



The Heart of Darkness

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INTRODUCTION: Lt. Rigelle Dutroi of the Starfleet Investigative Division is hot on the case of crimes covered up during the Dominion War, whether murder or things far, far worse. Will her Betazed intuition help her crack her new case or drown her in the trauma of a childhood accident?

“What do you have?” Lt. Rigelle Dutroi asked impatiently, bending over Lt. Fa’Lok as she continued her tricorder analysis of the skeletal remains excavated from the sand dune. It had been an hour since they’d taken possession of the scene and the body – and still the Vulcan scanned away – infamous as she was for her attention to detail.

“I have less light,” Fa’Lok replied emotionlessly, brushing her black hair back over the pointed tips of her ears to keep it from falling into her eyes.

“Sorry,” Rigelle muttered stepping aside so the harsh sun could touch the desiccated corpse once more. She knew she wasn’t going to get an answer until Fa’Lok had finished. The Coroner was meticulous and methodical. And she had to be for the role – if there was one constant in the Universe, it was that the Starfleet Investigative Division (or SID) was painstakingly thorough!

Rigelle sighed. As an Investigator, she was thorough also, but she had to have material to work with. She glanced to the weathered lifeboat a thousand yards away and decided to run over the case in her mind from the top.

Why had the body been carried so far from the landing site to be buried? She wondered, glancing over the harsh desert conditions of Bidrend 4 – it would have required incredible strength and determination in the face of terrible weather. The official report delivered by Commander Eddy Reynod detailed how he had landed the pod in a storm. He had made his way alone through treacherous weather to a crashed freighter where he rode out the storm. The pilot of the freighter had been killed in a hard-landing years before, but with a little work, Reynod had succeeded in getting the small ship spaceworthy again. Navigation was destroyed, but everything else proved repairable. He lifted off and warped into the general direction he felt

Starfleet would be.

After a couple of weeks, he was picked up by a Bolian freighter and returned to Starbase 100 where he told of the valiant stand his ship, the *USS Rightway*, had made against a Dominion battleship, but alas Captain Railo Descarte sacrificed the ship, pushing it at full impulse into the enemy warship with the self-destruct sequence armed.

Reynod was the sole survivor. He claimed he'd lost consciousness in the battle and found himself alone in a lifeboat spiraling out of control into an uncharted planet, where he'd made his heroic way back to Starfleet.

When interviewed by the Starfleet Investigative Division (SID), Reynod could not give any clues as to the location of the battle or the planet he had landed on. The case was filed as "Unsolved" and left for after the War, when time could be given to conduct a proper investigation. In all Reynod's testimony, he had never mentioned another crewman that had been in the lifeboat with him.

Yet, now, three years later, Rigelle was looking on one – clearly still wearing a Starfleet uniform. A crewman who had died and been dragged a considerable distance from the crash-site to be buried in the side of a sand dune.

And there it might have remained undiscovered for centuries had not a passing freighter stopped by the planet a week ago to repair a faulty coil and discovered the life-boat and the corpse. And so, the SID was assigned the case, and thus Lt. Rigelle was impatiently waiting for a cause of death from Lt. Fa'Lok's analysis. The Vulcan did not show signs of nearing completion and Rigelle began to pace behind her, kicking at the sand.

She was almost tempted to remove the Maang Tikka style jewelry that adorned her upper forehead. Made of Cavarian crystal, it descended over her upper frontal lobe from an ornate

chain clipped to her hair, but most importantly, it shielded her mind from the thoughts of others. Rigelle was mostly Betazed, but as thought-reading was illegal in Federation criminal investigations – seen as an invasion of the personal liberty – she wore this shield whenever she was “on the job.” But now frustration almost made her lift it, just to get a little glimpse into Fa’Lok’s thoughts, which she was keeping to herself until she was finished.

Rigelle sighed. Of course, she wasn’t going to actually do it. She looked around disinterestedly at the Starfleet personnel milling about outside the investigation area and reflected that she could not hear their thoughts – they might as well have been holodeck projections. This “silence” had at first been disorienting for her, but with time, she had grown to appreciate the immense peace it afforded her.

