufficient to send the wounded Jarrod sprawling.

DeSilva took a sliding step back and reached down to grab the small Type-I phaser affixed to her uniform belt.

The door next to the bladesmith crashed open loudly and a hand clutching a pistol of some kind thrust out of the darkness beyond. The weapon sent three sizzling blue bolts of energy into DeSilva’s chest as she was still bringing her phaser up and into play. Gouts of sparks erupted from the impacts as DeSilva was blasted off her feet.

Behind her two comrades, Garrett dropped her tricorder and tapped her combadge as she dove behind a display case festooned with knives and swords. “*Reykjavik*, we’re under attack! Three for emergency beam-out at my location! We have casualties!”

Another flurry of energy pulses blasted the display case apart, showering Garrett with bits of glass, wood, and a spattering of liquified metals from partially vaporized blades.

The bladesmith slid around the corner of the wrecked display case, the *bat’leth* held nearly at port-arms, clearly wielded by a man with significant skill. He snarled, “*tlhaw’DIyo! DaH Hugh vISuvjaj*,” as he brought the blade forward and down with practiced speed.

The transporter beam swept Garrett and the others away an instant before the *bat’leth* cleaved flesh.

“Captain to the bridge!”

It was the undercurrent of alarm in Glal’s voice and the fact that he was shaken enough to have forgotten her brevet promotion that first worried her. The call summoned Trujillo from her desk, and she stepped from her ready room out onto the bridge.

“As you were,” she called, preempting the announcement of her presence as she moved to the center seat.

The XO was completing a conversation with what sounded like Dr. Bennett over comms. “Understood, keep us updated,” Glal said, closing the channel.

He turned to Trujillo, stepping aside to offer her the command chair. “There’s been an attack on some of our personnel on the station, sir. DeSilva, Jarrod, and Garrett were ambushed and have been transported directly to Sickbay. Two of them are going into surgery now.”

“Who?” she demanded, sliding into the seat.

“Don’t know yet. Details are still coming in, sir,” he advised. “Transport coordinates were from the commercial concourse.”

The duty Operations officer called out, “Our datalink with the station indicates a security emergency has been announced on the commercial concourse, sir. Station constabularies are responding.”

“Any sign of docked ships readying for departure?” Trujillo asked.

“Yes, sir. A Xepolite freighter is powering up for departure and a Vulcan passenger liner is about twenty minutes out from docking.”

Trujillo brought her swing-arm console into play, referencing information. “Ops, hail Harksea station control and inform them of the attack. Let them know until the suspects have been apprehended, no ships will be allowed to depart or dock with the station.”

Glal shot a troubled look in Trujillo’s direction but kept his own counsel.

Garrett bolted through the parting turbolift doors, looking a disheveled mess. Her hair was unkempt, her uniform dusted with fragments of glass and splinters of wood, and her face and hands were spotted with tiny burns, some of them still oozing blood. “It’s Klingons!” she announced breathlessly, moving for the unoccupied Science station. Garrett began uploading telemetry from her tricorder to the bridge station.

Trujillo turned towards her in the chair. “Ensign? Report, what happened over there?”

“Lieutenant Jarrod saw a shopkeeper sharpening a Klingon sword and was trying to get information out of him on who it belonged to. I’d brought out my tricorder and started scanning the shop when we were attacked. My scans confirm they were both smooth-pate Klingons masquerading as other species.”

“Initiate scans and find me those Klingons,” Trujillo ordered.

“Incoming comms from the station, sir. It’s the station superintendent, Gem’lerr Bsor. Gem’lerr is his title, sir.”

“Understood. Put him on screen.”

The face of a bulbous-headed Aaamazzarite appeared on the viewer, his scowl presaging the anger of his words.

“By what authority are you trying to shut down this station? This is a non-aligned system; Starfleet has no jurisdiction here!”

“My apologies for the inconvenience, Gem’lerr. I am Commodore Trujillo of the *Reykjavik*. Three of my crew were just attacked aboard your station, and I am taking steps to assure that the persons responsible are unable to flee.”

“My security personnel are attending that situation right now, Commodore. There is no reason for you to interfere with the lawful operation of this facility.”

“So long as no one attempts to leave the station or dock with it prior to the attackers being apprehended, we will not interfere. I do offer the assistance of my security contingent in searching your station for these men.”

Bsor was unmoved. “I repeat, you have no authority here. If you attempt to interfere with the operations of this facility, you will be targeted by our defensive systems.”

Trujillo leaned forward in her seat, her expression hardening. “We are on an assignment to track down Klingon raiders posing as unaffiliated pirates operating in this region, Gem’lerr. I came to this station seeking information from anyone with potential ties to this group. The two men who attacked my crewmembers were disguised Klingons, and I will have them in my brig or my morgue before we depart this station.

“As for my authority, I’d encourage you to scan my ship’s armaments and those of the *Zelenskyy*. Six photon torpedo tubes and a brace of phaser banks is all the authority I require. If you try to take aggressive action against us, I will respond in kind, and we enjoy a considerable advantage in firepower.”

Bsor fairly vibrated with anger. “I will be filing a formal protest with the sector’s Federation attaché, Commodore.”

“You may do so at your leisure, Gem’lerr.”

Trujillo made a cutting motion and Ops severed the comm-link. Trujillo sat back into her chair; irritation evident on her features.

Glal approached her, speaking in a hushed tone. “Begging your pardon, sir, but we *are* overstepping our mandate rather boldly. Creating an interstellar incident here isn’t going to help our standing with Markopoulos or the Diplomatic Corps.”

“Noted,” Trujillo replied brusquely.

“I have them, sir!” Garrett blurted from her station. “They’ve gone into the station’s maintenance crawlways.”

“Transporter lock?”

Garrett took a moment to ascertain that. “Negative, sir. Too much interference from the power distribution grid that runs alongside those access tubes.”

“Shall I communicate their location to station security?” Glal asked Trujillo.

“No,” she responded after a moment’s consideration. “I’m not sure we can trust them, Commander. For all we know these Klingons are operating out of here with the station administration’s tacit approval. I want you to lead a security team in there and dig them out.”

His tusks quivered in anticipation. “Right away, sir.” He moved to a console and arranged for a security team to meet him in the transporter room and then stepped into the ‘lift, moving with purpose.

Trujillo toggled a series of commands into her panel, calling a sciences specialist to the bridge.

She looked over to Garrett. “Ensign, as soon as you’re relieved, I want you back in Sickbay being tended to.”

“Sir?” Garrett looked crestfallen.

The commodore slid out of her seat and stepped over to the Science station. She grasped Garrett gently by the shoulder. “I need you at one hundred percent, Rachel. This will all be much more difficult to do without you.”

“Yes, sir,” the ensign relented, feeling her adrenaline rush begin to ebb.

As Trujillo resumed her seat, a light began flashing on her armrest interface, a message tagged ‘discrete’ from Sickbay.

She found herself hesitating to press the icon, knowing full well that Gael Jarrod was one of the two seriously wounded officers from the attack. Trujillo and Jarrod had been involved for just over a year and allowing herself that outlet had opened an entirely new emotional paradigm for her. Even the prospect that Gael might be dead caused a tightness in her chest like an icy hand gripping her heart.

Trujillo opened the message, which read simply, *‘Please report to sickbay when you’re able.’*

She glanced around, her eyes finally settling on a junior lieutenant taking DeSilva’s position at Ops. “Mister Shukla, take the conn. If Commander Glal calls, route him through to me via communicator.”

“Aye, sir,” the young man intoned, standing to assume the command chair as Trujillo vacated it. If it was his first time in the center seat, he gave no indication.

Trujillo moved to the turbolift, joining Garrett at the doors as they parted. The two women stepped into the lift car, each a prisoner of her own dark thoughts as they descended towards Sickbay.

* * *

As Trujillo and Garrett entered Sickbay a nurse stepped forward to lead the ensign to a nearby examination table for treatment.

Trujillo immediately saw Jarrod atop a biobed, his neck and lower face encased in a hemostatic collar. His uniform jacket was splayed open, and the upper portion of his dark green undershirt was stained black with blood saturation. A quick glance at his readouts on the headboard display indicated stable life-signs, and she allowed herself to relax fractionally.

She then spotted another figure in an isolated treatment alcove, but the person on this biobed was covered head-to-toe by a blanket. The diagnostic monitor at the head of the bed was deactivated.

Dr. Bennett intercepted Trujillo on the way toward the bed. He wore the somber yet detached expression she had come to associate with physicians delivering unwelcome news.

“I’m very sorry, Commodore. Lieutenant DeSilva expired moments after being transported aboard. She suffered three impacts to the upper torso from an Orion pulse weapon at close range. One of those shots caused devastating injuries to her left lung and another ruptured her aorta. We were unable to stop the bleeding or repair the damage in time.”

Trujillo nodded distractedly; her eyes still fixed on the body. “I’m sure you and your team did everything you could, Doctor.” She hesitated, turning back toward where Jarrod lay.

“He’s been sedated, sir,” Bennett advised. “The collar apparatus is necessarily restrictive, and most patients struggle to try and tear it off. It’s easier this way and gives him a chance to heal.”

Bennett gestured towards the comatose officer. “Jarrod suffered a deep incision along his jawline that partially severed his tongue, as well as a significant concussion. He should make a full recovery, however.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Trujillo said, her voice lacking its customary timbre.

She found herself caught between competing emotions, both of which seemed to mock her. While part of her mourned the loss of a valuable and talented crewmember, another part of her experienced the selfish relief that it was DeSilva who had died rather than Jarrod.

Trujillo hated herself in that moment, loathing the concession of her personal relationship with Gael taking emotional priority over her responsibilities as a commanding officer. DeSilva deserved better, as did Jarrod.

She stepped forward and reached out, stopping herself just a few millimeters from touching Jarrod’s hand.

Trujillo chided herself for this crass self-indulgence and turned her back on Jarrod. Instead, she moved toward the exit, only to glance back just on the threshold of the doorway.

The commodore paused, then forced herself to walk step by reluctant step over to where DeSilva lay. So vibrant less than an hour earlier, DeSilva’s life and

accomplishments were now ended, obscured by a blanket bearing the Starfleet chevron and *Reykjavík's* registry.

Trujillo pulled back the covering, exposing DeSilva's face, now ashen in death. There was no sign of the young woman Trujillo had recruited as a junior lieutenant to join her crew as Operations manager and later, second officer. Arwen DeSilva, native of Lisbon, the person who had saved Trujillo's life from an ambush on Crastus. The woman who'd drunk with Trujillo on Risa and fought alongside her at Gamma Taxel, that woman was gone. Her life had been ended prematurely, the victim of a pointless ambush on an unremarkable space station in an utterly forgettable corner of the quadrant. She had been sacrificed for a mission Trujillo had cobbled together because chasing pirates and hunting Klingons was more fun than sensor surveys.

Though Trujillo's footsteps to the exit were measured and steady, she fled the compartment all the same.

* * *

Glal's summons to the brig had been a brief three-word summation over comms, *'We have them.'*

Trujillo fairly stormed into the security bay having prepared herself for additional casualties from the security team.

Instead, she found two disheveled human-looking individuals lying unconscious in separate holding cells and being examined by medical personnel.

Glal and the security specialists were stowing gas cylinders of some kind into the armory vault and at Trujillo's arrival the Tellarite paused to address his CO.

"Two soft-shelled Klingons for you, Commodore. We've confirmed their species with blood and tissue samples."

"No injuries among your team?" she inquired, still hurting from the mission's recent loss.

"No, sir. They were heavily armed with disruptor rifles, pistols and various bladed weapons, but we didn't give them the opportunity to use any of it. Once we had them located, we sealed off that section of the conduit and gassed them with neurozine. We dragged them out of the service conduits and beamed back. Station security wisely opted not to intervene."

She raised an appraising eyebrow, impressed.

"Fight smarter, not harder," Glal quoted from behind his scraggly beard. He cast a glance at one of the newest prisoners as the medics and security specialists backed out of the cell and activated the forcefield barrier. The fields of the other holding cells containing the Klingon brigands had been set to opaque, sound-proofed, denying them the spectacle of Starfleet's most recent captures.

“Agents of the Klingon *So'taj*, I'd bet my pension on it,” Glal grumbled. “It appears our Klingon friends may have directed significantly more resources into this little operation than we had guessed.”

“It makes sense,” Trujillo concurred. “If their military wanted this to be a covert affair, it stands to reason the Klingon intelligence service would be involved.”

Trujillo crossed her arms, looking thoughtful. “Is it fair to assume that if we couldn't extract information out of the pirate crews then getting anything out of two of their intel types is a lost cause?”

“Yes, sir. They're rumored to be subject to torture as part of their training, to include bouts with their own mind-sifter device.” Glal performed a safety check of his phaser pistol, removed its power-pack, and handed the weapon and e-mag over to the armory chief. “We'll go through the motions just the same, sir, but everyone involved will know it's just for show.”

Trujillo considered that for a moment. She then bade Glal to follow her and led him out into the corridor and into a nearby empty crew break room, assuring their privacy by sealing the door. “I presume you've heard?”

Glal sighed. “Yes, sir. A damn shame. She was a fine officer.”

“Indeed, she was. In that vein, we need someone heading up Operations. I don't like that post sitting vacant for too long. Ops is too integral to the smooth operation of the ship.”

An inclination of Glal's large head conceded the point. “Agreed, sir. Shukla would be my first choice, given that he's the deputy Ops manager.”

Trujillo appeared unconvinced. “He's pretty new. He's been aboard for all of what, two months?”

“Almost five now, sir. He got top marks aboard the *Guangzhou*, and he's coming up on a time at-grade promotion to full lieutenant. DeSilva told me herself she was impressed with how he was coming along.”

Trujillo appeared to mull that over. “I'd been considering promoting Naifeh to JG and moving him over to the post.”

Glal's reticence was apparent. “Nafie's a good pilot and he's advancing well as a junior officer, but he's lacking a lot of the prerequisite Ops data and personnel management training that Shukla's already got under his belt. That, and putting a newly promoted JG over Shukla in the department's chain-of-command would be a slap in Shukla's face. I'd anticipate an almost immediate transfer request.”

She nodded. “Sage counsel as always, my friend. Thank you. Shukla it is, then. I'll let him know this afternoon.”

Trujillo turned to leave but paused as Glal called, “Commodore?”

She turned back.

“How are you doing with this, sir?” Glal's concern was a palpable thing.

“Awful, actually, but I'll muddle through.” Trujillo was caught off guard by her own admission.

“It was just so damned sudden.”

“It nearly always is, sir.”

“*Bridge to Commodore Trujillo,*” the bridge called via the overheads.

“Go ahead.”

“*Sir, the starship Exeter is on approach at high warp, ETA thirty minutes.*

Captain Kiersonn is requesting to come aboard to meet with you.”

Trujillo’s jaw tightened noticeably. “Understood. Make arrangements to have him beamed over. Commander Glal will meet him in transporter room three.”

“Well,” Glal noted acidly, “this can’t be good.”

“This smells like Markopoulos,” she agreed. “He’s sent his little pet out here to check up on me.”

Glal eyed her warily. “All due respect, sir, this would be one of those times when we want to play nicely with the other children, at least until we figure out what his angle is.”

“So noted,” she sighed. “Please greet the captain and see him to my ready room.”

* * *

“Enter.”

The doors parted to admit Glal, who stepped aside to bid entry to Captain Olaf Kiersonn of the *Excelsior*-class USS *Exeter*.

“Thank you, Commander,” Trujillo directed towards Glal, who stepped out of the compartment with a mischievous wink that went unnoticed by Kiersonn.

Trujillo stood, gesturing for Kiersonn to take a seat. “Please make yourself comfortable, Captain.” She extended a hand, mindful of Glal’s advice.

Kiersonn was tall, just under two meters, with a slim frame and a well-kept grey beard. His grey hair was long, worn in a single braid down his back that was rumored to honor his Viking ancestry. He wore a stylish captain’s-jacket variation of the uniform tunic over his white turtleneck undershirt.

“Thank you, sir.” He shook her hand and waited for Trujillo to resume her seat before he took his.

“I presume this isn’t a social call?” Trujillo asked pointedly.

“Not as such, no,” he replied, somewhat ill-at-ease. “As I’m sure you’ve already surmised, Admiral Markopoulos has dispatched me on a fact-finding mission to ascertain your progress with Operation Venatic.”

“It’s all in my reports, Captain. If you’re checking up on me, I’ll assume you have access to those missives I’ve sent up the chain.”

“I do, sir, and I’d like to offer my condolences on the loss of Lieutenant DeSilva.”

Trujillo inspected him as she accepted his gesture with a nod. "Thank you." Was this genuine, she wondered, or was he setting her up for bad news or a knife in the back?

"You know," she said, "the admiral dropped your name when he bought off on my mission proposal, Captain. I half expected you were here to nudge me out of my chair and assume command of the task force."

He shook his head. "No, sir. *Exeter* just finished a three-month refit, and we performed a max speed run out here to test out our engine upgrades." He appeared momentarily pained.

"Permission to speak freely, Commodore?"

She waved a hand. "Please."

"Yes, Markopoulos sent me out here in a blatant effort to light a fire under you, despite the fact that based on your reports you're doing everything you can to locate the Klingons. He sent along provisional orders to have me assume command of the task force if I found that you weren't up to the job. I have no intention of executing those orders."

He sat forward in his chair, hands clasped together in his lap. "Look, I know I've earned a reputation as the admiral's errand boy, but those efforts, however detestable, have finally paid off for me. *Exeter*'s slated to start a five-year deep space exploration mission next month, hence our refit. I got what I want, and I don't feel I owe the old man anything in return at this point. I'll tell the cranky old bastard whatever you'd like."

Her skepticism was all too obvious. "Really?"

Kiersonn held up his hands. "It's true. I'll be hundreds of light years away soon, far from the admiral's clutches. I'm technically under Exploration Command right now; this was more of a last personal favor to him that jibed with our need for a shakedown. I've hated having to work under that man's thumb. You may be on his shit list, but at least you have the self-respect that comes from knowing you've never had to lick his boots."

"So, what *do* you plan to tell Markopoulos?"

His answering smile appeared genuine. "Whatever you tell me, Commodore, short of ordering him to piss up a rope."

She surprised herself by laughing out loud at that. "Wouldn't that be a sight?"

Kiersonn's grin faded, and he grew more serious. "I do have something I'd like to offer, sir, if you've a mind to hear me out?"

Trujillo presented the same wave of her hand. "Certainly."

"In going over your mission reports, I've seen that you're having no luck getting answers from the Klingons you've captured. I may have a solution to your problem."

"An airlock?" she joked. "I have those, too."

"Better, sir. A Betazoid."

“A *what* now?”

Kiersonn had introduced Bemsal Craylee as his ship's civilian bartender, a member of a species that Trujillo was unfamiliar with. The young man certainly appeared human enough, with the exception of his black, iris-less eyes.

Kiersonn had explained that Craylee's homeworld had been contacted by Starfleet some thirty years earlier but had since expressed little interest in diplomatic relations with the Federation. Still, some Betazoids chose to explore Federation worlds as tourists or students, eager to investigate the multispecies panoply that was the UFP.

Most interesting of all, Kiersonn had explained that Betazoids were very powerful telepaths. Unlike Vulcans, they need not touch a person to read their thoughts or memories, and also unlike the Vulcans, some Betazoids had no moral qualms about using their abilities to extract information from unwilling subjects.

Craylee was apparently one of his species with a more flexible moral framework. He would never use his skills to compromise a friend or stranger for his own personal benefit or gratification, but Craylee could not abide bullies. Criminals, pirates, and the like, those persons Craylee was more than willing to scan if it could potentially save lives.

And so, Trujillo, Kiersonn and Craylee found themselves in *Reykjavik's* brig, having chased out all other personnel due to the delicacy and dubious legality of their plan. True, there were no specific Starfleet regulations at present forbidding the telepathic scanning of sentient minds, due mostly to the fact that the various Federation species possessing such psionic talents had their own codified prohibitions against such. Still, they were skirting the edges of ethical conduct with this course of action.

"Are you certain you don't want to wait outside, Commodore?" Kiersonn asked. "It'd be another layer of plausible deniability, however thin."

Trujillo shook her head fractionally. "No, thank you. I'm responsible for everything that happens on this ship, this included."

Kiersonn smiled grimly. "I figured as much, sir. I wanted to offer just the same."

"Will they be in much pain?" Trujillo asked, still flirting with second thoughts about this.

The captain laughed lightly. "They won't even know it's happening. That's our other defense. They can't very well refuse or object to something they know nothing about."

The young man loitered in front of each of the opaqued cell barriers for a few moments then returned to the two starship commanders. "What would you like to know?"

Arggentha Secundus, Myrovar System

The Orion marauder blew apart with the detonation of *Shras*' volley of photons, adding another victim to Task Force Scythe's tally for the day.

"By the gods," Glal murmured from his bridge post, "those missile-cruisers can certainly lay down the fire."

Trujillo had to agree. The *Andor*-class ship's torpedo spreads put *Reykjavik*'s healthy rate of fire to shame. It was for that reason that the rest of Task Force Scythe's ships were essentially running interference for *Shras*, herding the pirates' other misfit corsairs, skiffs, and brigs into the missile-cruiser's weapons envelope.

The ambush on the Klingon pirate base, an abandoned Tellarite asteroid mining station, had become a slaughter. The pirates, used to having the advantage of surprise, were wholly unprepared to be attacked by a well-armed battle force. Jamming local subspace frequencies had only added to their woes, denying them the ability to coordinate a defense against Starfleet's onslaught.

Even Kiersonn's *Exeter* had joined in, her captain insisting that his crew needed live-fire tactical practice before undertaking their deep-space exploratory mission.

In short order, a Klingon formation of seventeen assorted ships had been whittled down to a remaining five. With *Shras* and *Exeter* having blasted apart the asteroid sheltering them, their only recourse was seeking to escape the system's gravity well so they could safely jump to warp and attempt to flee.

Trujillo had reconfigured her swing-arm console to display a three-dimensional hologram of the battlespace in the air in front of the command chair.

"Have *Hathaway*, *Feynman*, and *Zelenskyy* come to zero-seven-three-mark-two-two-four and cut off their egress from the system. I don't want any of them escaping to rebuild this awful little band of malcontents someplace else."

"Aye, sir. Transmitting orders."

Trujillo toggled a comms channel open, broadcasting in the clear. "Klingon vessels, you will stand down and prepare to be boarded. If you resist, you will be destroyed. Your attempts to flee like cowardly *petaQ* amuses me. Only by surrendering will you live to see another day. If you choose to run or stand your ground, you will die just the same."

Glal, usually the voice of prudence, growled his approval from his post behind her.

"The raider at three-three-seven-mark-one-nine-four is now in weapons range," Jarrod announced from the Tactical station.

"Torpedo spread, proximity burst to overwhelm shields and disable. Follow up with phasers if necessary. Fire when ready."

Torpedoes flashed, phasers blazed, and another Klingon marauder was updated on the holographic display, its icon flashing from red to yellow, indicating its disabled status.

“Find me another,” Trujillo ordered, fully engrossed in the running battle.

Lieutenant Shukla, his Sikh turban a glaring reminder of DeSilva’s absence at Ops, announced, “Signal from *al-Ashtar*, sir. They report one of their torpedoes has prematurely detonated. They believe it may have struck a cloaked vessel.”

This garnered Trujillo’s full attention. “Tell Captain Rith’vin to proceed with caution. Sciences, sensor sweep of that location, look for tachyon particle fields.”

“On it, sir,” Garrett affirmed.

“Mister Naifeh, set course for those coordinates and engage, full impulse. Ops, order *Exeter* and *Vespula* to continue the pursuit.”

Glal moved to lean in, whispering to Trujillo over her shoulder. “We may have got someone’s attention.”

“That’s what I’m concerned with,” she replied quietly. Trujillo glanced over at Sciences, wanting to prompt an update but satisfied that Garrett would alert her as soon as she had something.

“Tachyon surge ahead!” Garrett exclaimed. “Collision close!”

“Helm, hard over!” Trujillo ordered, activating her seat’s restraint system as *Reykjavik*’s extreme maneuvering momentarily overwhelmed the ship’s inertial dampers.

“Vessel decloaking,” Garrett continued. “Reads as a Klingon K’tavra-class battlecruiser.”

“Bring us around, nose-to-nose with them.” Trujillo said in a low voice.

A larger, more powerful evolution of the venerable K’tinga-class battlecruiser, the K’tavra was the empire’s newest heavy warship. Bristling with weapons ports and sheathed in reactive armor, it looked every bit the part of a Klingon battlewagon.

The open red maw of the ship’s active torpedo tube only added to its menace.

Reykjavik came around in a tight arc, using the momentum from her evasive maneuver to swing back to face this newest threat.

“Stop engines,” Trujillo ordered. “Hold position here. Tactical, reinforce forward shields with auxiliary power.”

Shukla announced, “We’re being hailed, Commodore.”

Trujillo released her chair’s safety restraints, standing to face the main viewer. “On screen.”

The image of a glowering Klingon warrior seated in his throne-like command chair appeared, the man’s greying hair and visible decorations giving testimony to his long career. It was not lost on Trujillo that reckless young warriors were not entrusted with the empire’s largest, newest and most destructive assets.

Trujillo heard Glal's involuntary intake of breath from behind her as recognition dawned on her and she fought to suppress a similar reaction.

"I am General Kang of the Klingon Imperial Navy," the man rumbled in a voice that had made whole worlds tremble in the not so distant past. "Explain your purpose here or face the full might of our forces."

Garrett's voice rang out in the otherwise silent bridge. "Sir, additional Klingon warships are decloaking."

* * *

"I bid you greetings, General," Trujillo said after a second's hesitation. Behind her eyes she was practically giddy, the result of a decades-long fascination with this very man and his exploits. Her senior dissertation at the academy had been about Kang's role in imperial military politics leading up to the Khitomer Conference, and his opposition to General Chang's cabal.

She took a steadying breath. "I am Commodore Nandi Trujillo of Starfleet. My task force is here hunting down the last vestiges of a band of depredators that have been plaguing systems in this and adjoining sectors. We have discovered that these pirates are Klingon but have been posing as other species. As their actions are clearly not representative of the Klingon government or military, we would welcome your assistance in finishing off these bandits."

Kang bared his teeth, dropping his chin to fix his intense gaze on Trujillo. "You dare fire on Klingon warriors?"

"I dare *kill* Klingon warriors, when necessary," Trujillo shot back, unfazed. "The birds-of-prey silhouettes on our hull are proof of that. But the men we seek are not warriors. They are nothing more than scavengers. These men prey on the weak, staging hit-and-run attacks on civilian cargo ships and raiding non-aligned colonies. They are without honor. I have captured several of them, and they have revealed the location of their base, which we have just destroyed."

"You speak of Klingon honor, but the words do not fit in your mouth," Kang rejoined.

"I need not embrace a thing to understand it," Trujillo answered. "Kahless said, 'Honor is thicker than blood, and once washed away, the stains remain forever.'"

There, Trujillo taunted Kang in her head. Now you have a choice. Either openly side with the pirates and end this charade or hunt them down alongside us to prove their actions are illegal.

"Four K'tinga-class battlecruisers and eight Birds-of-Prey have decloaked, Commodore," Shukla reported. "They've been added to the tactical plot, sir."

With a flick of her wrist Trujillo moved the tactical holo-display that she was now standing partially within. She brought it up to eye level to observe the

dispositions of the new Klingon arrivals. The imperial warships were evenly dispersed, having taken positions next to the two Starfleet squadrons.

Glal spoke up from behind her. “*Hathaway’s* formation has cut off the last of the pirate ships, sir. They are requesting you re-confirm your order to fire in light of our... new situation.”

“Tell them to hold,” she replied. Trujillo took another step forward toward the viewscreen. “What shall I tell my ships, General? Do we blast these raiders out of the stars, or shall you?”

For the briefest of moments, Kang appeared discomfited. He recovered quickly, shifting his weight to motion to someone off screen. “We will collect our wayward brothers, Commodore. Meanwhile, it would be in the best interest of... diplomacy... for you to come aboard the *T’Kuvma* so that we may discuss these things.”

All eyes on the bridge seemed to lock onto Trujillo as she said, “I agree, General. Send coordinates for transport.”

* * *

“I already know what you’re going to say,” Trujillo said, hand raised as if in a warding gesture as the two of them strode down a corridor towards the transporter room.

“So do I, sir,” Glal shot back. “This is a terrible idea. The last Starfleet captain to beam aboard a Klingon ship under similar circumstances was thirty years ago, and he ended up on Rura’Penthe mining dilithium.”

“It will be fine,” Trujillo countered. “Ambassador Dax says Kang’s a pussycat.”

“That is quite literally the exact opposite of the ambassador’s assessment of General Kang,” Glal growled.

“Oh, I must have read it wrong,” Trujillo said with a dismissive chuckle. This was bravado, pure artifice, and Glal knew her well enough to realize this.

She chucked him playfully on the shoulder. “Right now, he’s undoubtedly saying, ‘Oh shit, it’s Nandi Trujillo!’”

Glal didn’t dignify that with a response.

“Come on, Glal, this isn’t the first time I’ve been toe-to-toe with an angry Klingon official.”

He grunted in response, then offered, “Yes, but this isn’t some jumped-up provincial governor. This is Kang, *Dahar* Master. The man who bloodied the Romulans at Tolutlis, annexed the whole Pralok Cluster, and tangled with Kirk and lived to tell the tale.”

They entered the transporter room and Glal dismissed the on-duty technician with a mere look as Trujillo ascended to the platform. Glal stared disapprovingly from behind the operator's console.

"No beaming explosives onto their ship this time," Trujillo admonished the Tellarite.

"That would have worked," he replied sullenly.

"If this little *tête-à-tête* goes wrong, defer to Captain Kiersonn. That means no shooting unless he orders it, understood?"

Glal's silence spoke volumes.

"Damn it, Glal," she sighed, venting a fraction of her anxiety. "I can't give this meeting the focus it deserves if I'm sidetracked with what you might do. There's too much at stake. If I'm removed from the equation, Kiersonn's next in line to command the task force. Following his orders protects you and the crew from any political repercussions from whatever follows."

He came to a semblance of attention behind the console. "Understood, sir. In the event you are killed or captured by the Klingons, I will not attempt a rescue or to exact retribution without direct orders from Captain Kiersonn."

She shared a meaningful look with him before nodding slightly. "Thank you, my friend. Energize."

* * *

She materialized in the heavier gravity and higher humidity of a Klingon transporter bay. A single warrior stood ready to meet her, the only person in the compartment other than the transporter operator. The woman barked something at Trujillo that the Universal Translator in her combadge rendered as, "Follow!"

The Klingon turned and headed out the reinforced hatch with Trujillo trailing behind.

The corridors here were octagonal, dimly lit, and bustling with warriors and technicians going about their duties. Conduiting snaked across the bulkheads and ceiling, with no thought given to aesthetics or comfort.

Trujillo followed the woman to a turbolift, where the two of them stepped into the lift-car, noticeably smaller than it's Starfleet counterparts. The smells of Targ-hide leather armor, stale sweat and the musk of unwashed warriors was almost overpowering in the close confines of the car.

Trujillo took a moment to prepare herself for meeting Kang. She knew he would be a larger-than-life presence and realized that her own fascination with the man might serve as a disadvantage in these circumstances. So little was known about Kang himself beyond the state-sponsored propaganda, most insights limited to snippets of his writings, the musings of Klingon expatriates and the conflicting

impressions of Federation officers and diplomats who had interacted with the mercurial warrior in battle or over the negotiating table in the preceding decades.

Yet another hatch screeched open to admit the Klingon adjutant and Trujillo to what appeared to be General Kang's office.

The bulkheads of the large compartment were adorned with battle flags and a host of martial memorabilia, to include bladed weapons from a score of worlds. What appeared to be a humanoid skeleton stood within an elaborate display case, next to the crystalline head of a Tholian which was itself housed in a specialized pressure-tank to prevent its shattering in the humanoid-friendly environment. A pair of Romulan disruptor pistols were displayed next to a mid-23rd century Starfleet phaser.

Kang stood from behind an enormous metal desk that appeared comprised of the same metals as the deck and bulkheads, so much so that it seemed to extrude from the floor. She was thrown off-guard by the realization that he was of average height for a Klingon, and Trujillo experienced a wistful pang of regret that she'd expected him to be taller. His long hair was tied into a single braid and was shot through with streaks of grey that gave testament to his decades of experience.

Kang waved the escort out of the compartment and resumed his seat, observing Trujillo silently.

She nodded to him. "General," as she gestured to the assorted mementos. "May I?"

A slight inclination of his head communicated his assent.

Trujillo paused to inspect an Alshain sword held aloft in a suspensor field, the blade still stained with dried lupanoid blood. She pointed to it and inquired, "Is this the one you used against Polemarch Olikk Z'Orberik?"

He eyed her warily. "It is. You know of that battle?"

She turned to face him fully. "I know of that entire campaign. You and Koloth led a battle fleet against the Alshain Starforce in their last stand at the Nonshaa Passage. That battle stripped the last systems of the Pralok Cluster from the Exarchate's hands. It's said that you led the boarding party aboard Polemarch Z'Orberik's ship, and slew him in single combat, despite his having broken your *bat'leth* with his sword. *This* sword."

"It is true," Kang said in that uniquely sonorous rumble of his. "His blade was forged of duranite, and what he'd meant to be a killing blow shattered my weapon as I parried. I was forced to wield one half as a *mek'leth*, and was able to strike his arm, making him drop the sword. I recovered it and used it to remove his head."

"Remarkable," Trujillo murmured, turning to look again at the sword. "I wish I could have been there." She smiled wistfully. "Starfleet frowns on displaying such prizes, a pity really. My victories must live only in here," she said, tapping a finger to her temple.

“With the exception of the kill marks emblazoned on your ship’s hull?” he asked sardonically.

“That they tolerate, grudgingly,” she admitted with a smirk.

Kang stepped out from behind his desk. “You did not come here to fawn over my trophies, I think.”

“No,” she conceded, “but when else might I have the chance to see so much history, or to hear the tales of their taking from the source?” Trujillo turned again to face him. “But you are correct, General. We have other matters to discuss.”

He waved her towards a high-backed chair facing his desk. She moved to it but did not sit. “It is our tradition that the senior officer sits first.”

Kang nodded at this and sat, followed by Trujillo. “Speak your mind, Commodore.”

“Those Klingon pirates I have not slain are in my brig, men and women who have attacked colonies and ships as though they were common criminals. Yet they went to great lengths to hide their true nature.”

“Piracy among my people has flourished of late,” Kang answered. “A function of the empire’s growing restlessness in the... *peace* that has befallen us since Praxis.”

She noted that he’d said ‘peace’ as though issuing a curse.

“Yes,” she replied, “and if these were simply Klingon brigands from lesser houses or from the fringes of your society, I might agree. However, the sophistication of their ship’s systems and the devices used to alter their life-signs are clearly beyond the capability of mere pirates. Two of the Klingons in my custody are *So’taj* agents and are evidently involved in this business.”

Kang sat back in his chair, emitting a surly growl as though he found the entire conversation distasteful. “What of it?” he asked finally.

“I’m not going to show you the disrespect of pretending that we don’t know this is a covert operation to test the defenses of the colonies in these sectors. On behalf of the Federation and Starfleet, we are surprised and disappointed that the empire is skulking about in the shadows.” As anticipated, this had the immediate effect of angering Kang, whose fist crashed down atop the table. “*Ha’DIbaH!*” he shouted.

It took every ounce of self-control Trujillo possessed not to flinch in the face of his outrage, despite her having intentionally ignited it.

He rose from his chair, driving his hands palm down onto the tabletop and leaning against glare balefully at Trujillo. “We are the Empire! We do not cower in shadows!”

Trujillo stared up at him, seemingly unmoved by his outburst. “Tell that to the men in my brig, General.”

A long silence followed in which Trujillo fought to control her breathing and bring her heart rate down.

"I know this to be false," she replied after the pause. "They have talked. If they hadn't, we wouldn't be here mopping up their base of operations. So, tell me, General, on your honor. Who is telling me the truth? You, or them? Does a *Dahar* Master soil himself by association with spies and saboteurs?"

Kang sank slowly back down into his seat, the fury in his eyes diminishing gradually like a forest fire extinguished by rain.

"The High Council is a pack of fools," he said finally.

Trujillo held her tongue, not willing to risk another wave of indignation. The fact that she had survived one was miraculous enough.

"They are so fearful of losing Federation assistance in saving Qo'noS from the remains of Praxis that they allow spies and outlaws to set the stage for our next expansion."

She judged that his anger had been sufficiently quenched to allow her some leeway. "If the Empire cannot afford both, perhaps it would be wiser to wait for a time when the fate of Qo'noS is no longer in jeopardy?"

His eyes came up, still fierce, still smoldering with intensity. "It is in our blood. It is what we are. Fight to live, expand or die. The call of the hunt is bred in the bone for my people."

Trujillo offered a fatalistic shrug. "The Federation will object to the Empire conquering new worlds while we supply the equipment and knowledge to maintain the equilibrium of your home system."

"So be it," Kang intoned, sitting straighter as his course became clear. "Your prisoners, I would have them."

"Now that we've confirmed their identity and they've given me all the information I require, I have no further need of them. They are yours."

Trujillo tapped her combadge and ordered Glal to have *Reykjavik's* prisoners transported aboard *T'Kuvma*. Ever dutiful, Glal requested and received the proper countersign indicating all was well with Trujillo.

Sensing the approaching conclusion to their meeting, Trujillo stood. "Be advised, General, if the *So'taj* continues with this subterfuge, Starfleet will go on hunting them down as we've done here. If the Klingon Empire wants to return to subjugating other sentient species, it will have to be done in full view of the Alpha and Beta quadrants. You should be prepared for the inevitable consequences."

"Is that a threat?" he asked from behind hooded eyelids.

"You may consider that both threat and promise from your friends in the Federation, General Kang. Do you have any message for me to deliver to my government, sir?"

He considered that, but then demurred. "Not at this time. My government's response will be tendered through the proper diplomatic channels."

Trujillo reached for her combadge. "I will take my leave, then."

"You are an unlikely ambassador," Kang offered by way of farewell.

“Sometimes to avoid conflict, you must send a representative fluent in the language of war. Our diplomatic corps is the carrot, *Reykjavík* is the stick. This is what we do.”

She had no idea if the allusion translated well into Klingonese but found herself not caring overmuch.

He inclined his head as she called her ship, and the transporter beam swept her home.

“You’re alive,” Glal remarked as Trujillo regained molecular cohesion. She blinked and pursed her lips. “Yes.” She sounded genuinely surprised. “You must have caught him in a good mood.”

Trujillo stepped down off the dais. “Or I proved amusing enough to him that it wasn’t worth the diplomatic kerfuffle my unfortunate demise would have caused.”

“We’ve transported over the prisoners. Are you sure surrendering that leverage was the best strategy?”

Trujillo swept into the corridor with Glal hot on her heels. “I told Kang they’d spilled their guts.”

Glal winced at this. “You know he’ll torture them to death to discover who talked and what they divulged. None of them will be able to provide those answers.”

“Indeed, I do,” she replied darkly. “Pity that, cold-hearted raiders going under the knife. I am awash with regret.”

“So... are we done here, sir?” he asked.

“Not by a long shot. Now the ball’s in Kang’s court. He as much as admitted his government’s complicity in the operation, but it sounds like the High Council’s set all this in motion.”

“So, now we wait?”

“Aye,” she affirmed. “Now we wait.”

* * *

Gael Jarrod hesitated just short of pressing the annunciator button at the door to Trujillo’s quarters. Things had been inexplicably awkward between them since his injury and DeSilva’s death. She had come to visit him in Sickbay while he recuperated from his injuries, but those meetings had been perfunctory, impersonal encounters, all duty but little substance.