She looked up at the sky – milky white with high-altitude dust. Somewhere up there, the *USS Grisholm* – a Saber-class starship – was keeping orbit, waiting for the scene to be cleared. At that moment, as if Commander Sean Barker was watching her from orbit, Rigelle’s commbadge chirped.

“Barker to Rigelle, are you there?” the Commander’s gruff voice sounded.

“Yes, Sir?” she answered.

“We’re waiting on you to begin conducting the interview.”

“Understood, Sir,” she replied. “Lt. Fa’Lok is nearing completion of her analysis – I will notify you at once when she is done!”

“Very well,” he replied. “Tell her she doesn’t have to raise the dead – we just need a cause of death.”

“I will, Sir,” Rigelle answered, knowing it would make no difference. “Any updates from Sullivan and Bailey’s soil analysis?”

"None, yet," Barker replied. "They're still in the lab isolating DNA traces, but it looks inconclusive so far – and with so much shifting sand down there, it is unlikely they'll find anything, but you know them – persistent to a fault."

"Thanks for the update, Commander," she said, trying not to let her disappointment sound through the communicator.

"Anytime," Barker said. "Oh, and Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"I want you up here to take lead when we start the interview," he said. Rigelle tried to contain her excitement. This would be her first time asking the questions!

"Than...thank you, Sir," she stuttered.

"Baxter out," the Commander said, chirping off his Communicator, leaving Rigelle in a stew of pleasant thoughts.

Lt. Rigelle was a rising investigator for the Starfleet Investigative Division which had numerous units tasked with investigating mysteries that might have a criminal or unlawful element.

Her particular unit was dubbed "C14" after the Carbon 14 dating method, as it was primarily tasked with investigating unsolved mysteries – most of which stemming from the chaos of the recently concluded Dominion War.

"Do you like cold weather?" Commander Barker had asked her on her first day, over sixth months ago.

"Yes, I love it!" she had replied. He'd nodded.

"Good, because we only work with cold-cases," he smiled an easy smile to soften the awful joke. Rigelle had instantly liked his fatherly demeanor.

Yet those cold cases had already led to some fascinating discoveries and prosecutions. They'd investigated rumors of a lost platoon of Jem'Hadar holdup in the jungle caves of Pagent 2 – still convinced the war was going on; found the lost wreckage

of a Dominion vessel carrying the seeds of Armageddon before any pirates could salvage the weapons of mass destruction; prosecuted an Andorian militia for massacring two hundred Vorta captives; and more.

It seemed like every week they were off to a new location, assigned a new case from SID headquarters.

Fa'Lok closed her tricorder and rose from the ground. It was so sudden, that Rigelle stared blankly at her for a second.

"Well?" she asked in the silence. Fa'Lok arched her eyebrow.

"You will no doubt wish to express some emotion over these findings," she said with the faintest hint of displeasure. "This corpse belonged to Crewman Roger Bails – assigned to the *USS Rightway* under the command of Captain Railo Descarte and Commander Eddy Reynod." Rigelle absorbed the data. So it was true that Reynod had not landed alone on this planet – someone had been with him! Why had he never mentioned it before?

"And..." she asked her Vulcan associate breathlessly. "Cause of death?"

"He was struck from behind with a small circular object made of tritanium – the shape profile of the wound indicates a hyperspanner from the tool locker," Fa'Lok replied.

"From the crash?" Rigelle asked.

"Not likely," Fa'Lok replied. "The force of the blow and the angle corresponds to the maximum power output of a blow from a humanoid between a Bolian and a Bajoran."

"Well, humans are between those two, if I recall correctly," Rigelle observed, trying to bring up a mental picture of the strength profiles from her criminal biology textbook of her Academy days.

"You are correct," Fa'Lok answered.

"So, Crewman Bails was...murdered?" Rigelle asked, failing to contain her excitement in the question. If Fa'lok's Vulcan

training would have allowed her to roll her eyes at the emotional enthusiasm of her friend, she would have. Instead, she simply nodded rather than give Rigelle the satisfaction of a reply. It did little to dampen Rigelle's enthusiasm. She spun on her heels and tapped her commbadge.

"Commander Barker?" she cried, staring up at the heavens. The slight delay felt like eternity – then the link connected through light static.

"Yes, Lt., do you have a result?" he asked.