The crew had known for nearly six months that he and Trujillo were romantically involved, so he was at a loss to explain her distancing herself from him. The only reasoning that made any sense was that Trujillo blamed him for DeSilva’s death. Jarrod felt having the burden of Trujillo’s reproach on his shoulders would only magnify the guilt he already carried.

As gut-wrenching as that possibility would be, knowing would be better than this agonizing emotional limbo he found himself in. He steeled himself and pressed the button.

After a brief pause, she called, “Enter.”

The doors parted and Jarrod found himself face-to-face with Trujillo. She was garbed in her uniform undershirt and vest, a cup of tea in hand. “Lieutenant?”

“Good evening, Commodore.” He looked down, drawing her attention to the fact that he wore civilian attire. “And it’s just Gael at the moment.” He looked up to meet her eyes. “Is Nandi in?”

She closed her eyes and sighed, biting her lower lip. “Yes, of course.” She stepped aside to allow him access to her quarters.

He stepped inside and moved toward the sitting chairs, turning to face her. “We should talk.”

This elicited another sigh, this one seemingly directed at herself. “Agreed. Please, have a seat.”

He sat and she moved to seat herself on the couch across from him.

“Have I done something wrong?”

Trujillo leaned forward to set her cup down on the table separating them. “No, not at all.”

“I can’t pretend to understand the stresses that you’re under at the moment,” Jarrod confessed. “But it feels like you’ve thrown a switch, and suddenly I can’t seem to find my feet.” He held up his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “I’m in zero-G and I don’t know where up is.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured, then louder, “no, it’s nothing you’ve done. I’m... I can’t—I can’t seem to articulate what I’m feeling at the moment. With all that’s happening I’ve had to wrap up our relationship, place it in a box, and put that box away until I have the head-space available to process it all.”

Jarrod considered that. “Okay, that’s fair. I just needed to know I hadn’t screwed up in some way that you weren’t prepared to call me on.”

“No, nothing you’ve done, Gael. This is all me trying to untangle Nandi from the captain, trying to fathom where one ends and the other begins.”

He nodded, standing. “Okay. This is me giving you the time and space you need to do that.”

She followed him to her feet. “Thank you,” she said, and she meant it.

* * *

Lieutenant (junior grade) Jagvir Shukla entered Trujillo’s ready room at her invitation, reaching out to shake the commodore’s hand as she directed him toward a chair facing her desk.

“This meeting is overdue, Lieutenant. I apologize that our business with the Klingons has delayed this matter.”

Shukla took the offered seat, his face evidencing curiosity but little else. He was tall, well built, and cut a striking image with his well-kept full beard and piercing brown eyes. He wore a traditional Sikh *dastār* turban in operations-grey, matching his undershirt and shoulder flash. The *dastār* bore the Starfleet encircled arrowhead on the front, complimenting his uniform appearance.

“Can I get you something, Mister Shukla? Coffee, tea, or something stronger?”

“Coffee would be excellent. Thank you, sir.”

“How do you like it?”

“Black, two sugars, please.”

Trujillo rose and moved to the replicator station. As she input beverage orders she noted, “I’ve been reviewing your service jacket, Lieutenant. Your former COs are unanimous in their praise.

“I was most interested to note that Captain T’Pran gave you high marks for your service aboard *Guangzhou*. I’ve met T’Pran, and she is not overly effusive in her praise.”

He smiled at that. “I would concur with your assessment of the captain, sir. However, she is an excellent starship driver, and I learned a great deal from her.”

Trujillo returned with Shukla’s coffee and a cup of green tea for herself. Handing him his beverage, she slid into her seat, asking, “What brought you to *Reykjavik*, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Opportunity, sir. *Guangzhou* was due for a prolonged refit cycle after which she was going to be assigned a six-month rotation patrolling the Romulan Neutral Zone. Nothing much happens along the RNZ, and as much as I liked that ship and crew, I felt it was time to move on. After researching my options, I saw that the deputy Ops post was due to open up on *Reykjavik* in six months. The timing worked out perfectly, and with Captain T’Pran’s recommendation, I was able to attend the accelerated divisional leader’s training course and complete it just as your billet opened.”

Trujillo raised her cup towards him. “A win for all parties, aside from *Guangzhou*.”

“Thank you, sir,” he replied before taking an experimental sip of his coffee.

“Your successful graduation from that course combined with your time-at-grade enables me to grant you this,” Trujillo said. She opened a small box and produced two rank insignia for a full lieutenant. She stood and moved around the desk to hand them Shukla, who stood as well. “By order of Starfleet Command, you are hereby promoted to the rank of full lieutenant, with all the rights and privileges thereto. Congratulations.”

Shukla’s demeanor was appropriately serious, but Trujillo thought she could see a hint of a smile forming at the edges of his mouth.

“Thank you, sir. Would you do the honors?”

“Of course,” Trujillo replied, unfastening the shoulder clasp of Shukla’s uniform tunic and replacing his junior-grade rank pin with its senior counterpart. Refastening the clasp, she then followed suit with the rank insignia affixed just above the departmental stripe on his left forearm.

“Much better,” she affirmed with a smile that finally ignited one of Shukla’s own.

“I apologize, sir. I realize this is only because of Lieutenant DeSilva’s passing—”

“Belay that,” she ordered with a raised hand. “Your promotion was earned regardless of what happened to DeSilva. That said, her passing does find us in need of a new chief operations officer. I’m prepared to offer you that position, should you be interested?”

“I am, sir. We only served together for a few months, but the lieutenant made sure that I was prepared to step into her role should the occasion warrant it. I would never presume to take her place, but I will do my best to live up to her legacy.”

Trujillo extended her hand again. “Well said, Mister Shukla. Welcome to the senior staff.”

They shook, sealing the arrangement.

* * *

Despite the yawns and bleary eyes from officers who had just gone off duty a few hours earlier, the hastily assembled group stood to attention as Trujillo swept into the conference room. “At ease, this meeting is now in session.”

She took her seat with the others following. “We received the following transmission twenty minutes ago in a fleet-wide missive from Command. It appears the Klingons have given us our answer.”

Trujillo activated the viewer, revealing what appeared to be a large painting of a Viking longboat sailing the bay of the Terran city of Reykjavik to be a viewscreen. An image of the Federation/Klingon border expanded outward to reveal a region of disputed territory contiguous to Klingon space, with overlapping claims of control displayed in a riot of colors.

A computer-generated voice announced, “*At 1427 hours Zulu-time today, Imperial Klingon military forces initiated attacks on eight separate star systems in three contiguous sectors bordering on the empire’s core-ward frontier. This contested territory is presently claimed by several non-aligned species or governments. Antedian, Ornaran, Boslic, and Tyrellian colonies were among the planets assaulted and occupied by Klingon troops in this offensive. Command has ordered all Starfleet craft within four parsecs of the border to yellow alert in preparation for any aggression by the Klingons directed at Federation colonies or outposts in the region.*”

“*These assaults happened simultaneously with attacks on Klingon-annexed worlds that have been in a state of semi-revolt over the past decade, to include Troyius, Krios Prime, and Vault Minor. Fleet Tactical believes this is a move by the Klingons to crush internal rebellions within the empire that have been sapping their military strength and preventing the empire’s expansion.*”

The transmission ended and Trujillo turned in her chair to face her senior officers. “Seeing as Task Force Scythe is already assembled in the vicinity, we’re being dispatched to the border to monitor the situation, and if necessary, safeguard our assets there.”

Garrett raised a finger and Trujillo called on her.

“Are we looking at a potential resumption of the old neutral zone, sir?”

“No, nothing that dramatic, at least not yet. We’re being sent to monitor the situation and dissuade any aggression towards the Federation.”

Dr. Bennett sat forward, his clasped hands resting on the tabletop. “Sir, with respect, tens of thousands of sentients are dying out there right now. I hazarded a look at the local subspace traffic this morning, and those colonies are crying out for help from anyone who’ll listen.”

“I’m aware, Doctor. However, were we to become involved in this conflict, even peripherally, we could easily spark another war between ourselves and the Klingons. For that reason, Command has issued explicit orders for us not to intervene or to aid those under attack by Klingon forces. We are to observe and report, and that is all.”

The faces around the table gave testament to the popularity of those orders.

Kura-Ka spoke up, the engineer’s voice carrying through the vocoder in his breathing mask with a subtle distortion. “How does the Federation reconcile our support of ongoing Terraforming projects on Qo’noS while the Klingons have resumed conquering entire sectors?”

Trujillo offered a resigned shake of her head. “That’s all being decided far above our heads, Commander. We have our marching orders, distasteful as they are.” She turned to address the room. “We’ll set course immediately for our patrol zone, with the ships of our task force distributed to provide maximum long-range sensor coverage. Are there any further questions?”

None were voiced.

She stood and they followed suit. “I’m heading off duty, XO has the conn. This meeting is concluded, and you are dismissed.”

* * *

“What have you got, Captain?” Trujillo inquired across subspace from her ready room data terminal.

“It began as an anomalous contact, sir,” Commander Va’obb replied. The bulbous-headed Arkenite continued, “*Vespula* was tracking a convoy of Boslic refugee ships fleeing the Toliza system when we detected an object decloaking near us, roughly the size of a photon torpedo. We initially feared the Klingons might be deploying cloaked mines, but further examination indicated that the object was a

message drone. It delivered a brief, localized signals burst on a Starfleet frequency before self-destructing. The transmission was a message for you, sir.”

“For me?”

“Yes, sir. Specifically. It requests that you and *Reykjavik* rendezvous with a Klingon ship at coordinates that I’m transmitting to you now. ETA for the meeting is at 0400 Zulu-time tomorrow.”

“Any indication as to the reason for the meeting?” she asked.

“None. However, the message is signed, ‘the wielder of Z’Orberik’s blade.’”

Trujillo suppressed a smirk at that revelation. “Understood. Thank you, Captain. I’ll need *Vespula* and *Feynman* to escort us to that rendezvous in case our Klingon friends are plotting some kind of mischief.”

“Understood, sir. We’ll be standing by. *Vespula*, out.”

The transmission terminated and Trujillo shot a curious look to Glal, seated across from her desk.

“Well, something’s afoot,” she surmised. “Kang doesn’t just request a meeting for the hell of it.”

“You suspect an ambush?” Glal asked skeptically.

“No, not really, but anything’s possible. Now that Klingon aggression is out in the open, sneak attacks on individual starships wouldn’t make a lot of sense. Especially since their forces have been going out of their way to avoid confrontations with Starfleet.”

Glal stood, stifling a groan as his knees crackled. “Still, taking two extra ships with us is a good idea. Better to be safe than dead,” he offered sagely. He looked out the ready room’s viewport, admiring the local constellations before saying, “The Klingons have lost more ships and troops than they’d planned to. The assistance we gave those colonies in upgrading their orbital defenses gave the empire an unexpected bloody nose.”

Trujillo replied with a disconsolate grunt. “It wasn’t enough. They were overrun and occupied anyway. So, what if a few hundreds or even thousands more warriors died in the effort? It’s what they want, after all; what they spend their days glorifying.”

“You would think that,” Glal countered, “but I wonder how much of that is a grand social pretense? Is there really any glory when a Klingon soldier in the bowels of an engine room is atomized when his ship explodes? Does his or her family mourn their absence any less, regardless of how many songs are sung about the honor of it?”

Glal turned his bearded face towards her, his tusks quivering with irony. “Imagine what it must be like to have to grow up in that society. The crushing weight of those expectations. Any dreams a child may have of the future would be supplanted by the prospect of their being slain in combat at some point. What of their

artists, their scholars, the shopkeepers and the old man who cooks the gagh at the corner kiosk?”

“You’re suggesting a society so devoted to war and conquest is more aspirational than concrete reality?”

“It’s possible. Quite probable, actually. I don’t see how their culture could function, otherwise. Someone has to build the ships, work the farms, and toil in the factories. You can’t do all those things if everyone is a warrior.”

“They subjugate whole worlds and take their people as slave labor. *jeghpu’wl’*, they call them.”

“Well, there is *that*,” Glal allowed.

“I’d be a lot more empathetic if they weren’t butchering innocents at this very moment,” Trujillo remarked acidly. Her weary sigh presaged, “I don’t know. When I was young, it all seemed so much simpler. They were the enemy, bloodthirsty savages just waiting to descend upon a thousand worlds and crush them under the weight of their ancient empire. Now, though? Now they’re just... people, as flawed and fickle and complex as the rest of us.”

He grinned. “You prefer your foes painted with a broad brush?”

“It helps me sleep at night,” she confessed.

Glal gestured to the doors leading to the bridge. “Shall we go find out what General Kang wants from us, sir?”

* * *

Zeta Upsilon IX had been mined out a century before, the planetoid having surrendered its heavy metals and dilithium over the previous five-hundred years to countless spacefaring species. What remained was a roughly spherical husk surrounded by a cloud of debris that stretched out across half the system like a massive comet’s tail.

This made it a perfect location for an illicit rendezvous far from prying eyes or sensors.

Shukla’s summons brought Trujillo onto the bridge from the ready room with a pre-emptive call of, “As you were,” before the lieutenant could formally announce her arrival.

“Report,” she instructed as she assumed the newly vacated command seat.

“A Bird-of-Prey has just decloaked five thousand kilometers directly ahead, sir. They’re signaling via direct laser-link, requesting permission to beam a party over.”

Glal stepped out of the turbolift, fastening the shoulder clasp of his tunic and looking as though he had just crawled out of bed. He spotted the Klingon scout nose-on with *Reykjavik*. “They’re prompt. That’s unusually considerate of them.”

“They’re requesting to beam over, Commander. Please see to the arrangements, taking all necessary security precautions, of course.”

“Of course, sir,” he echoed. Pointing towards Jarrod, Glal ordered, “With me, Lieutenant, and have a security detail meet us in transporter room two.”

* * *

Three partially formed patterns shimmered atop the transporter pad.

The chief advised, “There are three individuals, sir. I’m holding them in transit. One of them is inside a container... looks to be some kind of cryogenic tank. No weapons detected.”

Glal snuffled in response, “None that we can perceive, anyway,” over his shoulder to Jarrod and his security team. Then with a nod to the transporter operator he said, “Bring them in.”

He straightened involuntarily as the figure of General Kang materialized on the pad, along with a shorter Klingon carrying a satchel over his shoulder, notable for not being clad in their seemingly ubiquitous armor. A torpedo-sized containment vessel lay across two of the pads, presumably the cryogenic unit.

Glal called the assembled security team to attention.

“I am Lt. Commander Glal, first officer. Welcome aboard *Reykjavik*, General.”

Kang scanned the Starfleet contingent, then turned to introduce his companion. “This is Physician Kardec, my medical officer. We have urgent need of your medical facilities, Commander.”

Glal nodded to Jarrod, an indication he should scan the cryo-chamber to ensure it didn’t contain weapons, explosives, or toxins of any kind. A quick but comprehensive sweep was completed, and Jarrod gave the all-clear.

Glal led the party to Sickbay, notifying Trujillo of their destination en route.

The commodore arrived to find Dr. Bennett inspecting the readouts on the cryo-chamber’s antiquated display. He looked up to give Trujillo a questioning expression as he swept a sensor wand over the stasis tank. “Single male Klingon occupant in cryonic suspension. He’s suffered significant injuries and I’d judge him to be in critical condition.”

Trujillo wheeled on Kang. “What is this about, General?” she barked. “Tell me you didn’t just pull me a parsec out of my way because some favored soldier of yours has been wounded?” Glal tensed, expecting outrage from Kang who doubtless was not used to being spoken to so forcefully, especially by Federation officers.

Instead, the general merely inclined his head towards the tank. “This man may be the only one who can stop the empire’s push into the borderlands. If he dies, all hope of tempering that offensive is lost.” Kang gestured with evident frustration

at the imperial physician standing idly by, transfixed at the sight of all the advanced Starfleet medical equipment. “Our healers were not up to the task.”

The Tellarite realized suddenly that Kang had accepted Trujillo’s ferocity as Klingon asperity. It was how they addressed one another, and he appeared to take no offense at such coming from her.

Trujillo looked to Bennett and her curt nod prompted the doctor and his medical staff to sweep the cryo-tank towards Sickbay’s surgical theater.

As they departed, she turned again to the Klingon general. “Explain.”

“His father sat on the High Council. Theirs is an old and honored House. His family has opposed the chancellor’s ill-advised offensive, and their stance had nearly split the council on the matter.

“This courted the chancellor’s wrath. The same disguised brigands and operatives used to test the defenses of the alien colonies were sent against his family’s stronghold on Khorast. His father and siblings were killed in the attack, but he managed to fight his way past their blockade and made it to my flagship.”

Trujillo absorbed that for a long moment, watching through the transparent partition as the Klingon physician assisted Bennett’s team with removing the wounded man from the stasis tank.

“Presuming we save his life, what then?”

“We see him safely back to Qo’noS, to take his rightful place on the Council as the surviving head of his household. From there, he may be able to sway the Council’s decision regarding this invasion.”

“We?” she said sharply, her head snapping around to direct a withering gaze at Kang. “You propose we escort you to the homeworld to safeguard him from further attack?”

Kang hesitated, clearly uncomfortable with that idea. “I do not know. If your doctors are unable to save him, this goes no further. If he lives, the opposing Houses on the council may send their own ships to try and kill him. So far, this power struggle has been kept to the shadows, but an attempt on his life in the open could spark a civil war.”

Trujillo’s reply could have frozen plasma. “And you brought him... *here*.” She touched hand to her forehead in a gesture of exasperation. “You risk dragging the Federation into a Klingon civil war.”

“Yes,” Kang replied, guileless.

“So be it,” she said after a second’s consideration. “If Federation blood may yet be spilled in this young man’s defense, I would ask to know his name at the very least.”

“He is K’mpec, son of Anag, and last remaining heir of House Korrd.”

USS *Reykjavík*, Ready Room

Trujillo had expected anger from Vice-Admiral Markopoulos, and so she found his sudden excitement at her situation report disconcerting.

“If Kang’s telling the truth and this man can derail the High Council’s war plans, this could be a blessing in disguise,” he enthused across the heavily encrypted channel.

“Sir?”

“The Federation Security Council has voted to suspend our support for the terraforming and orbital-deconfliction work on Qo’noS. Our technical and support teams on-site have grown larger than the transport ship assigned there can safely evacuate. I was just cutting the orders to dispatch a task force under *Menelaus* to retrieve them. Instead, I’m going to substitute *Reykjavík* and Task Force Scythe. Task Force Archer can backfill your group’s border security detail. If you’re heading there anyway, it seems an excellent opportunity for you to deliver this important Klingon back home.”

“And the implications if opposing Klingon factions discover the ruse, sir? We might endanger the safety of our personnel already on Qo’noS.”

“That’s a possibility,” Markopoulos conceded. “But few plans worth implementing are ever without risk.”

Said from the safe comfort of an office on a starbase, Trujillo thought uncharitably.

“Understood, sir. What are our rules of engagement if we’re confronted by Klingon forces, one of these opposing factions?”

“If you’re confronted, withdraw. If you’re engaged, defend yourselves as best you’re able, and withdraw.”

Trujillo sat back slowly in her seat, not liking the sound of that one bit. “If we break and run, what happens to our people on Qo’noS?”

“We have contingencies in place,” Markopoulos said breezily. “One of our last groups of technical specialists to arrive at Qo’noS is actually a covert Special Missions Team. If your task force meets resistance, while you’re keeping that Klingon faction busy, I’ll dispatch Task Force Archer to Qo’noS in your place. Hopefully the SMT can keep the technical staff alive and well until the cavalry arrives.”

“Hope?” Trujillo echoed, unable to leach the acid from her tone. “Respectfully, sir, hope is not a recognized component of accepted strategic or tactical planning.”

“That’s going to be the plan, Commodore,” Markopoulos replied brusquely, unused to having his decisions questioned. “If you don’t approve, I can promote

Captain Kiersonn to lead the task force in your stead and take all of this off your shoulders.”