"Sir, Fa'Lok's analysis is complete. The deceased is one Crewman Roger Bails, assigned to the *USS Rightway*. The cause of death is a blow to the back of the head consistent with a human wielding a hyperspanner...Sir, the conclusion is murder!" she said. There was a long pause.

"Are you sure?" Barker asked. Rigelle turned and gestured for Fa'Lok to speak up.

"This is Fa'Lok, Sir," she answered, stepping closer to the Com-badge. "The analysis is thorough and conclusive. I am uploading my findings to you now."

"Very well," Barker sighed, knowing not to question the Lieutenant's meticulous examination. "Let the recovery crews in to the perimeter to recover the body and evidence. We're beaming you both up directly."

"Yes, Sir," Rigelle and Fa'Lok replied.

Rigelle took one last look at the desolate surroundings and felt the hot, arid air sticking in her throat – then she felt the familiar tingle in her skin as the scene faded to white and then back to the transporter pad on the *USS Grisholm*. She took a deep breath of the cool, conditioned air of a starship, before stepping off the pad first. She caught herself at the door for Fa'Lok to lead the way to the briefing room – she still wasn't familiar with the layout of the Saber-class starship. The greatest challenge of her

career was getting used to being on a different starship every week with their different layouts! But that was how the SID worked. You were assigned a different ship for every case and it would serve you for the duration of the investigation.

Last week, she'd been on an old Excelsior-class vessel for a low-threat investigation of a reported mass-grave discovered in the Liorta system. The evidence declared it was the Jem'Hadar's handy-work and the case was handed over to the war crimes Tribunal. But the week before that, they'd been assigned a Sovereign-class as they were charged with investigating rumors from freighter captains that the Dominion War was still raging day and night in an uncharted asteroid field somewhere in the Barankana Expanse. It turned out to be a lost fleet of Federation and Dominion ships trapped in a naturally occurring temporal bubble – unknowingly repeating the same battle in an infinite time loop. That had been a sticky situation to resolve! In the SID, your ride usually told you Starfleet's threat assessment of the variables in the case you'd been assigned.

Fa'Lok and Rigelle made their way down a short corridor and entered a long room just behind the bridge. There, Commander Barker sat opposite a middle-aged man with a sharp jaw, looking put-out by the proceedings. This was Eddy Reynod. He was wearing a command uniform and the pips on his collar told of his achievement to a captaincy.

He looked up with disinterest at Fa'Lok and Rigelle's entry. Rigelle was immediately struck by the murky, cold eyes that passed her over, causing a chill down her spine.

Was it her proximity to a murder suspect or the thrill of justice? She couldn't say, yet. Catching a murder case was always an exciting proposition for her – justice had to be served if society was to function and what more terrible injustice was there than murder – the unlawful termination of innocent life?

She took her seat on Barker's left while Fa'Lok sat on his right. Behind them, the windows looked out on the stars to starboard and the desolate hues of Bidrend 4 to port.

The only other people in the room were two Starfleet Security officers and the Captain of the *Grisholm*, Marty Pressman, who nodded to Commander Barker and left the room in his care. The door closed behind him and was sealed. Barker cleared his throat.

"Captain Eddy Reynod, I understand you waved your right to legal counsel during this interview?" Barker asked. Reynod waved his hand dismissively.

"I've done nothing to warrant this investigation," he answered.

"That is a 'yes' then?" Barker pressed. "For the record, you understand?"

"Yes," Reynod replied, with the faintest hint of a sneer. "I wave my right to legal counsel."

"Very well." Barker said. "And do you know why your presence has been requested aboard the *Grisholm*?" Reynod shrugged.

"I was told it related to my service aboard the *USS Rightway*," he said.

"That is correct," Barker affirmed, sitting forward and reviewing the PADD with Fa'Lok's findings. "Let the record show that I am handing this interview over to Lt. Rigelle Dutroi." He nodded to Rigelle and sat back.

Clearing her throat, Rigelle prepared her line of questioning.

"Captain Reynod, I understand that this proceeding is unpleasant for you and it is forcing you to relive very difficult memories of a traumatic period in your career," she began, pausing long enough to see the assenting nod from Reynod. "In your testimony three years ago, you stated that you were the lone survivor of the destruction of the *USS Rightway*, is that correct?"