“That won’t be necessary, sir,” Trujillo replied, voice equally frosty.

“Then you have your orders. Additional navigational data will be transmitted within the hour. Markopoulos, out.”

She sat back, turning slowly in her chair as she pondered the plan, or rather the sketchy outline of a plan that Markopoulos had just tossed in her lap. If Trujillo and her people somehow succeeded, Markopoulos would claim credit for that success. Should she fail, the price exacted by Command for that failure would be hers alone. The Chic Greek had a reputation for treating his subordinates like chess pieces, and right now Trujillo felt more pawn than queen.

She turned her attention back to the tablet on her desk and the half-written speech for DeSilva’s memorial service it contained. Trujillo had been stymied in her attempts to finish it, her attention diverted by the pace of recent events and by her own procrastination. She desperately wanted to complete it, so that she could give her friend and comrade the departing recognition she so deserved, but something held her back.

Trujillo picked up the data-slate, looked at it for a moment, and then tossed it back on the desk as she stood and moved for the door.

* * *

Guest Quarters, Deck 6

The armored security specialists flanking the doorway snapped to attention at Trujillo’s approach.

She acknowledged them with a nod, then pressed the annunciator. The doors parted after a prolonged delay, and a hulking Klingon warrior filled the doorway, glowering down at her.

“What?” he sneered.

“I am here to see General Kang,” she said simply.

“Do you have an... appointment?” the warrior asked, appearing to savor the last word a bit too much for her liking.

“The general is a guest on *my* ship,” Trujillo replied. “I will see him at my convenience, or he can gather his things,” she paused, looking the man up and down, “and his... *people*, and go.”

The warrior frowned and appeared to be trying to decide whether Trujillo was making a joke.

“*Move!*” she barked, surprising herself as much as the Klingon, who actually started at her eruption.

The man stepped aside, and Trujillo strode into the compartment, finding Kang eating at the dining table. The surface of the table was littered with plates, platters, and bowls holding a variety of foods from several Federation worlds.

Kang glanced up from his meal but said nothing as Trujillo approached.

“Apologies for interrupting your repast, General, but we must talk.”

The general set down a bowl of what appeared to be plomeek soup, dipped his hands into another that Trujillo hoped contained water, and washed them briefly before shaking his hands dry with exaggerated flicks of his wrists that sent droplets flying across the compartment.

Kang stood to face Trujillo. “You humans talk far too much,” he said.

Ignoring the jibe, she announced, “My orders are to comply with your plan, General. Will you or any of your ships be accompanying us to Qo’noS?”

“I must soon resume my place at the head of my fleet, but I have authorized three Birds-of-Prey and a K’tinga-class cruiser to accompany your squadron under cloak.”

“They will move to defend us if we’re opposed by a Klingon faction?” she asked pointedly.

“Of course,” he intoned. “You will be performing a service to the Klingon people.”

“I doubt those among your pro-conquest faction would perceive it as such.”

“Their feelings on the matter are of no consequence,” Kang offered dismissively.

“They are if those particular warriors are shooting at me and mine,” Trujillo countered.

Kang gazed at her appraisingly. “Do you fear battle so, Commodore? Perhaps I should have approached another in Starfleet?”

Her eyes narrowed at the implied challenge. “I do not fear battle, General. I dislike being used as someone’s game piece, regardless of whether the players are Klingons or Starfleet Command.”

Kang spread his arms wide in an all-encompassing gesture. “We are all expendable weapons, to be wielded or discarded as our superiors dictate. Such is the life of a soldier.”

Trujillo raised her chin. “True enough, though I still don’t have to like it.” She cocked her head and gestured out the nearest viewport. “In any event, if your fellow Klingons come calling, looking for battle, we still have plenty of room for more silhouettes on our hull.”

With that, Trujillo spun on her heel and stalked out, leaving a bemused Kang in her wake.

* * *

“How’s your patient?” Glal asked, staring through the window into the Klingon’s Sickbay recovery room.

“Hanging on,” Dr. Bennett summarized from beside him, “though whether that’s due to my skills or his ridiculously redundant biology, I can’t say.”

“They build them tough,” Glal noted with a hint of admiration.

“They’d have to,” Bennett agreed. “Their homeworld is like something from Earth’s Cretaceous period – naked savagery.” He shook his head in mock disbelief. “One wonders if they’d have ever achieved warp drive on their own if the Hurq hadn’t littered their planet with discarded spacecraft.”

Glal cast an unsavory glance in Bennett’s direction. “That sounds dangerously prejudicial, Doctor.”

“Tough,” Bennett shot back, his candor unchecked. “I was serving aboard *Callisto* when Klingon raiders hit our colony on Donatu V. We were the first ship on scene. It was a goddamn bloodbath. They killed and maimed indiscriminately, same as they’re doing now to all those nonaligned worlds.”

Bennett’s face flushed with the memory of it. “Women and children with *bat’leth* wounds, Commander. Where’s the *honor* in that?”

The question was clearly rhetorical, and Glal remained silent, his attention back on the Klingon atop the biobed.

“Their government denied responsibility, of course,” Bennett continued. “They were ‘unaffiliated brigands,’ operating outside Klingon jurisdiction.”

Glal replied softly, an uncommon occurrence for the Tellarite. “I won’t try and quench your hatred, Doctor, as it was fairly earned. In the here and now, however, we need every bit of your skill and knowledge to keep this man alive. Countless other lives, those of the people who may yet fall under the Klingon sword, may depend on it.”

Glal could see Bennett’s sneer in the reflection the men shared though the transparent aluminum viewport.

“Not to worry, sir. The Hippocratic Oath trumps my personal feelings on the matter, and if this Klingon bastard can help stop the slaughter, so much the better.”

“I guess that will have to do,” Glal grumbled.

* * *

“We are approaching the Klingon border, sir,” Naifeh reported from the helm station. “ETA, five minutes to territorial boundary.”

Trujillo acknowledged the order, turning in her seat to gesture towards Tactical. “Mister Jarrod, coordinate with the task force and ensure we’ll be the only ship receiving or making transmissions to the Klingons.”

“Aye, sir.”

“We’re being scanned, Commodore,” Garrett noted, her attention fixed on her sensor displays.

“Concurrent sweeps from multiple sensor buoys along their border.”

“Incoming challenge hail from the closest Klingon border outpost, sir. Audio only.”

“Let’s hear it, Mister Shukla,” Trujillo ordered.

“Unidentified vessels, you are approaching the territory of the glorious and mighty Klingon Empire. Slow to impulse speeds and convey your intentions or you will be destroyed.”

“Always opacity and obfuscation with the Klingons,” Glal decried acerbically. “You just never know where you stand with them.”

Ignoring Glal's theatrics, Trujillo instructed, “Ops, order all ships to decelerate to one-half impulse and send our transit authorization codes to the Klingons.” Trujillo looked back over her shoulder at Glal. “Here’s hoping Kang has as much pull with his government as he claims.”

“We should know in a few moments, sir,” he agreed.

Trujillo toggled a comms channel open on her chair’s armrest display.

“Klingon border defense, this is Commodore Trujillo of Starfleet. I am leading a squadron of starships to Qo’noS to collect our personnel and return them home. We have transmitted the authorization codes given us by your government for safe passage to your home system.”

The delay stretched on, and Trujillo busied herself by plotting a series of tactical deployments of her ships to thwart an attacking squadron of Klingons. It was her way of hoping for the best but preparing for the worst.

Icons representing Starfleet and Klingon ships swirled around her in a holographic ballet of simulated violence.

“Federation squadron, your authorization codes are accepted. We will dispatch a ship to conduct customs inspections and then escort you to Qo’noS. Hold your current position until it arrives. Any deviation from these instructions will result in revocation of your transit permissions and your forcible expulsion from Klingon space.”

“*Reykjavik* acknowledges and will hold position,” Trujillo replied before closing the channel.

Glal stood from his chair and approached Trujillo. In a confidential rasp he said, “Kang told us those codes would grant us free passage to their homeworld. He never mentioned an escort or an inspection.”

“No, but the Klingon armed forces answer to a series of regional warlords, based on Great-House affiliations. That means their policies and procedures are widely disparate, depending on location.”

“Perhaps so,” Glal conceded, “but what if this is a stalling tactic to give one of the pro-invasion houses time enough to send a squadron against us?”

Trujillo nodded slowly. “That’s entirely possible. Regardless, we’ll need to let this play out first before I’m willing to force the border. An incursion by a Starfleet task force would risk a full-scale war, and I’m not prepared to do that for any one man, or his family’s honor.”

Garrett turned in her seat to face the commodore and XO. “Sirs, the customs inspection could be a cover for a Klingon faction to try and ascertain if K’mpec is aboard.” Trujillo and Glal shared a look.

“Very likely,” Trujillo agreed. “We’ll need a contingency plan or two in place before their arrival.”

“At least on this occasion we have the luxury of planning time,” Glal observed brightly.

* * *

In Glal’s estimation, Commander K’daal was a portly, arrogant, and officious little shit. That assessment had been formed during the hour and a half that *Reykjavik*’s executive officer had escorted the Klingon border legion officer around the ship in a so-called ‘commercial contraband inspection.’

Given that *Reykjavik* was not a civilian cargo vessel and was engaged in a priority diplomatic mission for which she had already received transit authority, it was readily apparent something else was at play here.

K’daal and his two burly armed escorts had doubled-back to Sickbay after a sweep of the ship’s cargo bays, despite having already inspected the medical areas more thoroughly than any other section of the ship.

Glal stepped through the doors and moved aside, allowing the Klingon trio access to the medical facility once again. He snorted derisively, “You believe we’ve synthesized some contraband in the past twenty minutes since you last turned this place inside-out?”

K’daal, no taller than the compact Glal, came practically nose-to-nose with the XO. “We will search wherever we please, in whatever order we please!” he snarled.

“We have places to be, and you are interfering with our mission!” Glal seethed in return.

“Your coward’s errand to collect your sniveling scientists and engineers?” K’daal riposted. Glal stepped even closer, his porcine nose and tusks almost brushing the Klingon’s face. “If you’re referring to the courageous beings who’ve braved Klingon hostility and indifference to keep Qo’noS from complete destruction, then yes... *them*.”

“You sound as though you disapprove!”

"In fact, I do," Glal said in a quiet hiss. "If it were up to me, I'd drink a toast with Romulan ale as I watched the shards of Praxis rain down on your damnable ridged heads!"

There was an aching long moment which in reality lasted only seconds as the hands of the Klingon warriors and Glal's accompanying security personnel inched towards their holstered or sheathed weapons. Violence seemed certain.

Then K'daal erupted in laughter, a sound that seemed wrenched from a dyspeptic Terran hyena. "I like you, Tellarite!" he cried. He wiped at his eyes and collected himself. "Now, again, I must insist on speaking with your captain."

"As I told you earlier," Glal rasped with continued irritation, "the *Commodore* cannot be bothered with the whims of a mere bureaucratic cog in the Klingon military machine."

K'daal's short-lived humor was extinguished by this remark, and he rose on his toes in a misguided effort to try and stare down Glal. "We suspect you are harboring fugitives aboard this ship, Commander Glal. Klingon fugitives."

Glal offered an impressively genuine look of wry bemusement. "Why would we transport Klingon fugitives to Qo'noS? I could understand why some of your people might wish to flee that stinking, rock-pelted swamp, but who in the name of Kahless would want to be smuggled there?"

That proved to be K'daal's breaking point, and the rotund little Klingon roared, hand grasping at his belt as he tried to locate his blade.

K'daal's intent was evident, but Glal beat him to the punch. Literally. The squat Tellarite swiveled like a turret to deliver a spleen-bruising strike to K'daal's side, followed by a jab that snapped the Klingon's head back. K'daal swayed back, then forward again, his hands still searching desperately for his *d'k tahg*, just in time to receive Glal's follow-on uppercut.

The man stiffened and fell backwards onto the deck, insensate.

The Starfleet security detail had drawn their phasers on K'daal's escorts, but neither man had made any attempt to intercede.

"I have wanted to do that for months," confessed one of the warriors.

"Indeed," remarked the other. The man inclined his head in Glal's direction as if acknowledging the deed. He stooped and, with his companion's help, lifted K'daal by his arms and began dragging him back towards the doorway into the corridor. "This inspection is concluded," the man assayed. "We will make way to the homeworld. Have your squadron match our course and speed."

"Uh... yes," Glal spluttered. "It will be done."

The XO gestured for the security contingent to follow the Klingons while he held back a moment. After the doors had closed, Glal tapped his combadge. "We're clear, Doctor."

Multiple transporter beams deposited their Klingon patient, his Klingon physician, Dr. Bennett and his assistants in the main examination bay. It was the third

time during the inspection they had been forced to move to pre-established locations via site-to-site transport.

Overlapping Thoron fields had shielded the Klingon life-signs from sensor sweeps and masked the shuffling of personnel by transporter to avoid the inspection team.

Bennett directed an appreciative look at Glal, who nodded in return before stepping through the doors to see the Klingons off the ship.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Trujillo snapped, her expression tight with anger.

Glal sat heavily onto the ready room couch, his head drooping. “I wasn’t, sir.”

“You’re goddamn right about that!” she shot back before working to rein in her outrage. She took a moment to collect herself and then began again more calmly. “You’re my right hand, the person who keeps *me* in line when I start to stray off course. I have to be able to depend on you to do the right thing, especially in a situation as combustible as this.”

Glal looked up to meet her eyes, his expression shifting from crestfallen to resolute. He opened his mouth to speak, but then thought better of it.

“It’s only the dumbest blind luck that K’daal’s men appear to loathe him as much as you.” She gestured to the forward bulkhead, in the direction of the Klingon destroyer shepherding their task force through Klingon space. “That could—that *should*—have turned into an all-out brawl that would have resulted in us and the *H’behl’n* out there trading shots. How long do you think our civilian specialists at Qo’noS would have lived if you’d started a shooting war with the empire?”

“Not long at all, sir,” Glal answered weakly.

“Weren’t you the one in here just two days ago telling me you’d had to bring Dr. Bennett to task for his feelings about the Klingons? You go and snap him back into line and then turn right around and provoke a Klingon officer to violence by insults? How does that look to the crew?”

“Bad,” Glal croaked, “inconsistent, hypocritical and... bad.”

“We agree on that, at least,” Trujillo offered. “I’m disappointed in you and your performance today, Commander. A formal reprimand will appear on your service jacket.”

Trujillo knew a black mark on his record was a toothless gesture, given that Glal was on the cusp of retirement and had no ambitions to promote or transfer to another post. However, it was precisely what she would do if any other crewmember had acted similarly. She was not one to allow her first officer of all people to slide.

“Yes, sir. Commodore, I just want to say how—”

“You are dismissed, Commander Glal,” she said brusquely, cutting him off. She then turned her attention to her computer terminal as her XO gathered what little dignity he could and departed.

Trujillo had been tempted to dress him down even more forcefully, but she realized that nothing she could do or say would surpass Glal’s own overwhelming feelings of guilt and shame. She also knew that her desire for such was born of hurt and disappointment in the closest thing aboard that she had to a friend, aside from Jarrod.

It seemed that this mission would continue to exact a heavy toll, on both lives and relationships.

Trujillo toggled off the do-not-disturb icon on her display and immediately received a call from the bridge. “*Ops to Commodore, secured transmission from Menelaus holding for you, sir. Captain T’Aroo commanding.*”

She had to suppress a sigh and bury her frustration with Glal for the moment, replying, “Thank you, Mister Shukla. Put him through.”

The screen flickered as the comm-link connected and various subroutines decrypted the scrambled transmission. The image of a male Caitian coalesced, his fur a greyish-tan, striped pattern that would have fit the description of ‘tabby’ in Terran domesticated felines.

“Captain T’Aroo, I apologize for having kept you waiting. What can I do for you?”

“Just updating you on the position of Task Force Archer, sir. We’re currently holding at the border along Sector 01337, and I’ve embedded precise coordinates in this transmission’s substrate. We’re standing by for orders from you or Admiral Markopoulos. If either of you give us the ‘go’ order, we can be to Qo’noS in thirty-one hours, barring any interference from the imperial navy.”

“Good to hear, Captain. I sincerely hope we won’t need you, no offense. We passed our impromptu ‘commercial inspection’ and are presently on course for the Klingon homeworld at warp six, ETA twenty-three hours.”

T’Aroo’s ears rotated sixty degrees, the Caitian variant of a nod. “Our latest information indicated that we’re looking at nearly sixteen-hundred personnel in orbit of the planet. I wanted to confirm those numbers are accurate.”

“That’s correct, Captain. The Klingons won’t allow any Federation personnel on the surface, so our people are stationed on eleven orbital facilities in and around the Praxis Ring. The ship they have can carry around a thousand people, so we’ll divide those remaining among my task force’s ships.”

“Understood. And what if the Klingons were to destroy the transport ship prior to your arrival. Do you have sufficient capacity in your force for all of them?”

“We’d have been hard-pressed before, but with *Exeter* joining us we’ll be able to accommodate all the personnel, even without their transport ship.”

T’Aroo growled approvingly and then inquired, “I was informed there is a covert Special Missions presence among the personnel.”

“Correct,” Trujillo confirmed. “There is a multi-team detachment of some sixty SMT operators that may be able to supplement our security staff, if needed. However, given the vulnerability of our people’s position at Qo’noS, I really can’t imagine even a battalion of SMT would make much of a difference should the Klingon navy decided to attack the orbital facilities with standoff weapons.”

“Whose idea was that, sir?”

Trujillo chuckled with dark humor, “Good question. Some genius at Starfleet Tactical would be my guess. They love throwing special operations at things, regardless of whether it’s a good fit for the situation.”

“Anything else you need from me on this end, Commodore?” T’Aroo asked.

“Not at this time, Captain. I appreciate your calling to check in and coordinate.”

“Of course, sir. *Menelaus*, out.”

Trujillo sat back in her chair and considered the precariousness of their position. Task Force Scythe moved deeper into Klingon space with every passing moment, while harboring a fugitive that various Klingon sects were eager to kill, regardless of the collateral damage. She wondered again at the wisdom of carrying this K’mpec to Qo’noS, when his very presence threatened the vital rescue mission they were ostensibly undertaking.

* * *

USS Reykjavik Shuttlebay

“Arwen DeSilva’s life was exemplified in how she died. Her last conscious act was in defense of a fellow officer, giving the last full measure of herself in one final selfless gesture.”

Trujillo’s voice carried throughout the shuttlebay, the assembled crew standing at attention as others still on duty listened over the intraship.

A torpedo casing draped in the blue flag of the Federation stood at the front of the gathering, flanked by crew members holding aloft one standard bearing the seal of Starfleet Command and another emblazoned with *Reykjavik’s* sigil.

“Arwen was intelligent, resourceful, stalwart and compassionate. She represented the best of humanity and embodied everything Starfleet stands for. She has left our lives and our universe too soon, but we may take some comfort in the fact that we are better people for having known her.

“Arwen’s legacy should be... *must be*... that we who go on do so taking a part of her with us along the way. Let her courage fortify our own, allow her drive to inspire us in moments of doubt, and permit her compassion to remind us of our duty to one another.”

Trujillo recited her speech from memory, eyes fixed on the foremost bulkhead in order to keep her emotions carefully in check. The remainder of the memorial ceremony proceeded as planned, with a well-drilled color-guard hoisting flags and Chief Petty Officer Fraser playing the funerary dirge *Going Home* on the bagpipes. As the Commodore concluded the ceremony, Glal dismissed the crew to allow them to pay final respects to their comrade individually.

Trujillo stepped down from the dais, where Glal moved forward to meet her. “Nicely done, sir.”

She gave him a curt nod and thanked him before moving away into the crowd to mingle with her crew.

He watched her depart, still smarting from her aloof demeanor over the past day. Trujillo being angry with Glal was problematic enough, but her disappointment in him was nearly more than he could bear. Since she had recruited him aboard as her XO upon taking command, they had always enjoyed a close working relationship. Now he feared he may have irreparably damaged that rapport.