"Yes," Reynod said evenly.

“Very good,” Rigelle replied, setting down her PADD and projecting a holographic image of a young man smiling towards them, wearing his cadet uniform.

“Do you recognize this man?” she asked.

Reynod leaned forward and looked the features over carefully.

“Crewman...Bails, I believe,” he said as if drawing from the depths of his memory.

“That is correct, Sir,” Rigelle said. “He served with you aboard the *Rightway*, did he not?”

“I believe he did,” Reynod said uncomfortably.

Rigelle adjusted the PADD and a 3-D scan of Crewman Bails’ corpse appeared hovering between them. Reynod hardly reacted.

“Do you have any idea how Crewman Bails wound up buried in a sand dune less than a kilometer from your landing site on the planet below?” she asked. Reynod pursed his lips and shook his head.

“Not a clue,” he said, shifting in his seat. “I was the only survivor that I was aware of. Perhaps he also made it off the *Rightway*...in a different lifeboat?”

“And how would you explain his death?” Rigelle asked. Reynod shrugged and waved his hands dismissively, lapsing into silence. At that moment, Rigelle desperately wanted to lift her headpiece and unblock her Betazed senses – just to hear what was going through Reynod’s mind – what he was really thinking. But she knew if she did that, the investigation would be terminated and the case dismissed due to a “miscarriage of justice.” No, she would catch this killer in his own spoken words. “Please, indulge me,” she said. “what do you think happened?”

“It’s a funny old Universe,” Reynod said lightly. “I mean how does anything happen, really?” He looked triumphantly as his questioners, but then sat up when his eyes met the unflinching gaze of Rigelle. It also didn’t help to have the knowing eyes of

Commander Baxter and the piercing glare of the Vulcan sifting through his life.

"Well," he said, staring off into the distance, "if I was to harbor a guess, I'd say that with his head injury, Crewman Bails probably was unconscious at the time and likely suffocated in the storm when the sand dunes shifted and buried his body." Rigelle sat back and considered Reynod. His murky grey eyes quivered slightly under her gaze.

"Captain Reynod," she said slowly, "I never told you Bails suffered a head injury, nor that he was found buried in a sand dune."

"Well...it's an obvious guess," Reynod started. "I mean head injuries are common in crash-landings, aren't they?"

"Not head injuries caused by a hyperspanner wielded by a human hand, Captain Reynod," Rigelle said firmly, leaning forward. Reynod leaned back and shuffled his hands over his lap. He looked towards the door.

"I'd like to go now," he said.

"I'm sorry, but we have some more quest..." Rigelle began but Reynod cut her off.

"You're not in charge here!" he said sharply, and then pointed at Barker. "And neither are you! I'm a Captain, and I won't be addressed in this manner by some witch-hunting Lieutenants or Commanders. Where is Captain Pressman? I demand to speak to the Captain!"

"Enough!" bellowed Barker. The room shook. Everyone was taken by surprise, but the shock proved more than Reynod could handle. He bent over and covered his eyes with his hands.

"It's not my fault!" he cried. "If he'd just kept his mouth shut, it wouldn't have to be like this! He didn't have to be a boyscout!"

"Just to be clear, you are admitting to killing Crewman Roger Bails," Rigelle asked amid the sobs.

Reynod nodded.

"If you have the spanner, you know already," he choked. "My DNA is on it. I killed him."

"Why did you kill him?" Rigelle pursued, ignoring the comment about the spanner, which they had not yet located.

"Well...he was going to tell the truth!" Reynod struggled to contain his emotion. "He was going to tell everyone what a coward I was! He was going to tell how I was placed in the brig for attempted mutiny after I broke – I...I broke under the stress of Captain Descarte's plan to hunt down a Dominion Battleship we'd seen on the other side of an asteroid field. We were a Nebula-class scanning vessel, not a warship! He went mad – not me! But no! He was going to tell everyone that I was the one who'd had a mental breakdown and had to be forcibly removed from the bridge! So, I did what I had to – I broke out of security. I commandeered engineering, and I overrode the safeties to...to autodestruct the ship."