Glal spotted young Rachel Garrett standing next to DeSilva’s casket, her hand resting on its cool surface. She murmured something softly and turned to depart. He stepped forward to intercept her, and she looked at him, eyes glassy with tears. “Sir?”

He pulled her gently aside toward a quiet maintenance alcove. “Are you alright, Ensign?”

“No,” she murmured. “No, sir. I’m not. I... should have done more. If I’d been faster, somehow, maybe got my phaser out...”

“You called for an immediate emergency transport. You got DeSilva and Jarrod to Sickbay as quickly as you could, saving Jarrod’s life,” Glal said in a calm but authoritative tone. He glanced back to the casket, where other crew members were saying their goodbyes. He turned back to Garrett. “DeSilva was dead when she hit the floor. That pulser destroyed her cardiopulmonary system instantly. There’s nothing anyone could have done, even if we’d been on a starbase.”

Garrett nodded numbly in response, hearing his words but not yet ready to accept them.

Glal reached out a thick hand to grasp her shoulder lightly. “We live such soft, comfortable lives nowadays. Even with all the training Starfleet gives us, we’re still unprepared for how quickly death can come for us out here. This career is many things, but safe is not one of them.”

Garrett wiped her eyes on her uniform sleeve before bringing herself to a semblance of attention. “Thank you, sir. I appreciate your taking the time to talk with me about it.”

“The privilege is mine, Ensign.”

She stood unmoving, prompting him to add, “Dismissed.”

Garrett hurried out of the compartment, leaving a melancholy Glal in her wake.

* * *

“Doctor, he’s awake,” Nurse Batbayar advised, drawing Dr. Bennett away from his data terminal and his ongoing primer on Klingon physiology.

Bennett approached the biobed, where the young Klingon man was sitting up with the assistance of another nurse. "Hello, I'm Dr. Bennett. You're aboard the Federation starship *Reykjavik* en route to your people's homeworld."

K'mpec reached for a bulb of water offered by the nurse, gulping greedily before responding.

"Where..." he croaked, "...is Physician Kardec?"

"You want me to summon Kardec?" Bennett asked, reaching up to tap his combadge.

The Klingon's hand intercepted his own, grasping him with surprising gentleness by the wrist.

"No... keep that incompetent fool away... from me," K'mpec said.

"Alright," Bennett demurred, lowering his hand as K'mpec's own retreated. "Are you saying he's attempted to harm you?"

"Not intentionally. The man is... simply inept. I barely survived his ministrations the first time." He took a long look around the compartment, sensing the different Federation ethos, the dedication to healing the sick and injured, so unlike Klingon custom. "What is my condition?"

"Improving, the physical damage from your injuries is healing faster now that I've stabilized your cellular chemistry."

K'mpec scrutinized Bennett carefully. "What was wrong with my cells?"

"Klingon physiology is far less forgiving of cryogenic suspension than many other humanoid species. The stasis that saved your life very nearly killed you by altering your cellular functions. I corrected that problem, allowing my team and I to heal your physical injuries."

"Then you have my thanks, Doctor."

"I would point out," Bennett added, "that Physician Kardec proved invaluable in assisting me. Without his insights, you may well have died. He lacks some of our skills, yes, but his purpose, his drive, is... honorable." Bennett surprised himself with this admission.

K'mpec held his gaze for a moment, then nodded. "I will take that into consideration, Doctor. Now, do Federation starships contain any food?"

"The general brought a supply of Klingon foodstuffs aboard," Bennett advised. "I can have any number of dishes prepared for you."

"I would like to sample human cuisine. I have heard stories about the food from a region called... Thai?"

"Thailand," Bennett corrected with a smile. "I believe we can accommodate that."

"And a fermented Earth drink... *Tah-Ki'laH*. Many warriors have boasted it is stronger than bloodwine."

Bennett frowned, drawing a blank. He was about to reveal his ignorance when the nurse assisting him snorted with laughter.

“Tequila, Doctor. He’s talking about tequila.”

“Well,” Bennett said reluctantly, “that’s something that the Commodore is going to have to help you with. Though, I’m relatively certain she has a bottle or six.”

* * *

The first sign of Klingon factional duplicity killed the starship *Feynman*.

The navigational deflectors on the *Akula*-class vessel were nowhere near powerful enough to brush aside the cloaked gravitic mine which intercepted the ship at hyper-relativistic speeds.

One moment *Feynman* was in formation with the other ships of Task Force Scythe, and the next instant she was a smear of light and expanding gases falling behind the formation.

A red alert sounded, rousing Trujillo from the daybed in her ready room. She donned her uniform jacket and emerged onto the bridge, still belting it around her.

“Commodore on the bridge,” Ensign Naifeh announced as he stood to relinquish the command chair to its rightful owner.

“Situation?” Trujillo asked as she affixed her belt buckle and assumed her seat, moving to fasten her uniform shoulder clasp.

“A twenty-isoton explosion has just destroyed *Feynman*, sir. No sensor contacts with threat vessels, no sign of weapons fire,” he answered crisply, moving to relieve a warrant officer at the helm station. “Captain Sheinbaum of *Hathaway* ordered the task force to spread out, raise shields and slow to one-quarter impulse.”

“Acknowledged,” Trujillo replied. “Signal *Hathaway* that Scythe-Actual has resumed command.” She brought her swing-arm console interface up and across her lap. “Status of our Klingon escort?”

The petty officer at Operations replied, “*H'behl'n* is dropping to impulse and swinging back around to rejoin the task force, sir.”

As *Reykjavik* and her remaining escorts sought to orient themselves, the turbolift doors parted to admit Glal, Jarrod, Shukla, and Garrett onto the bridge. The late arrivals fanned out to relieve the personnel staffing their posts, and a litany of hushed conversations passed on the events of the last few minutes.

“Any sign of escape pods from *Feynman*?” Trujillo asked.

“Negative, sir,” Garrett replied from where she stood, reading sensor telemetry from over the duty science officer’s shoulder. “Given the power of the detonation, the involved warp velocities and spatial geometry, the gravimetric shearing stresses would far exceed the design tolerances of any escape craft.”

Shukla’s Ops board began to trill at him even as he assumed his seat. “Reading two Birds-of-Prey decloaking near *H'behl'n*’s position, Commodore. They’ve opened fire on the cruiser.”

“Tactical overlay on the viewer,” Trujillo commanded.

The tactical display showed the two smaller ships strafing the larger warship, then vanishing under cloak before the cruiser could bring its superior weapons to bear.

“It appears someone is sending a message. Shall we assist *H'behl*n, sir?” Glal asked.

After a brief moment’s consideration, Trujillo said, “This is an internal Klingon matter. If we intervene without being fired upon, we’ll have openly picked sides in what may well devolve into a Klingon civil war.”

“But sir,” Shukla protested, “the *Feynman*.”

“Struck by what appears to have been a mine. She may or may not have been the intended target, Lieutenant. *Feynman* was the ship closest to the Klingon cruiser and may have been...” she grimaced at the bitter cynicism of the words, “...collateral damage.”

Numerous officers and enlisted ratings on the bridge exchanged glances, their expressions caught somewhere between disbelief and horror. Nandi Trujillo was not known for walking away from a fight, most especially against a foe who had just killed nearly two-hundred Starfleet personnel.

“There are sixteen-hundred people on Qo’noS awaiting rescue. They are our priority.” Trujillo referenced her console. “Have all ships route auxiliary power to forward navigational deflectors and short-range sensors. We’ll maintain a separation of five-million kilometers between ships as we proceed.” She eased back into her seat, bracing her arms atop the rests and setting her shoulders. “We’re pushing through.”

The Klingon, K'mpec, stared at Trujillo from across her ready room desk. An untouched cup of something called *raktajino* sat in front of the young man. Glal occupied the couch along the wall, leaning forward with his elbows atop his knees, thick three-fingered hands clasped.

"What can we expect from the warring factions as we approach the homeworld?" Trujillo asked.

K'mpec sat back in his chair, scrutinizing the woman seated opposite him. "A warning has been tendered, Commodore. What you just experienced is as subtle as my people get. Someone obviously suspects you may be doing more than retrieving your personnel. The next confrontation will exact a much higher price."

Trujillo shot a look at Glal, who grimaced behind his beard.

"I'm sorry," Trujillo said, "how should I properly address you? Do you hold a military rank or some kind of familial title?"

He chuckled ruefully in response. "I am my father's third son, functionally the 'spare.' Little has been expected of me, and I have rather enjoyed living down to those expectations. As a member of a family on the High Council, I hold the rank of *sogh* in the imperial navy, but I have never actually served." He took an experimental sip of his *raktajino* and appeared to find it passable. "I spend most of my waking hours drinking and whoring, Commodore."

Trujillo sat forward, craning her neck to look around K'mpec to address Glal. "*Him?* This is the kid who's going to stop Klingon core ward expansion?"

"To that point, Commodore," K'mpec offered, "my father was opposed to the empire's present military adventurism. I've always felt our people need to expand to survive. Without wars, too many of our young men and women turn on each other in pointless factional squabbling. If they were to die enlarging our empire's borders, at least then those deaths would count for something."

Trujillo observed K'mpec as though weighing the wisdom of ejecting him in an escape pod. After a moment she said pointedly, "Then why am I hauling you back to Qo'noS?"

A slow smile spread across K'mpec's face, and despite herself, Trujillo felt the hairs on the nape of her neck rise. She had seen smiles like this in the past, but only rarely. Smiles such as this belonged to mad men, or those bent on vengeance who no longer cared for their own safety. It promised horrors beyond imagining.

"I will retake my family's place on the Council, Commodore. In so doing, I will kill every last person associated with the attack on my family and the assassination of my father. I will drown the soil of the homeworld with their blood, the blood of their entire families, their retainers, and their allies. I will burn their homes and give away their holdings and property as gifts to those who follow my banner. I will stab and slash and cut until my arms are so fatigued that I can no longer

hold a knife. Then I will have one of my men bind the blade to my hand and use their arms to move my own so that I may go on killing until the deed is finally done.”

He leaned forward, eyes fixed on Trujillo’s as he continued. “I will vote to curtail the expansion because it defies the will of the enemies of my house, not because I care about my father’s final cause. You see, I have cared for nothing and no one until now, Commodore, except satisfying my own base desires. But now... now I’ve suddenly discovered that I actually loved the family I so often ignored and rebelled against. The family taken from me by cowards who struck under the guise of pirates and raiders.”

He stood, slowly, and suddenly the unremarkable young man who had entered her office minutes earlier seemed to have been replaced by someone larger than life. A man imbued with dark purpose. “When I am done, not even the chancellor himself will dare stand in my way.” He glanced back at Glal, then looked to Trujillo once again. “Do you have any further questions for me, Commodore?”

All the air seemed to have been drawn out of the compartment.

Trujillo swallowed, finding her voice at last. “No. No, *Sogh* K’mpec, I think that about covers it.”

K’mpec turned and departed, joined by a security escort as he exited the ready room.

After the hatch had closed, Glal expelled a long breath. “That man is psychotic,” he assessed gravely.

“No,” Trujillo countered. “Someone reminded him that he is a Klingon. They will regret it, but not for very long, I fear.”

* * *

Composition of Task Force Scythe:

USS *Reykjavik* – *Shangri-La*-class attack cruiser – Commodore Nandi Trujillo

USS *Exeter* – *Excelsior*-class heavy cruiser – Captain Olaf Kiersonn

USS *Shras* – *Andor*-class missile cruiser – Captain Oshath Th'thaorhok

USS *Hathaway* – *Constellation*-class cruiser – Captain Ruprecht Sheinbaum

USS *Zelenskyy* – *Miranda*-class cruiser – Lt. Commander Eldred Withropp

USS *Vespula* – *Wasp*-class frigate – Commander Va'obb

USS *al-Ashtar* – *Saladin*-class destroyer – Lt. Commander Marc Chu

USS *Falmouth* – *Nereus*-class Starship Tender – Lieutenant Neled Zomhura

Task Force Scythe, led by their Klingon escort, dropped out of warp at the edge of the Qo’noS system, the seat of power for the many worlds of the Klingon Empire.

“We are secured from warp, sir,” Naifeh advised from the helm. “*H'behl*n has set a course for Qo'noS at one-third impulse.”

“Match course and speed. Ops, transmit the same to the task force,” Trujillo ordered.

Glal stepped over to Trujillo's chair from his post on the bridge's upper level. “Into the belly of the beast,” he said in a grim whisper.

She turned to look at him, her jaw set tightly. “Never thought I'd live to see Qo'noS with my own eyes.”

“I know the feeling, sir,” Glal replied. “I can't believe we've made it this far without another attack.”

Trujillo nodded slowly, turning her attention back to the main viewer. “Easier for a hostile faction to stage their attack here at our destination, rather than somewhere along the way. This is where they'll show their hand.”

She had already briefed the other commanding officers in the task force as to their rules of engagement should hostilities erupt here. So long as the violence was exclusively between Klingon factions, they were not to intervene. However, Trujillo had authorized all ships in the task force to defend themselves if attacked directly.

“ETA to Qo'noS at our present speed is one hour, seventeen minutes, sir.”

“Acknowledged.” Trujillo sat a little straighter in her chair and said, “Ops, open a channel to Qo'noS orbital control.”

“Channel open, sir.”

“Klingon Control, this is Commodore Trujillo of the USS *Reykjavik*, leading a Starfleet task force to retrieve Federation personnel from your system. I am requesting permission to enter orbit of Qo'noS to transfer our people over.”

There was a noticeable delay, prompting Trujillo to prop her chin on her fist, elbow braced on the chair arm as she fumed silently. It was so like the Klingons to convey insult via bureaucracy, stalling as intentional slight. *I do not wait for thee, thee shall wait for me.*

Finally, the vaguely disinterested reply. “*This is Klingon Control. We grant you orbital privileges on the authority of the High Council. You may assume station at the coordinates to follow. Your weapons and shields will remain powered down. If you violate these provisions, you will be destroyed.*”

Trujillo grunted defiantly, then checked herself. This was neither the time nor place to provoke the Klingons. She was a guest in their house and reminded herself that she must behave accordingly and demonstrate the respect they were due. “Understood. We will comply.”

She shifted in her seat, nodding in the direction of the Operations station. “Mister Shukla, raise the command center for our operation here,” she ordered, forcing herself back to the task at hand.

A moment later a bald, dark-skinned Deltan female appeared on the viewscreen. Though her collar was command-white, and she bore a full

commander's rank insignia on the epaulets of her jumpsuit, the fact that she wore engineering coveralls rather than a standard uniform rankled Trujillo's finely honed sense of military decorum. *So many burdens to be suffered today*, she thought sardonically to herself.

"*Reykjavik*, welcome to Qo'noS," the woman said brightly. "I'm Commander Osaoui of the Joint Orbital Interdiction Mission."

"Good afternoon, Commander. I'm Commodore Trujillo with Task Force Scythe. We are to be your ride. May I presume you and your people are finalizing preparations to depart?"

Osaoui nodded, her expression darkening. "That's correct, Commodore. It's difficult to see all we've accomplished here jeopardized by politics, but I understand the Federation's position on this. We've been turning over control of the operation to the Klingons for the past week, but they've been dragging their feet. As a result, some of our personnel are still trickling in from our ancillary outposts."

"If the Klingons are assuming control, isn't that *their* problem, Commander?" Trujillo asked.

Osaoui looked incredulous. "If we botch this handover, a planet dies, sir. The High Council and the Klingon military may be at fault here, but I'm sure you'll agree that the five-billion other people down there aren't deserving of that fate."

Trujillo suppressed a wince, but only just. "My apologies, Commander Osaoui. I've been raised to see the Klingons as the enemy, and my old soldier's bones are aching the closer I come to Qo'noS. You're right, of course."

The Deltan's answering smile signified an understanding between the two women, and a spark of mutual respect. "No apology necessary, sir. These are uncertain and troubling times."

"How may we be of assistance?" Trujillo asked, surrendering her illusory sense of control over the scenario.

"We could use some help collecting our people from our harder to reach outposts within the PDD, sir."

"PDD?" Trujillo asked.

"Sorry, sir. Praxis Debris Disk, the orbital deconfliction zone we've established to safeguard the planet from descending meteoric fragments. Some of the areas of the disk are quite dense, most notably the intact shards of Praxis that we've glued together with our gravimetric web network."

Trujillo's eyes widened. "You have people... *inside* what's left of that moon?"

"Yes, sir," Osaoui confirmed. "We have manned operations and monitoring stations within the shell. You'd need a small ship or shuttle craft to reach most of them."

"You'll have them," Trujillo affirmed. "We'll be in orbit in a little over an hour."

They terminated the comms link after a further exchange of logistics information, prompting Glal to step over and lean in towards Trujillo. “Where’s the rest of our escort? If a Klingon task force were approaching Earth or Tellar Prime, you’d best believe we’d have more than one ship out there.”

“You know the answer to that,” she chided him quietly.

The Tellarite grumbled, “Yes, they’re all out there, cloaked. Both our enemies, and our... allies, for want of a better term.”

“They’re running the same risks we are, Commander. Allies, co-conspirators, take your pick.”

An alarm warbled at the Science station. “Commodore, I’m picking up some rather intense electromagnetic interference in the upper atmosphere of Qo’noS, overlapping scattering fields across the spectrum.” This from Rachel Garrett.

Trujillo pursed her lips. “Might I imagine such interference would prohibit beaming a person safely to the surface, Ensign?”

Garrett looked up from her sensor returns. “Yes, sir. Most definitely.”

Shukla looked over his shoulder from Operations. “They couldn’t keep that up for very long, sir. Widespread transport jamming would cause enormous economic damage in mere days. Commerce and transportation, both civilian and military...”

“Oh, yes, Lieutenant. I’m certain this arrangement is in our honor,” Trujillo interrupted. “Someone down there doesn’t want us depositing K’mpec on the surface. General Kang told me something like this was to be expected.”

“Which also means they anticipate this situation being resolved quickly,” Glal noted darkly.

Trujillo accessed her swing-arm console, bringing it up over her lap and tapping in instructions for the task force to form a protective sphere with *Reykjavík* and *Exeter* at its center.

“No shields, sir?” Glal inquired.

“You heard Orbital Control,” she replied. “I’m not going to provide them with the excuse to begin shooting. That’s an honor they’ll have to *earn*.”

“Lots of tetryon emissions out there, sir, as well as sporadic energy distortions throughout the system,” remarked Garrett, her eyes fixed to her displays.

“We’re also seeing only a fraction of the military traffic usually active in the system, Commodore,” Shukla added from Ops.

“Acknowledged,” Trujillo rejoined evenly. “Maintain course and speed. Tactical, I want shields and weapons on hot-standby, ready for immediate deployment.”

“Aye, sir,” Jarrod answered from the Tactical station.

“Everyone be ready,” Trujillo coaxed. “When it happens, it will be quick.”

Moments later, it began. A handful of Klingon ships decloaked, followed by a few more, then scores more appeared as various houses, alliances, and power blocs began to maneuver against one another.

“Tactical plot map,” Trujillo ordered, trying to keep track of the assorted groupings as they came into view throughout the system. She looked over at Glal. “Any way to identify who’s who out there?”

“Unfortunately no, sir,” he replied glumly. “They’ve gotten away from emblazoning their house sigils on their ships in recent decades. That might have made things easier for us.”

“Weaps,” Trujillo called to Jarrod at Tactical, “what do you see?”

“Various Klingon formations are holding defensive positions at strategic strongpoints throughout the system, Commodore. Others are attempting to gain positions of advantage over their opponents. These three groups,” he highlighted them on the main viewscreen’s tactical plot, “are clearly shadowing our task force.”

“And no way to know which of those groups belongs to Kang, or his adversaries?”

“No, sir. Not until General Kang decides to decloak *T’Kuvma*. His is the only K’tavra-class ship we’ve encountered so far.”

“I doubt he’s terribly anxious to show himself at the moment,” Glal postulated.

“We’re being hailed, sir,” Shukla announced. “The signal’s coming from multiple comms satellites, audio only.”

“Let’s hear it,” Trujillo commanded.

“Federation ship Reykjavik, you are carrying a Klingon national aboard your ship in violation of Klingon law. You will surrender this individual immediately or you and your task force will be destroyed.”

Trujillo raised a hand in abeyance. “No reply,” she ordered. She knew the thoron fields erected to hide K’mpec and the Klingon doctor’s life-signs had proved impenetrable to Klingon sensors earlier. It was nearly certain that this was a bluff. It was one she had no intention of calling.

“Signal all ships, maintain course and speed,” Trujillo instructed.

They stayed on course, heedless of Klingon threats. The ships of the task force swept with sensors in all directions, assessing the capabilities of nearby Klingon warships and probing for those they could not otherwise see.

“Signal from *al-Ashtar*, sir. Commander Va’obb reports many of the Klingon ships they’ve scanned show signs of significant systems degradation.”

Trujillo raised an eyebrow at that and inclined her head towards Garrett at Sciences.

A few tense moments later the young woman said, “Confirmed, sir. I’m seeing structural fatigue, power-systems fluctuations, even entire sections of some

ships that have been depressurized.” The younger woman directed a questioning look at Trujillo.

The commodore shared a knowing look with Glal. “We turned over control of the atmospheric processors and terraforming operations on Qo’noS to the Klingons a decade ago, and just absorbing that added expenditure has overstretched the empire’s industrial base. Their military vessels are getting less than half the drydock time they should be. Some of their ships languish at their moorings while the others are flown until they’re falling apart at the seams.”

Glal grunted in agreement. “It helps to explain their poor showing in the attacks on those nonaligned colonies. They lost far more ships and soldiers than expected in taking those worlds.”

“But how do you keep something like that a secret, sir?” Garrett asked, clearly perplexed. “We’ve had personnel in this system for three decades, some of them had to have been intel assets.”

“Oh, we’ve known, Ensign.” Trujillo confessed. “They’ve done their best to hide the deterioration of their military capability, but corruption and mismanagement on that level are nearly impossible to cover up completely.”

In response to a trilling alarm at his station, Shukla called out, “Priority from *Exeter*, sir. They’ve picked up a sensor echo at two-two-seven, mark zero-eight-one, CDDR. Possible incoming vessel under cloak.”

“Mister Shukla? Mister Garrett?”

“We’ve got it, sir,” Garrett spoke up first. She then shot a glance at the lieutenant at Ops and nodded in his direction in deference to his seniority.

“Definitely a cloaked ship,” Shukla picked up from where Garrett had left off. “Closing at... one-half impulse. It will penetrate our escort perimeter in thirty seconds, coming within a quarter million kilometers of *Zelenskyy*.”

Trujillo sat back in her chair, her expression grim. “Here’s hoping we don’t give Kang a bloody nose for being too stupid to call first.”

“Can’t be, sir,” Glal refuted. “Kang would never allow his cloak to malfunction that badly.”

She toggled open the task force’s encrypted channel. “This is Scythe-Actual to all ships. Either this is a friendly or they sent a ship with a faulty cloak to try and stage an ambush. This also may be an intentional distraction. *Zelenskyy* and *Reykjavik* will keep this target painted, everyone else keep eyes out for other inbound. We’ll raise shields if this target decloaks, and we’ll engage it if it fires on us. All ships to alert condition red.”

The klaxon blared in response to her command.

“And what about Klingon Orbital Control’s orders, Commodore?” Glal inquired teasingly.

“Fuck Klingon Orbital Control, Mister Glal,” Trujillo replied caustically, causing heads around the bridge to swivel her direction in open surprise.

“Inbound is passing *Zelenskyy*, on a direct intercept course with us,” Shukla advised. “Now within Klingon weapons range, sir.”

Trujillo, intuiting the course of the next few seconds, closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“Here we go,” she whispered to herself.

A garishly painted K’tinga-class cruiser emerged from behind its imperfect cloaking screen, the ship an improbable blood red color, its hull pocked with years or decades of unrepaired micrometeorite impacts and weapons strikes. Even as it wavered into view, the open maw of its forward torpedo tube came to life like a great red eye opening.

“Klingon battlecruiser preparing to fire!” Jarrod exclaimed, raising shields and powering weapons systems before the order had even been given.

“Shields and weapons,” Trujillo said. “Evasive, hard to port.”

Three Klingon torpedoes flashed from its forward tube, the first slamming home against *Reykjavik*’s ventral deflector screens as the ship pulled hard to port and exposed her belly. The following two sailed harmlessly past, victims of Naifeh’s deft maneuvering.

Zelenskyy fired first from behind their opponent as *Reykjavik* heeled hard over, trying to avoid the battlecruiser’s opening salvo. Four photon torpedoes and streamers of phaser fire from both *Zelenskyy*’s saucer and the outboard emitters on her tactical rollbar bludgeoned the Klingon ship’s aft/ventral shields.

Exeter, unbidden, threw a volley of four more torpedoes into the mix, hammering the old K’tinga’s port/aft shields and causing buckling in sections of the aged battlecruiser’s hull.

Reykjavik completed her yawing turn, her phaser emitters erupting with answering fire as she did so. Thanks to the abuse already delivered by *Reykjavik*’s escorts, the battlecruiser’s shields collapsed under the barrage of phaser fire from the attack cruiser. One salvo punched into the Klingon’s hull, creating catastrophic internal explosions as another slashing burst of phaser energy scored across the graceful neck of the crimson warship, severing the command section from the engineering hull in an eruption of atmosphere and short-lived flame.

The bisected ship fell behind the task force in a glittering corona of gas and debris as *Reykjavik* corrected her course and joined the assembled starships as they forged ahead.

“Report!” Trujillo called as the bridge crew worked to assess the ship’s condition.

“Shields holding, negligible damage aside from a few systems overloads,” the duty engineer relayed.

“Another incoming transmission from the Klingons, sir.”

Trujillo glared at the viewscreen through hooded eyes. “Put it through.”

“Federation squadron, you have fired on Klingon warships in violation of your orders from Orbital Control. You will surrender or be destroyed.”

She toggled the channel open. “You fired first. You attacked a mission of mercy flying a flag of truce. Is this Klingon honor? Stand down and allow us to collect our people, and we’ll be on our way. Interfere, and the damage to your home system will be on your heads.”

Now I’ve gone and done it, she thought to herself. Decades of peace discarded in seconds.

The martial ballet developing in the Qo'noS system continued apace, with ships of differing allegiances jockeying for position against their rivals while the small Starfleet task force pushed in towards the homeworld with its ring of shattered moon fragments.

At the Tactical station, Lieutenant Jarrod observed, "Sir, I'm concerned with the Klingon's planetary defense grid. We have no idea which faction is in control of their orbital weapons platforms, and they are quite formidable."

Trujillo nodded, the gesture lost on Jarrod, whose attention remained fixed on the dynamic activity taking place throughout the system. "Understood, Weaps." She used her chair's console interface to activate an encrypted comms channel, a frequency provided her by Kang.

"General Kang, this is Trujillo. We will be in orbit shortly, and we have no wish to be blasted apart by your planetary defenses. If this task force is destroyed while trying to rescue our people, it will ignite another war between the Empire and the Federation. That would serve no one's interests. If you and your allies are going to get into this fight, this would be the time."

After a momentary pause, Kang's sonorous voice answered, *"I hear you, Starfleet. Your cloaked escorts stand ready to assist with anything your squadron cannot handle. My allies are working on seizing control of the orbital platforms now. They will be secured by the time you reach Qo'noS."*

"I will take that as your warrior's oath, General," Trujillo retorted, severing the comm-link.

"I'm seeing skirmishes breaking out among Klingon formations, Commodore," Shukla offered from Operations. "Mainly strafing runs on shielded ships or outposts, with little damage to either side."

Trujillo grunted in reply, then offered, "The Klingon version of counting coup, Lieutenant. Saber rattling just for show. When the real shooting starts, we'll know it."

Glal appeared at her side, speaking in hushed tones. "They'll keep coming for us, sir. We're endangering the rest of the task force with our presence."

She nodded slowly, acknowledging the truth of his statement. "But where to go?" she said in an equally muted voice. "Once we break from the pack, we'll be vulnerable. We can't just flit around the system, hoping and waiting for their beaming shield to drop."

Glal's scruffy beard twitched, hinting at the smirk concealed within. "Might I suggest we go someplace they'd be reluctant to engage us, sir?"

"And where would that be?"

He directed a thick finger to the abbreviated navigation window on her laptop console.

She turned her head, her eyes widening fractionally. “You can’t mean...”

“They’ll hesitate. They’ll have to. Those few seconds might make all the difference.”

Trujillo sat in stony silence for a moment. Finally, she issued a reluctant, hissing sigh. “Given our dearth of better options, I will unenthusiastically accede to your plan, Commander.” She gave him an incredulous look that melted into a grudging smile. “I’m more disappointed I didn’t think of it myself.”

“Just earning my keep, sir,” Glal noted.

“Ensign Garrett,” Trujillo called, causing science officer’s head to snap up from her scopes. “You have fifteen minutes to become a subject matter expert on the Praxis Debris Disk. We’ll be pushing inside the shell of what remains of that moon.”

“Aye, sir,” the young woman replied. Her tone betrayed her surprise, but her voice remained steady.

Trujillo opened a coded comm-link to *Exeter*. “Captain Kiersonn, it’s likely the Klingon factions opposing us will continue to focus on *Reykjavik*. To prevent compromising our rescue mission, I’m taking *Reykjavik* straight into what’s left of Praxis and will do my best to lead them on a merry chase. I’m placing you in command of the task force. Your orders are to focus exclusively on getting our people safely away from here, using whatever level of force you deem necessary to achieve that goal.”

“*Understood, sir,*” was Kiersonn’s measured reply. “*And what of our remaining personnel inside the shell of the moon?*”

“We’ll get them out after we’ve lost, disabled or destroyed our pursuers. I’m sending you General Kang’s comms frequency and encryption so you can coordinate with him.”

“*Acknowledged, Commodore.*”

“Bring our people home, Captain,” she urged.

“*We will, sir. Good hunting. Exeter, out.*”

“Mister Naifeh, project a course that will diverge from the task force’s as we approach the planet. We’ll want to make a quick departure and then thread our way through the larger debris and into the interior of the biggest moon fragment.”

Positioned behind him, Trujillo was unable to see Naifeh’s Adam’s apple bob involuntarily as he absorbed the responsibility tasked him. “Aye, sir.”

Trujillo cast a glance over at the Science station. “Mister Garrett, will the particle density of the micrometeoroids interfere with the Klingon’s cloaking fields as we approach Praxis?”

“Very likely, sir, dependent upon the age and sophistication of the individual units the ships are employing. Even if their cloaks remain active, we should be able to detect the particle wavefront the ships will create as they move through the debris, not unlike an ocean ship kicking up a bioluminescent wake.”

Trujillo nodded slowly to herself. “That’s what I was hoping to hear, Ensign.”

The next twenty minutes were filled with hurried navigational and defense-related planning between the senior officers, with the Zaranite Lt. Commander Kura-Ka from Engineering making a rare appearance on the bridge.

His vaguely digitized voice issued from his atmospheric mask as Kura-Ka handed her a data-slate. "I've prepared a few surprises for anyone determined enough to follow us in there, sir."

Trujillo scrolled through the schematics contained on the device, her lips drawing into a tight smile. "Yes, I think these will do nicely, Commander. A less forceful argument than a photon torpedo, but also far less lethal."

"Approaching separation point, sir," Naifeh announced. "A course into the PDD has been plotted."

"Very well." She handed the slate back to Kura-Ka, who retreated to the Engineering station. "Ops, make sure the other ships are aware of our impending departure. Science, be ready to update navigation telemetry to the helm as the field density increases. Weaps, stand ready to modulate shield strength as we enter the field."

Affirmations of her orders echoed around the bridge.

Trujillo toggled open the comm-link to the task force. "Scythe-Actual now ceding task force command to *Exeter*."

"*Confirmed*," Captain Kiersonn's voice acknowledged. "*Exeter now Scythe-Actual*."

She counted down the seconds silently in her head until prompted by her display. "And... separate, accelerating to one-half impulse."

Reykjavik peeled away from the center of the starship formation and leaped ahead, leaving Task Force Scythe on their orbital approach.

"Contact with the leading edge of the PDD in two minutes... mark," Garrett apprised.

Trujillo queried, "Klingon activity?"

"Nothing close, sir," Shukla replied. "Some Birds-of-Prey uncloaking and cloaking in high orbit of Qo'noS but no sign of anyone pursuing us specifically."

"Thank unspecified deities for small favors," she murmured to herself.

An alarm tone trilled at the Tactical station, prompting Jarrod. "Now detecting a formation of three K'tinga's that just decloaked behind the task force, sir. They're being engaged by a squadron of five Birds-of-Prey that are running interference for our ships."

"Tactical overlay, holographic," Trujillo ordered.

Icons materialized in the air between Trujillo and the forward bridge stations, giving her a three-dimensional view of the developing engagement. She observed as Kiersonn reconfigured the task force for greater protection should the K'tinga's overwhelm their opposition.

“Fighting the urge to micromanage?” Glal asked discreetly, sidling up to her chair.

“I’m coping,” she confessed. “It’s his fight now. We’ll have our own soon enough.”

“Penetrating the outer accretion disk of the PDD, Commodore,” Naifeh called from the helm station.

“Increasing power to the navigational deflector,” Kura-Ka announced. “Now at one-hundred fifteen percent of rated output.”

Trujillo deactivated the tactical hologram, fixing her attention on the navigational information routed to her laptop workstation from the helm.

“Sensor contact,” Shukla observed.

“Confirmed,” Garrett seconded. “Cloaked vessel kicking up a particle wave front at twenty-one, mark one-eight-nine. It’s matching our speed.”

“Size?”

Shukla scrutinized the sensor return. “Too big to be a Bird-of-Prey, too small to be a cruiser.”

Garrett looked up from her displays, her expression pinched. “Commodore, we’re quickly approaching the outer perimeter of the orbital interdiction graviton-web. The gravimetric generators and their anchored receiver-nodes will become more numerous the further we travel into the PDD. We’ll want to avoid crossing any of those graviton beams directly. Weakening or breaking those connections could cause a cascading collapse of the entire grid.”

“Let’s hope the Klingons share our sense of caution, Mister Garrett.”

On the viewer, Trujillo caught a glimpse of a pair of robotic drones racing to catch an errant piece of debris that had been flung out of the PDD, returning the flotsam to the accreted disk that surrounded what remained of Praxis. The drones were part of the Federation’s multilayered defense of the planet’s orbital zone, acting as sheep dogs to the graviton web’s corral.

Trujillo turned in her chair, looking to Kura-Ka at the Engineering station. “Commander, your micro-mines, are they potent enough to cause problems with the containment web?”

“They were designed not to, sir. I conferred with Commander Osaoui herself and we determined that if employed more than twenty kilometers away from a graviton generator, beam or anchor, they should prove benign.”

“Excellent news, and my compliments on your foresight. Please coordinate with Tactical to drop the mines on my command, should circumstances warrant it.”

“Photon torpedo inbound!” Shukla blurted an instant before *Reykjavik* slewed to port courtesy of Ensign Naifeh’s excellent reflexes.

The torpedo flashed past along their starboard side, nearly grazing the perimeter of their shield bubble before detonating in an aggregate of heavy mineral debris.

“Why didn’t we see them decloaking to fire?” Trujillo asked accusingly.

“I... I don’t know, sir,” Shukla stammered, his cheeks coloring.

“Commodore,” Garrett replied in an even tone, “it appears the accretion of ionized particles at the apex of the Klingon ship’s wavefront as it passes through the micrometeorite debris is clouding our sensors. They were able to decloak briefly, loose a torpedo, and recloak without us seeing it.”

Trujillo grunted at that, commenting, “It appears they do *not* share our reticence to damage the graviton-web.”

“Well,” Glal observed dryly, “they’ll be the ones cleaning up the mess... and evacuating their homeworld.”

“Helm, decrease speed to one-quarter impulse. Weaps, firm up the forward shields. We’re pushing in, Klingon objections be damned.”

* * *

“Steady,” Glal coaxed gently as a brief thruster burst nudged the shuttle forward. He needn’t have coached the pilot so, as it was he who occupied the small-craft’s pilot seat.

Ahead, through the shuttle’s cockpit viewports, was the great glowing exhaust port of a Klingon warship’s idling impulse engine.

Ensign Garrett, seated in the copilot’s chair, touched the control interface delicately, though such subtlety wasn’t necessary. At the behest of her inputs, a low-powered repulsor beam deposited an explosive charge on the Klingon’s hull, a meter from the engine’s exhaust port.

“I can’t believe this is working,” she murmured as she remotely activated the transponder on the device.

“Don’t jinx it,” Glal grumbled, secretly pleased at his mastery of human idioms. “And wasn’t this your idea in the first place? Why are you shocked at our success?”

“I’m not, sir... not really. I’m mostly surprised the Klingon navy is throwing nearly century-old ships at us.”

Glal gave a short, barking laugh. “Thank the Great Herd that’s the case, or this plan never would have had a chance.”

Before them was a D-4 class cruiser, a relic of the Federation/Klingon war nearly seventy-five years earlier. Parked within the fragmented remains of Praxis, the cruiser had been lying in wait, hoping to ambush the elusive warship *Reykjavik*.

Despite the aged vessel they commanded, the warship’s captain seemed a wily old warrior who’d elected to place his or her ship very nearby a graviton node that served to anchor a dozen others. They doubtless knew full well that Starfleet would hesitate to attack the ship so close to a critical component of the graviton web gluing together Praxis’ largest shards.

However, its proximity to the node also degraded the warship's sensor acuity, a situation that Garrett had determined to exploit. With Kura-Ka's help, she'd designed a stealth-probe equipped with a sensor-scrambling emitter that *Reykjavik* had sent to sneak up behind the already partially blinded D-4. Once in position, the probe sent errant sensor returns to the warship's aft scanning array, allowing one of *Reykjavik's* shuttles to approach undetected.

The shuttle *Sigluþjóður*, piloted by Lt. Commander Glal, had gamely approached the somnolent warship and attached mines near her impulse engines and aft disruptor bank.

Their mission complete, Glal began to back the shuttle slowly away from their now mined target.

Eyes on the controls, he offered, "You know it wasn't necessary for you to come out here, Ensign."

"Nor you, sir," she rejoined, dropping a small comms-relay in their wake that would amplify *Reykjavik's* detonation commands if and when they were issued. "We've plenty of shuttle pilots aboard, Commander. I seem to remember you volunteering to be here."

He smiled grimly within his beard. "True enough, but we hardly needed to send our chief science officer out here on this errand."

"My plan and my probe, sir. Respectfully, I couldn't just sit back and let someone else risk their life for an idea I hatched."

"Commendable, but that kind of thinking may hold you back, Mister Garrett."

Garrett adjusted the fictitious sensor inputs from their probe to compensate for the newly deployed comms-relay. "Please elaborate, sir."

"Having skin in the game is all well and good for a junior officer, but if you have any ambitions of advancement to senior officer rank, let alone command, it's important to make peace with the fact that you'll have to send others into harm's way, regardless of whether or not it was your idea."

"I will keep that in mind, sir, and I do appreciate the advice."

He spared a quick glance over at her. "I *am* glad to have you along, Ensign. Just between you and me, the Commodore sees advancement potential in you, as do I."

Garrett's cheeks colored as she studiously fixed her attention on her displays. "Thank you for saying so, sir." She cleared her throat, announcing, "I've picked up *Reykjavik's* nav-laser. Locking on and setting a course for home."

* * *

"The last mine is in place, Commodore," Shukla noted from his Ops console. "*Siggy* is signaling they're returning."

Jarrold glanced up from the Tactical board to add, “The mines on the D-4 and D-7 are confirmed as armed and awaiting triggering signals. Only the Bird-of-Prey remains unaccounted for.”