The silence that followed Reynod's rambling confession weighed heavily in the room.

"Why?" Rigelle asked breathlessly at last.

"I couldn't let my father down, could I?" Reynod demanded.

"He's an admiral. Captain Descarte was going to tell my father what a coward I was...he was going to ruin me and...and kill my father with shame! He was the murderer, not me!"

"So...you killed all those people...and invented the story of the Dominion attack?" Rigelle asked in disbelief.

Reynod nodded. "Yes," he said, letting his sobbing finally get the better of him.

"And Crewman Bails?" Rigelle insisted. "What of him?"

"Bails...made it into my escape pod, just before I launched," Reynod gasped for air. "I tried to convince him...to drop the whole thing and tell Starfleet my story! I pleaded...I pleaded for

his life! But he wouldn't listen! He was going to tell! It was his fault! It was all their fault...its...all...fault!" He began to babble.

Barker rose from his seat and nodded to the Security detail.

"Captain Eddy Reynod, I am placing you under arrest for the murder of Crewman Roger Bails," he said firmly. "Pending additional charges for the murder of Captain Railo Descarte and the crew of the *USS Rightway*." The Security team dragged Reynod to his feet and carried him from the room towards the brig.

"It's not my fault!" he cried as his incoherent ramblings faded away down the corridor.

Barker leaned on the table a moment, as if to catch his breath before turning to Fa'Lok.

"You did an exceptional job this time – as always," he told her – as if he was trying to make her blush. He then turned to Rigelle.

"That was some amazing work, Lieutenant," he said, straightening his jacket. "I haven't been so on edge since I wrestled that Klingon wombat on the Kijornan precipice in my Academy days. I'll be putting you both in for commendation. Now, if you will excuse me, I have some calls to make." He punched up his Comm station and input for Admiral Cleaver – head of the SID.

Rigelle nodded and rose from her seat. She was exhausted. The atmosphere in the conference room was heavier than Jupiter. She ambled out, clutching her PADD with white knuckles. She tried not to imagine what the interview would have been like had her mind not been shielded from that deluge of psychotic emotion. "All those people!" she gasped to Fa'Lok. "He killed them all like they were nothing! For what? His reputation?"

The Vulcan arched her eyebrows. "Indeed," she said simply, preparing to turn and find her quarters, but Rigelle stopped her.

"I imagined him capable of killing the crewman," she continued. "But I still can't believe he murdered his entire crew!"

Fa'Lok studied Rigelle for a moment. "I believe you may be emotionally compromised, Lieutenant," she replied. "Perhaps you need to see the Doctor?"

Rigelle snapped into focus and forced a weak smile. "No...I think I just need some strong Roktajino," she said.

They separated and Rigelle found the galley. She replicated a cup of Klingon coffee and found a table by herself gazing out at the stars. The off-duty crew milled about laughing and talking, but Rigelle didn't know any of them – that was the one curse of working in the SID – you rarely formed any lasting relationships on the ships you caught passage to-and-from your next investigation. It could be really lonely when your team was preoccupied elsewhere.

Outside, the stars suddenly blurred and then streamed away as the Saber-class went to warp. They were leaving the scene of the crime. Justice would be served. A shiver went down her spine as she recalled Captain Reynod's pale, unseeing eyes. She was mesmerized and terrified by the motivations that could drive any one person to do unspeakable acts.

Suddenly, Commander Barker sat down across from her with a steaming cup of Roktajino.

"Great minds..." he smiled, and then considered her. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine," she said. "Just tired." Barker nodded knowingly and ran his hands through his thick gray hair.

"If we're going to work together, you have to be honest with me," he said. "You and I are the two investigators of this unit. The other three are doctors and scientists – they can operate on different wavelengths than us – you know, radiation samples, blood in the soil, metallurgy, etc., etc....but you and I have to be

in sync. We have to harmonize. And since I can't read your thoughts and you aren't supposed to read mine, you have to talk to me."

"I'm sorry, Sean," she said. "I just can't believe that this man murdered all those people in cold blood...for what?" Barker shook his head.

"I know," he said. "It can get to you...staring into the darker corners of the Galaxy – you see more horrors in a year than most civilians, or even your average officer, will ever see in their lifetime. But that is the job! Because someone has to do it – someone has to stare into the darkness and hold it accountable. That's justice..."