Trujillo nodded fractionally, eyes appearing to probe the enhanced view of the debris-strewn pocket of the moon where *Reykjavik* had been holed up for the past six hours. “Thank you, gentlemen. Maintain zero-emission status and continue silent running.” She added an uncharacteristically wry, “If anyone here possesses extra-sensory abilities, please be so good as to deduce the coordinates of that Klingon scout.”

Jarrold let a frustrated sigh slip out. “If it were anyone other than the Klingons, crippling those other ships would likely draw out the Bird-of-Prey.”

“And yet it *is* the Klingons, Lieutenant,” Trujillo affirmed with equal vexation. “So, they will sit idly by as we sunder their fellows and wait for us to show ourselves. More honor in not sharing a prize kill.”

She called, “Computer, location of *Sogh K’mpec*?”

‘*Sogh K’mpec is located in the primary crew lounge, deck seven, port-ventral compartment.*’

Trujillo rose from the command chair. “Mister Shukla, you have the conn. I’m going to inquire with our guest what gambit might lure out that pesky scout.”

* * *

It was dark within the rubble-cluttered interior of Praxis, and only a dim haze of light illuminated the congested asteroid mass as viewed through *Reykjavik*’s viewports.

“Every hour they continue to scramble the planet’s transporter frequencies will increase the public’s outrage and strain the High Council’s tolerance,” K’mpec noted with satisfaction as he stood gazing through the lounge’s large bay windows. “The chancellor’s little expansionist war has resulted in more death and loss than our military anticipated.”

Trujillo sat behind him, her chair pushed out and away from the nearest table. “Public outrage? Is that the wedge you’ll try to use to split the High Council?” she asked.

“One of them,” he conceded.

“How do you stop a war that’s proved so expensive in lives and materiel without dishonoring the sacrifices of all the warriors already lost?”

K’mpec pondered that for a long moment, finally answering. “Even if we pursue this current offensive to a successful conclusion, we’ll have lost. We have neither the ships, soldiers, nor the economic power to maintain control of those conquered border territories. We’ll end up mired in endless struggles against multiple insurgent movements, costing us more lives, more ships, and all the while those

powers opposed to the Empire will funnel materiel to those groups, weakening it by proxy.”

He glanced back at Trujillo. “I must convince the Council that victory now will lead to a slow, painful defeat over time. We must marshal our strength, expand our industrial base, and come to grips with the Praxis Crisis. We’ve permitted the Federation to cope with the worst of the disaster’s fallout for decades, an indolent disregard that has allowed your government to wield far more influence with our leaders than should have been acceptable.”

She smiled grimly. “I won’t dispute your assessment. It has, however, kept the peace for thirty years.” She rose from her chair, moving to join K’mpec at the viewport.

“We’ve identified and taken steps to incapacitate two cruisers that followed us in here, but there’s a troublesome scout that won’t show itself. I would appreciate any advice you might offer on how to draw them out.”

“How many other pursuing navy ships did you immobilize on our run in to the debris disk?” K’mpec asked, sidestepping the question.

“Three that we know of,” Trujillo replied.

“You’ve embarrassed the navy. As such, you’ve made *Reykjavik* the kind of prize that could make a ship commander’s career. Whoever’s out there waiting for you, they won’t move until you do. Provide them the irresistible target of your ship, and they’ll attack.”

“Nothing else will suffice?”

“No,” K’mpec said emphatically. “They are Klingons.” He looked askance at his human companion. “You would do well to come to grips with your own liabilities before battle is joined, Commodore.”

She gave him an appraising look. “How so?”

“You care about the fate of Qo’noS, and you will take steps to avoid damaging the systems that keep Praxis’ remains intact. The Klingon commander of that ship out there will use that to their advantage, if they can.”

Trujillo reflected somberly on the ramifications of that insight. “The homeworld means nothing to them?” she asked finally.

“It surely does, but no self-respecting Klingon captain would put the welfare of our home planet before their personal honor and the pursuit of glory. They have their priorities, after all.”

“They *are* Klingons, after all,” Trujillo parroted, voice tinged with irony.

This elicited an approving grunt of assent from K’mpec.

The alarm sounded, a surprisingly benign chime seeing as it likely presaged a battle to come.

She silenced it. “Ten hours,” she noted stolidly.

Trujillo and Glal sat in the ready room, staring across the desk at one another. A glass was positioned in front of each of them, containing a small measure poured in honor of the impending fight. It was one of their longstanding traditions.

“Time enough for Kiersonn to have recovered most of our technical personnel,” Glal acknowledged. The Tellarite inclined his head towards the glasses. “What do you have for us this time, sir?” He picked up the glass and swirled its contents as he observed the amber fluid play against the surrounding light.

“Macallan, barrel aged twenty-five years. Bottled in 2147. I received a bottle of it from Admiral Munroe when I made captain.”

“*The bottle,*” Glal said reverently. “Rumors abounded that you had such a trophy among your collection.” He studied her carefully before asking, “Why now, sir?”

“I wanted to open it before I did something that would disappoint the admiral,” Trujillo confessed. “We may have a resounding success out there today, or we may start a war. We *might* kill an entire world in the process. I’d rather crack that bottle with clean hands, as it were.”

Glal bobbed his head sagely at this, accepting the logic of her argument. He raised the glass in a toast. “*Augh'toom,*” he offered.

“*To a successful endeavor,*” the universal translator in his combadge obligingly provided.

“*Salud,*” she answered, leaning forward to touch the glasses with a soft clink before they both took a sip.

“Oooh...” was all Glal could say. “You humans certainly do know how to ferment.”

Trujillo stared at her glass appreciatively. “And this is just the neck-pour. If we live through this, you and are going to have to create a serious deficit in the contents of that bottle.”

Glal drained the rest in a single draught, taking a moment to swish it around in his mouth before swallowing. “I would enjoy that very much, sir.”

The Commodore took her time with her glass, savoring the liquid in a series of deliberate sips.

Finally, glass empty, she stood. Glal followed her through the parting doors out onto the bridge.

“Commodore on the bridge!” Jarrod called as the senior officers stood from their stations in deference.

“As you were,” Trujillo said, moving to assume the captain’s chair from Lieutenant Shukla.

“Situation unchanged, sir,” Shukla advised as he in turn relieved the ensign manning the Operations station. “Our boobytrapping of the Klingon warships still appears to have gone unnoticed, and there’s been no sign of the Bird-of-Prey.”

“Understood,” she replied, settling into her seat. “Engineering, restore power to nominal levels. Weaps, bring shields and defensive systems to the ready. Helm, set course for Habitat Node-11 and execute at best speed, owing to local conditions.”

In the tightly confined innards of Praxis’ remains, *Reykjavik* was forced to bull through the debris at low speeds while creating a wake that was far more visible to sensors than Trujillo would have liked. Regardless, they forged ahead, mindful to avoid the graviton lattice that maintained the cohesion of the rubble field.

A tense half-hour passed, with the bridge crew maintaining strict discipline. The only conversations were duty related, brief exchanges so as not to distract one another from their sensor displays or status readouts.

The silence was finally broken by a sensor alert at Operations. “Contact,” Shukla advised, “picking up Klingon D-7 cruiser. Range, seventeen kilometers, bearing 297-mark-130 at one hundred ninety kph.”

Trujillo glanced to Garrett at Science. “Is that the one we tagged?”

There was a brief pause as Garrett checked her sensor returns. “Yes, sir. She’s got mines on her port nacelle and impulse engine.”

“Have they detected us?”

Shukla fielded that. “I don’t believe so, sir. Their sensor sweeps are too generalized to have locked onto us as yet.”

“Alter course to avoid them, if possible.”

Reykjavik adjusted to skirt around the old, prowling cruiser, resuming their original course only after it was certain the warship wasn’t following them.

Another twenty minutes of plowing through meteoric debris brought them to a habitat constructed within a sizeable shard, perhaps three-quarters of a kilometer in diameter. The station’s structure seemed to extrude through the surface of the asteroid, as though having grown from inside.

“Habitat Node-11,” Garrett identified the facility. “Detecting seventy-three lifesigns of Federation member species... and twenty-two Klingons.” She delivered this last bit of news with a dour expression aimed at Trujillo.

“It is the one place the Klingons knew we’d eventually have to show up at,” Trujillo allowed.

“So, they’re taking hostages now, eh?” growled Glal.

“They’ll probably propose an exchange,” Trujillo countered. “Our people for K’mpec.” She favored her XO with grim look. “It’s what *I’d* do if I were them in these circumstances.”

“That’s what worries me,” Glal answered *sotto voce*.

After a moment's consideration, Trujillo turned to Jarrod at the Tactical console. "Lieutenant, prepare an assault team to storm that facility and recover our people, should that prove necessary."

Jarrod nodded enthusiastically, "Aye, sir," before turning his station over to a subordinate and moving for the turbolift.

"Helm, move us to within transporter range." Trujillo leaned back in her chair, tugging at the bottom of her uniform blouse. "Open a channel to the station, tight-beam."

The view of the asteroid station was replaced with the image of an irritated looking Andorian male flanked by Klingon soldiers.

"I'm Lieutenant Jaron'Jesh with the JOIM. We've been expecting you Commodore," he gestured to his escorts, "as have our... *friends*."

"Good day, Lieutenant," Trujillo answered. "We're here to collect you and your people for evacuation. May I presume the Klingon contingent joining you was stationed here to ensure your safety until our arrival?"

One of the Klingons stepped forward as he pushed Jaron'Jesh roughly out of frame. "No, Commodore, that is not correct! I am Commander Verad of the Imperial Navy, and I have been sent to recover the traitor K'mpec from your ship."

Trujillo shifted in her seat, leveling an inscrutable expression at the man over the comms channel. "We are here with the express permission of the High Council, and my ship was thoroughly searched prior to entering the system, Commander."

"Enough words!" Verad raged. "We know you have him! Surrender K'mpec to us and we will hand over your people unharmed."

"You take hostages and threaten their safety?" Trujillo asked derisively. "Are these the actions of honorable Klingon warriors?"

Verad drew his disruptor from its holster and held it aloft. "These are the actions of a soldier under orders. What do I care for an outworlder's opinion of Klingon honor?" He leveled the weapon and fired before Trujillo could muster a response.

The image shifted just in time to show Lieutenant Jaron'Jesh vaporized by the disruptor pulse in a shriek of air rushing to fill the void of his passing.

Trujillo rose from her seat slowly, her fists clenched. "How dare you take the life of a Starfleet officer in cold blood?"

Verad appeared unmoved by her obvious outrage. He held the disruptor up again. "Seventy-two of your people remain, Commodore, and my weapon is fully charged. What is it to be, then?"

If expressions could kill, Verad would have been ashes. Slowly, by force of will, Trujillo brought herself under control. "If we were able to locate this person... this K'mpec, and turn him over to you, I have your word our people will be returned unharmed?"

“My word as warrior and member of House KaTaj’j is given,” Verad answered coolly. “Any deception on your part, and I will kill them all.”

Trujillo reached out and terminated the comm-link via her chair’s armrest display. “Mister Glal, collect K’mpec and meet me in transporter room two.”

* * *

Glal intercepted Trujillo in the corridor just outside the transporter bay.

“Sir, we can’t. We just *can’t*.”

She stopped short, cocking her head as she assessed her XO. “We most certainly *can*, Commander. The Klingons sent the right man for the job. If I’m any judge of character, Verad will kill every one of our people with a smile on his face and a song in his heart. I can’t bluff my way out of this.”

“Jarrod’s strike team,” Glal said, grasping.

“If we beam in a rescue team, they’ll start shooting hostages. How many lives are we willing to risk with that gamble? And where is Verad’s ship? We don’t see it, but I’d wager he didn’t walk here. Odds are there’s one or more ships under cloak here with us. As soon as we lower shields to beam over the assault team, they’ll decloak and open fire. Then the rescue team’s cut off while we’re fighting for our lives and trying desperately not to damage any of the delicate graviton infrastructure surrounding us.”

“If we give up K’mpec, hundreds of thousands will die, perhaps millions as the Klingon offensive continues.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder in a gesture of camaraderie, her voice softening. “We swore an oath to Starfleet and the Federation, Commander. In this circumstance our people’s lives are the primary consideration. It’s awful, it’s unfair, but it is what it is.”

With that she stepped past him and into the transporter room.

Reykjavik’s resident Klingon guests, both K’mpec and Physician Kardec, stood rigidly, escorted by armed and armored security personnel.

Trujillo strode through the doors, with Glal trailing her. She turned to face the two Klingons. “My apologies, gentlemen, but your countrymen have begun murdering Federation citizens to force my hand. I must return you, K’mpec, to secure the lives of our people.”

“You can’t be serious?” K’mpec replied, his expression caught between disbelief and outrage.

“Too damned serious, mister,” Trujillo rejoined hotly. “They just executed one of our officers and will continue to kill our people until you’re turned over. They’re not buying my denials anymore.”

“You’re signing my death warrant by surrendering me to them, Commodore. All hope of swaying the High Council to oppose the chancellor’s expansionism dies with me.”

Trujillo stepped forward, coming face to face with the young Klingon. “You, me, and everyone else gambled that this little deception would work. It didn’t. I’m now out of options, and I won’t trade seventy-two Federation lives for you, your political influence be damned.”

“Is this how the Federation upholds it’s word?” K’mpec practically snarled the question, causing the security personnel in the room to rest their hands on the grips of their holstered phasers.

“I’m done talking, K’mpec. You have two choices. You can step up on that pad and face your fate like a warrior, or I can have you stunned and beamed over like cargo. Decide now.”

The man stood erect, eyes focused on the transporter pad and all it represented. His face slackened as he seemed to come to terms with this new destiny. “I understand. This was always a possibility.”

He stepped up onto the pad, turning to face Trujillo.

Kardec moved to join him, but Trujillo interceded. “They only want K’mpec. You may remain.”

Kardec swallowed. “I appreciate your gesture, Commodore, but my duty is to remain with my patient.”

“Where he’s going, they won’t need doctors,” Trujillo answered coldly. “You stay.” She gestured for one of the security specialists to move Kardec gently but insistently away from the pad.

“For what it’s worth, K’mpec, I desperately wish this ruse had succeeded,” Trujillo said by way of farewell.

He nodded once, definitively. “As do I.”

Trujillo moved to toggle a comms control on the transporter console. “Trujillo to bridge, patch me through to the habitat.”

“Aye, sir. Channel open.”

“Trujillo to Verad, I am beaming K’mpec over to you. I expect the immediate return of our personnel, unharmed. Let me be clear, their safety is the only thing keeping you alive. If you betray me, I’ll destroy every one of your ships in this debris field and every graviton emitter I can find on my way out. We’ll see how enthusiastic your people are for continued war while the sky is literally falling.”

There was a pause, followed by Verad’s voice, now sounding significantly less conceited. *“I understand, Starfleet. Let’s be done with this.”*

“Energize,” she ordered, and K’mpec vanished in a cascading field of energy.

Her jaw tight with repressed anger, Trujillo remained long enough to see the first group of Starfleet engineering personnel beamed over from the habitat.

As she turned to leave, Kardec stepped up to her.

“Why keep me behind?” he asked.

“You damned well know why,” Trujillo replied acidly as she shouldered past him and out of the compartment.

* * *

Trujillo sat seething as *Reykjavik* threaded its way through the meteoroid field towards freedom from the debris disk. Her thirst for revenge was almost overpowering, but she suppressed it for the good of the mission and the welfare of her crew. Yes, they had rescued the Federation personnel from the remotest of the operation’s outposts, but it had cost the life of yet another Starfleet officer and the shameful surrender of someone Trujillo had sworn to safeguard.

Even Glal knew better than to approach her in such a mood, and she had quickly abandoned the bridge for the seclusion of her ready room.

Glal recalled her to the bridge roughly an hour later as the red alert klaxon blared.

She waved off the customary announcement of her arrival as she fastened the front flap of her tunic and took her seat. “What do we have?”

“A Bird-of-Prey has just decloaked in our path and we’ve detected three additional ships on approach. Our D-4 and D-7 of earlier acquaintance, and now a K’tinga-class cruiser,” Glal recited.

“We’re being hailed, sir,” Ops noted.

“Let them wait,” Trujillo replied, taking a moment to query the ship’s readiness for battle from her department heads. Once she was satisfied her ship and crew were prepared, she ordered the channel open.

Commander Verad sat atop the BoP’s throne-like command chair, his self-satisfied smirk having returned. “Commodore Trujillo, so nice to see you again.”

“I’m in no mood for games, Verad. What do you want?”

“I had meant to distinguish myself and my crew in battle against the Federation today, but it appears the cowards I allied myself with have decided to stand down now that you have so helpfully surrendered the traitor. Your other ships are leaving the system even now, and so you can clearly see my dilemma. Here I have a Federation vessel of some renown in my sights, and those outside this asteroid field can never know what, precisely, transpired within.”

“Ah,” Trujillo surmised, nodding. “You mean to destroy my ship and then trade upon your accrued honors. How very Klingon of you, Commander.”

Verad inclined his head as if accepting a genuine compliment. “I’m pleased you see the necessity of it.”

Trujillo smiled broadly, the gesture causing Verad’s grin to falter.

She touched both hands to her chest in a gesture of gratitude. “Commander, I thank you. As we left here today, I found myself nearly overcome by the desire for

vengeance, but there was no means readily available for me to achieve it. Now, here you are, obstructing me and making threats when I have already met your demands.” She pointed toward Verad’s image. “On your belt, may I surmise that knife you carry bears the crest of your House?”

Verad glanced down despite himself, then looked back to Trujillo, his confusion evident. “It does, yes.”

“In that case, Commander, I solemnly swear that if you do not move out of my way, and that if you provoke a battle here with me, I will deliver that blade to the family of Lieutenant Jaron’Jesh on Andoria as some small token of compensation for his murder at your hands.”

“I have four ships,” Verad scoffed. “True, your starship is formidable, to be sure, but—”

Trujillo toggled a button on her armrest and explosions rippled across the hulls of the previously mined D-4 and D-7, sending them careering, shield-less, into nearby debris fields.

“You have *two* ships,” Trujillo corrected, “and you are still in my way. Move, or be destroyed.”

The communication link was abruptly terminated on Verad’s end.

“Open fire,” Trujillo commanded as Verad’s Bird-of-Prey began to cloak. Streamers of phaser fire raked across the scout’s nose, collapsing the bulkheads surrounding its forward torpedo launcher.

Multiple torpedoes from *Reykjavik* rifled aft towards the approaching K’tinga.

“Mister Glal,” Trujillo hissed between clenched teeth, “get me that knife.”

* * *

An hour and a half later, *Reykjavik* stood nose-to-nose with Kang’s flagship, *T’Kuvma*. The starship had just emerged from the PDD and had been about to establish orbit of Qo’noS when the menacing cruiser had decloaked directly in their path.

From Tactical, Jarrod said, “*T’Kuvma*’s shields are raised, and their weapons systems are active.”

Trujillo rubbed her temples, a headache threatening. “Open a channel.”

“Aye, sir. Channel open.”

“General Kang, to what do we owe the pleasure of your unexpected presence?”

The viewscreen wavered and then showed Kang standing at the front of his bridge, his arms folded across his armored chest. He glowered at Trujillo from across the intervening kilometers.

He began without preamble, “You came all this way, braved all these dangers, only to surrender K’mpec to our enemies on the cusp of our victory?” The disbelief in Kang’s voice was matched only by his contempt. “You handed him over in exchange for the lives of mere *technicians*?” Kang spat the final word, leaving it dripping with derision.

Trujillo rose from her seat, unconsciously tugging at her tunic as she did so. “Am I to understand that you take issue with my refusal to sacrifice the lives of dozens of Starfleet personnel for one man, General?”

“This is why the empire can never forge an alliance with your Federation,” Kang rumbled. “You have no honor, and your oaths are empty words. I was a fool to have trusted you.”