"...to hold evil in check through accountability – to call it by name and hang its handiwork around its neck'." Rigelle finished, knowing her Commander's maxim as much as he did himself. Barker smiled.

"You got that right!" he laughed, taking a long swig of his coffee. "We serve the rule of law..." he began, but Rigelle cut him off.

"...not the rule of passions, special interests, or latinum," she finished.

"And why is that?" he challenged his pupil.

"Because," she answered, rising to the challenge, "a rule of law makes everyone equal to justice, regardless of their circumstances of birth, the latinum in their possession, the special interests that lobby outcomes, or the power they wield in society. A rule of law levels the playing-field so that all may find justice regardless of their race, religion, or circumstances. The President and the Ferengi bar-keep have equal access to it." Barker nodded with pride.

"I've taught you well," he smiled. Rigelle hesitated.

"What about mercy?" she asked. Barker sighed.

"Is this your old argument for grace?" he asked.

"Yes," she smiled guiltily.

"Well, I also believe in grace," he said, "but it resides in the victim's hands – it isn't our job to give it."

"So, if they want to forgive, it is their decision?" she asked.

"Exactly," he said gently. "For us to intervene is to rob them of their rights." Barker took another long sip of his Roktajino and sat back to consider his favorite colleague.

"We serve a higher calling," he said quietly. "The moral laws that form the Foundation of our Federation are very, very old – don't steal, don't murder, don't pollute innocence...etc. They come from the belief in a higher power that gave the law and that keeps the law, meaning the law came from outside our making of it – it is above all – and it remains untouchable, unalterable by whims, designs, or lobby. If you don't believe that, you must at least live your life as if you do believe it, otherwise justice will crumble and rot in the face of special circumstances, mob passions, and societal expedience. The push and pull on us "lawmen" is incessant and we can never give way. Many innocent people rotted in prison because special interests and societal expedience bent the men and women serving the rule of law. Many lynchings robbed men of justice because those whose job it was to administer it bent to the pressures of mob passions. Sadly, this cycle has been seen in every time and place throughout the history of the Universe."

"You're quoting Professor Strout again," Rigelle smirked. Though a good generation lay between them, Rigelle and Barker both sat under the now aged Professor Strout's legal instruction at the Academy.

"Am I?" Barker paused to digest what he'd just said.

"Word for word," Rigelle said shaking her head. Barker smiled.

"Guilty as charged!" he laughed "I can hear his voice now."

Already, he could see Rigelle's spirits were rising.

"Say," he said in hushed tones, leaning forward. "We have our next assignment from HQ."

"Already!" Rigelle answered. "But we've only just closed this case!"

"I know, I know!" he said. "But investigations wait for no man."

"Okay, what is it?" she asked, her curiosity already getting the better of her.

Barker winked and pulled out his PADD. "Well, we've been ordered to the Denebme System after a long-range, three-year recurring scan by a science vessel picked up an unlocalized reading of a Klingon hull composite," he said. "It is believed to be a missing ship that was involved in some shady research under the Gowron chancellery during the height of the Dominion War."

"Klingon?" she asked. "But isn't that outside our jurisdiction?"

"Well, the finding is in Federation space," Baxter answered, "so technically it is ours, but we will be working with a Klingon liaison from the High Council's Honor Guard." That sounded a bit intimidating – the Honor Guard were reputed to be the hardest edges of all.

"What's the research?" she inquired.

"We don't know for sure, but it was rumored to be a weapon of..." he lowered his voice. "...mass destruction."

"Okay," Rigelle sat up. "That sounds interesting!" Barker winked.

"I thought you'd like it," he said. "A little change of pace from catching psychopaths."

"You know I love that too!" she protested. "It's just that a change of pace is nice, also."

"I hear you," Barker smiled. "Anyways, we'll be travelling on a Prometheus-class this time – *USS Endeavor*."

“Cutting edge!” Rigelle said with surprise. “I don’t think I’ve ever been on one of those. But isn’t that a tactical warship?”

“Yep,” Barker replied, drowning his coffee.

Rigelle sighed. “This mission is going to be rough,” she said, downing her own coffee. “I just know it!”