Trujillo snorted, dropping her head for a moment with a strangely curious chuckle. When her gaze came up again, there was steel in her eyes. “Let’s drop the pretense, shall we? I’ve played along with your little deception for as long as I could, but I drew the line at sacrificing more Federation lives in support of your fraud.”

“What do you mean?” Kang practically snarled the question.

“You are a patriot, General. I have studied you at length since I was a cadet. Having now met you in person I know with certainty that you would gladly die before entrusting the future of the Klingon people to Federation hands, no matter how desperate the circumstances. That was my first clue.

“Credit where it’s due, Physician Kardec’s genetic modifications to the man you handed over to us were better than Federation medicine believed was possible for your people. Placing him in cryo-stasis to exacerbate and explain away the damage to his genetic structure was very clever. Under other circumstances, it might even have worked.”

Her eyes bore into Kang’s, giving expression to the anger and frustration she’d held in check since entering the Klingon home system.

“What you clearly did not know is that when General Korrd, K’mpec’s grandfather, was taken hostage on Nimbus III thirty years ago the Klingon government reluctantly turned over Korrd’s DNA profile to Starfleet so that if he was killed the General’s remains might be identified. From that sample, my ship’s doctor determined that our guest’s DNA had been modified to make it appear as though he was a descendant of Korrd. Despite your efforts to mask those alterations we discovered them. The man I handed over was *not* K’mpec, son of Anag. He played the part flawlessly, and perhaps he may even have believed he was K’mpec, but you and I both know that to be a lie.”

Kang’s sneer evaporated and his face relaxed. He inclined his head towards Trujillo. “Well done, Commodore. You are correct. While our enemies were preoccupied with pursuing your ship, the real K’mpec was delivered safely to the surface some hours ago. He has already begun solidifying a power base from which to challenge his family’s enemies within the High Council.”

It was Trujillo's turn to cross her arms. "And yet here you are, play-acting like some two-darsek Orion troubadour. To think that you had the gall to lecture *me* about honor, you feckless *taHqeq*."

Kang's expression darkened. "You would do well to watch your tongue, human. I remind you that you are in Klingon space at our sufferance."

Trujillo resumed her seat with a dismissive wave of her hand. "We have collected our people and I have had enough Klingon hospitality for one day. I will save entertaining hollow Klingon threats for another time, General."

She reached down and picked something up that had been lying near the base of the command chair. Trujillo held a Klingon *d'k tahg* knife up and appeared to be admiring its edge. "In the remains of Praxis you will find three of your ships crippled and adrift. They sought to contest our egress from the PDD, and it proved necessary to demonstrate Federation resolve in its fullest measure.

"Sadly, Commander Verad proved sufficiently obstinate that we were forced to destroy his ship entirely. I've taken his blade as a trophy." She made a point of inspecting the sigil on weapon's handle. "House KaTaj'j has a rather handsome crest, don't you think?"

Kang's face was unreadable as he took a moment to absorb Trujillo's words. Then the general offered a smile commensurate with the bellowing laugh he emitted. "You do not disappoint, Commodore. You have performed dual service to the Empire this day. Verad and his house vocally opposed K'mpec, and Verad's death helps pave the way to K'mpec's ascension."

Trujillo said nothing in reply, and Kang returned to his seat. "You may depart with your trophy, Commodore Trujillo. I hope that at some future time when the Empire's strength has returned that I might face you on the field of battle."

"Though I may hope for such in my heart, General, my duty requires that I seek the path to peace."

"Tell that to Verad," were Kang's parting words as the transmission ended.

"Helm, plot a course to rendezvous with the task force. Ops, inform Captain Kiersonn that our mission was a success, and then arrange to transport Kardec over to Kang's ship before we depart."

Glal sidled up to her chair. "Would it be bad form to start adding the silhouettes of those Klingon ships to our hull before we've left their home system, sir?"

"We've tested our luck enough for one day, Commander, but I trust you'll see to that task at the earliest opportunity."

Starbase 443, Altair III

The interior volume of this orbital facility was still under construction, with large gaps visible in the station's superstructure through which stars and the planet below could be glimpsed.

Nandi Trujillo paused in the viewing bay just outside the gantry walkway to look back at *Reykjavik's* graceful lines. Lost in thought, her eyes traced the contours of her command, its hull pocked and blackened in places with the evidence of recent battle.

Sharing the berth with *Reykjavik* was the *Zelenskyy*, both ships now festooned with portable drydock scaffolding and surrounded by repair craft and maintenance drones.

Trujillo was due for a meeting with Admiral Saavik in just under an hour, a precursor to the board-of-inquiry she had just been notified would be convened to investigate Operation Venatic and the events in the Qo'noS system.

"Commodore?" The question came from behind her and jolted her from her reverie. She turned to see Lt. Commander Eldred Withropp, commanding officer of *Zelenskyy*.

Trujillo offered him a half-smile. "It's just captain now, Mister Withropp. Task Force Scythe has been dispersed."

"Of course, sir, my apologies." Withropp's shoulder had healed weeks earlier and his uniform was free from the burns, tears and blood stains of their first meeting. His hair was cut shorter, and the early grey that had begun creeping up his temples was now more pronounced.

"I've been alerted to the board-of-inquiry, sir. I just hope you won't be held to account for any mistakes on my part."

"Thank you for saying so, Commander, but your actions were appropriate and my reports to Command stated that plainly. This is about my decisions and actions around Qo'noS."

"In that case, sir, I'll do whatever I can to support those decisions through my testimony."

Trujillo shook her head. "No need to go out on limb to back me, though I appreciate the sentiment. Just tell the truth. I wouldn't want you to damage your credibility with Command by blindly defending me, regardless of the circumstances."

Withropp extended his hands, palms up, seemingly on the cusp of pleading. "You saved my ship and my crew. I owe you that, if nothing else."

"You and your crew saved your ship, Mister Withropp."

She reached out a hand and grasped the younger man above the elbow. “You’re a good captain, Eldred. You proved it that day against the Klingons, and every day since as part of Scythe. You’ve gained invaluable experience in the past few weeks, knowledge that will help inform your decisions and actions from here forward. Pass on what you’ve learned, as I did with you, and help mentor the next generation of leaders. They’ll need it now more than ever.”

Withropp relaxed fractionally. “Thank you, Captain. I will.”

“Have you located a candidate for your XO’s billet?” she asked.

Thrown off by the sudden change of topic, Withropp took a moment to answer. “Uh... no, no I haven’t. In fact, my next stop is the starbase’s Bureau of Personnel office. 443’s a major transfer hub for personnel moving out to assignments on the rim. If I’m lucky I might be able to poach a few people before their transfer orders are confirmed.”

“Well, if you’re not immediately able to find someone for XO, I *might* have someone who fits the bill.”

“Sir?”

Trujillo glanced at the chronometer display on the wall behind Withropp. “We’ll speak more, later. Can’t keep the admiral waiting.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you for your time, Captain.”

“It was my privilege, Commander.”

* * *

Trujillo came to attention in front of Saavik’s desk as the admiral’s adjutant departed the office, prompting a raised eyebrow from the flag officer who had stood to welcome her.

Saavik extended a hand in a very un-Vulcan like gesture, saying, “Please, Captain, take a seat.”

Trujillo shook her hand, finding Saavik’s grip firm and dry. The older woman was not yet middle-aged for one of her mixed heritage and exuded an aura of vigor. Trujillo sat delicately into the proffered chair, still displaying a stiff formality.

“I’ve just completed my review of your after-action reports, Captain,” Saavik noted.

Trujillo offered nothing in response.

Saavik sat back in her chair, scrutinizing her subordinate. “Why does this feel as if you’re prepared for a dressing-down?”

“One-hundred forty-eight personnel died on a mission under my command, sir. Due in part to my actions, we and the Klingon Empire came close to the brink of war. I’m fully aware that a board of inquiry is being convened to pursue a fact-finding in regards to Operation Venatic.”

“All true,” Saavik affirmed. “However, you were sent on that mission by Admiral Markopoulos with my approval, after having uncovered Klingon duplicity in the attacks on non-aligned colonies in the run-up to the Empire’s full-fledged offensive.”

Trujillo inclined her head, tacitly confirming Saavik’s interpretation.

Saavik stood and made her way across the room, opening a cabinet. Glasses tinkled and the admiral turned around with two drink glasses and a bottle of blue liquid. “Rumor has it you’ve a taste for distilled spirits. I only rarely indulge.”

Trujillo looked from the bottle to Saavik, her expression dubious. “That’s not...?”

“Strictly legal?” Saavik finished for her, placing a glass in front of Trujillo. “I’m half Romulan, and I received this as a gift from the Romulan attaché to the Barzan delegation. I am... exploring my heritage.” She poured a measure for the captain, handing the glass over with the barest hint of a smirk gracing her lips. “Rank hath its privileges.”

Trujillo raised her glass, mirroring Saavik’s own gesture, before taking her first tentative sip. Her eyes widened and she held the glass up, staring appreciatively at it. “This is far superior to the swill the Orions peddle as Romulan Ale.”

“That bootleg grog they foist off on naïve ensigns on their first tours?”

“The very same, sir,” Trujillo chuckled.

Saavik motioned for Trujillo to join her in the office’s spacious seating area, a low coffee table separating a couch and two comfortable chairs. Trujillo settled into one of the chairs with Saavik seated across from her.

“The first thing the board of inquiry is going to want to know is what happened with the Klingons inside the PDD?”

Trujillo took a moment to collect her thoughts before answering. “I had a Klingon commander blockade my ship and tell me that he planned to destroy it. A commander who held a four-to-one ship advantage over me in a situation that precluded my calling for reinforcements. I struck first, halving the threat force, and then gave him the option to back off. He chose instead to pursue his attack. His ship was destroyed, the other three were crippled and presumably later recovered by the Imperial navy.”

Saavik sipped at her ale, mulling that over. “Your recorded exchange with Commander Verad might be considered problematic.”

Trujillo cocked her head, replying, “I disagree, sir. He’d just executed a Starfleet officer in cold blood and was threatening to do the same to myself and my crew. Under the circumstances, I felt I was being *very* diplomatic.”

“You don’t like the Klingons,” Saavik observed.

Trujillo was surprised at that, her dismay evident. “Not at all, Admiral. Actually, I consider myself something of a Kronophile. I’ve studied their culture and history since I was a child. I understand them in ways others might not. I realize the

Vulcan Hello has been *verboden* since our last war with them, but I felt it was applicable under the circumstances.”

Saavik held up a hand in a gesture of forbearance while suppressing a wince at the historical reference. “I’m not suggesting Verad didn’t force your hand, but a Starfleet officer voicing a desire for vengeance doesn’t play well with the public or the brass, Captain.”

A sober nod presaged Trujillo’s reply. “I’m unconcerned with how it ‘plays’, sir. Verad and I achieved crystal-clear communication in that moment. I let him know that I was spoiling for a fight, but I wouldn’t engage unless he pushed me to it. Verad’s final lesson was that choices have consequences.”

Saavik seemed to ponder this. “Are you concerned about the board of inquiry?”

“That depends, sir,” Trujillo hedged.

“On what?”

“On whether Admiral Markopoulos will be on it,” Trujillo said bluntly.

“Vice-Admiral Markopoulos has been transferred to Logistics Command and is not available to participate in the board of inquiry,” Saavik relayed coolly. “He’s been posted to Starbase 14, effective immediately.”

Trujillo paused mid-sip, coughing politely into her fist. “You don’t say? LOGCOM? That seems a step down for someone of his ambitions.”

Saavik said nothing for a long moment, weighing the costs and benefits of candor. “It’s a lateral move, and he really does have good instincts for that kind of work. Despite his failings, Starfleet’s ultimately stronger with him than without him. Eventually it will result in a promotion to full admiral, but he’s finished in Operations Command. He cut too many corners with this scheme and allowed us to be drawn further into Klingon politics than was advisable. That’s a dangerous enough gambit when the Empire is at relative peace. In wartime it’s practically Russian roulette.” Saavik gestured offhandedly to Trujillo. “It was obvious that you were to be his sacrificial lamb if everything went wrong.”

Trujillo pursed her lips. “I’m relieved I’m not the only one to see that.”

“You did well, Nandi. In all frankness, there were others besides Markopoulos who thought you’d make a useful scapegoat after what happened last year with the Cardassians. I am relieved you proved them wrong.”

Trujillo spent a moment savoring the peculiar burn of the ale on her tongue. “I’m always happy to be a pawn in someone else’s game of political brinksmanship, sir.”

Saavik held her gaze unflinchingly. “You helped create that unfortunate situation with the Union because you thought you knew better than Command. This time, however, you tread more carefully. You displayed restraint, even when your blood was up. You could have destroyed all four of those Klingon ships instead of just Verad’s. I’m not sure you realize what a rare gift that is to a flag officer, being

able to dispatch a subordinate into a complex situation and trust in their abilities and instincts.”

A smirk tugged at the corner of Trujillo’s mouth, courtesy of the potent drink in her hand. “This is beginning to feel like a job interview.”

“Well spotted, Captain. As it happens, this situation and other recent events which have seen us flirting with catastrophe have helped me to convince Command that in addition to diplomats and explorers, Starfleet occasionally needs talented soldiers at the ready.”

“An argument I’ve been making for years,” Trujillo offered.

“I’m well aware.” Saavik set down her glass. “This latest exploratory push will see many of our best and brightest commanders sent far beyond the Federation’s borders. I’ve insisted that we keep some percentage of them home, specifically those with established combat experience.

“I’ve been tasked with assembling a network of regional response teams staffed by capable starship captains who will be stationed throughout Federation space nearest anticipated hot spots. When activated, these officers will lead rapid response task forces to interdict border incursions, piracy outbreaks, and those more nebulous ‘interstellar emergencies’ that crop up from time to time.”

“Ancient weapons, god-like aliens, genocidal AI’s, sentient pathogens...” Trujillo listed off.

“Precisely.”

Trujillo set her glass down. “Where do I sign up, Admiral?”

“You just did,” Saavik confirmed. “The board of inquiry will be *pro-forma* and will be completed in three days’ time. I’m to understand *Reykjavik* is due for some crew rotation and routine maintenance?”

“Yes, sir. I anticipate some senior staff posts to fill in the coming days.”

Saavik’s expression was guarded. “Is everything okay aboard ship, Captain?”

Trujillo hesitated. “Not entirely, sir. My XO has been considering retiring to pursue a career in politics on Tellar Prime. He assures me he’ll let me know one way or the other within the next forty-eight hours. Additionally... I’m likely going to need a new chief security-tactical officer.”

Saavik’s raised eyebrow begged elaboration.

“It’s a personal issue, Admiral. Lieutenant Jarrod and I are romantically involved, but the situation has become increasingly complicated. I fear this mission was the breaking point.”

“That is unfortunate,” Saavik offered. “Please let me know if I can be of assistance in securing candidates to fill your vacancies.”

“I will, sir. Thank you.”

Saavik stood and moved to her desk, withdrawing a small case identical to the one Trujillo had presented to Shukla the previous week.

“It will be necessary for these rapid response officers to have sufficient rank to coordinate the assembly of task forces, sometimes outside real-time communications with Command. Accordingly, it must be a flag-rank position.” Saavik handed the case over to Trujillo.

“Congratulations, Commodore Trujillo.”

Trujillo opened the box to examine the commodore’s rank pins, identical to the brevetted ones she’d surrendered just days before.

“This won’t become official until after the board-of-inquiry’s findings are released, of course. That will take no longer than two weeks. In the meantime, you can affect repairs and see to your personnel issues.”

Nandi looked up to Saavik as she snapped the case closed. “Thank you, sir. I—I don’t know quite what to say.”

“No need to say anything, Nandi.” Saavik extended her hand once again. “Welcome to the admiralty.”

* * *

Restaurant *Haute Orbite*, Starbase 443 - Altair III

The circular restaurant was built to rotate fully once an hour, affording the patrons views of both the cavernous, partially completed interior bays as well as the Class-M planet the starbase orbited.

Trujillo and Jarrod, clad in civilian attire, sat at a window table. The night-side of Altair III was visible through the viewport, with the eastern continent and the Asindri island chain outlined by a scattering of urban light pollution.

“So...” Jarrod broached the subject they’d both carefully avoided all night thus far, “...you’re not worried about the board of inquiry?”

He was wearing a buttoned dress shirt and slacks, practically the nicest thing in his civilian wardrobe. Trujillo wore a simple, black A-line dress that was accentuated by a black choker necklace.

“I wouldn’t say I’m not worried. There’s just nothing I can do except offer testimony and answer their questions. It’s largely out of my hands.”

“You’re not concerned this isn’t some kind of setup?” Jarrod fretted in his slightly nasal Oxonian lilt which Trujillo secretly adored.

“If it was that serious I’d have been afforded JAG representation,” she replied calmly.

Jarrod’s expression suggested he didn’t quite believe her, but he allowed his attention to be diverted to a passing waitstaff carrying a champagne bottle to a nearby table. “Are you sure you don’t want something to drink?” he asked.

“I’m fine with water,” she said, the response accentuating Jarrod’s dubious mien.

He set aside his fork and pushed his salad away. “Okay, what’s going on? You’ve hardly said a word all night, but you insist the BOI isn’t weighing on you. They’ve got three-dozen varieties of Altair spirits on the menu, and you’re drinking water. In my line of work, these are what we call ‘clues.’”

Trujillo exhaled slowly, then offered a hesitant nod. “Okay, fine. I told you during the mission that I had a lot to sort out in my head, and I need to let you know what conclusions I’ve come to.”

He swallowed and sat back slightly in his chair.

“When we first became... involved, I thought I could compartmentalize that aspect of our relationship and keep it separate from the chain-of-command. And for a time, I was able to. But after the *Esau* recovery mission where you dragged me out of that cave, things started to change.

“I found myself increasingly hesitant to send you into harm’s way, to the point where I’d have to remind myself that putting you in potential danger is part of my job.”

Jarrold nodded slowly but remained silent.

“When you, DeSilva and Garrett were attacked in that shop, I rode the turbolift down to Sickbay praying to gods I don’t actually believe in that you weren’t dead. Then, when I found out it was DeSilva who’d been killed, I felt relief... *relief!*”

Trujillo glanced away, something like self-loathing etched on her features. She swallowed, collecting herself before looking back at him. “I love you. I love you so much that it tears me apart every time I have to send you into some situation where you might not come back. My thinking that I could keep Nandi and Captain Trujillo separate somehow was completely naïve. Having you aboard is interfering with my ability to command.”

Jarrold’s face had become a mask set in a frozen expression of regret. “I understand,” he said simply. “I was afraid this might happen ever since—”

“Marry me,” she blurted.

He blinked, stunned to silence.

“Marry me,” she repeated. “We’ll find you another assignment where you can achieve promotion without it appearing like nepotism. If we’re married, Starfleet will have to post us within fifty light years of one another. With all the leave time we’ve accumulated, we can get together three or four times a year, more if our ships end up at the same port of call.”

“You... you want to get married,” Jarrold said slowly, as if trying to divine a riddle.

“Yes, absolutely,” she breathed, reaching out across the table to take his closest hand. “I love you, more than I’ve loved anyone else in my adult life. I can’t be with you aboard the same ship, but I can’t be without you, either.”

“I love you, too...” he echoed.

“I know you’ve sacrificed to remain in this relationship,” Trujillo continued. “You’d easily have made lieutenant commander by now if you hadn’t chosen to stay aboard *Reykjavík*. You have all your command qualifications—”

“Yes.”

She froze. “Yes... you have all your qualifications?”

He chuckled, so unused to seeing Nandi flustered. “Yes, I will marry you. It’s absolutely what I want, but I’d never thought in a million years that you’d ask, or that you’d say yes if I’d asked.” His eyes twinkled with mischief suddenly. “Captain Nandi Jarrod... that really does roll off the tongue, doesn’t it?”

She squeezed his hand, her eyes brimming with tears of joy. “As much as I adore you, Gael, I still won’t hesitate to blow you out a goddamn airlock.”

“There’s my girl,” he laughed again.