After all that coffee, Rigelle knew she wasn’t going to get any sleep, so she ran a few kilometers along an infamous Klingon mountain on the holodeck, known as Molor’s Jaw. It was a twisted, razor-sharp ridge of lava chimneys all fuming, and quaking, and flaring with fire. Suffice it to say, she was exhausted by the end of it.

Yet, she slept fitfully that night – the mad face of Captain Reynod haunted her dreams and what he had done kept twisting into her thoughts. She woke early with a cold sweat – nothing a cup of Roktajino wouldn’t fix – and she was up before the others. She went down to the Galley, replicated some eggs and sausage and sat at the same seat, looking out at the gently warping stars flowing past her. It was so relaxing – almost hypnotizing if you let yourself go! Suddenly, she became aware of a white scintillating fleck that was not passing with the stars. At first, she thought it was a reflection on the window, but it was moving – growing towards her. It was the *Endeavor*! She stood up and leaned against the window, watching it closely. Slowly, through the distortion of the warp bubble, she could make out the features of the Federation’s most advanced starship – and it was to be her ride!

Soon, Commander Barker entered, grabbed some breakfast and joined her – followed shortly by Fa’Lok.

“Where are Sullivan and Bailey?” Barker asked, referring to the other two Lieutenants in their unit – an Engineer and Scientist respectively.

“They are still in the lab,” Fa’Lok replied. “In search of DNA

markers for the Reynod case.”

Barker lowered his toast in disbelief. “You mean you never told them we got a confession and the case is closed!?” he cried. Fa’Lok raised an eyebrow in protest at the accusation.

“I told them!” she answered evenly. “They did not hear me.” Barker threw his toast into his plate. “Why do I have to do everything around here?” he grumbled, getting up from his seat and storming out of the galley.

Rigelle exchanged a smile with Fa’Lok’s almost amused face, before glancing back outside the window to see the Prometheus now larger than ever, shadowing their every move. Both ships had business at their destination, Corris 1, before the exchange of the SID was to take place.

Suddenly, Lt. Peter Sullivan and Lt. George Bailey stumbled into the galley, looking shocked and confused – and more than a little tired. They yawned in unison as Barker came in after them. “Don’t just stand there!” he bellowed. “Eat! We have less than half an hour before we disembark and you still need to pack!”

The two brainwaves absently ordered their breakfast and stumbled to a table all by themselves where they chatted variables more than they ate. Outside, the stars slowed back to points of light as the *Grisholm* dropped out of warp, presumably to enter the Corris star system.

Over the intercom, Captain Pressman’s voice sounded.

“Attention, all hands,” he called. “We will be assisting Corris 1 shortly with flood relief efforts. Please refer to your duty posts. All Starfleet Investigative Division personnel to Transporter Room One in ten minutes to disembark for the *USS Endeavor*.”

“That’s our cue!” Barker announced, stuffing the rest of his omelet into his mouth. “Let’s not be late!”

Rigelle rose and recycled her dishes. Before she followed the others out, she pressed up against the large windows of the

galley and gasped as a massive gas-giant planet slowly slipped past them – its scintillating atmosphere tempting her to explore beneath its veiled head.

“Perhaps another time,” she said wistfully and hurried to her quarters to grab her kit.

In the Transporter room, Captain Pressman thanked them each for their service before sending them on their way. The beam caught them up – away from the *Grisholm* – and in a moment, they found their feet aboard the *Endeavor*. Immediately, Rigelle noticed the clean, crisp smell of the Prometheus-class, which belied its newness. She had found that all starships held a particular aroma that spoke to their personality. This ship was a clean, mean, tactical instrument. Even the throb of the warp core in the deck belied its power.

“Welcome aboard the *Endeavor*,” a black-bearded man announced genially from beside the transporter console. “I am Captain Shad Hivers.”

“Captain, we are honored to be aboard your fine vessel,” Barker replied, introducing his team.

“It is we who are honored,” Captain Hivers insisted through the sparkle of his warm eyes. He welcomed each in turn. “You folks have done some amazing work out there and have brought a lot of closure to families across the Federation. Even a few of our own owe you all a debt of gratitude.”

He led them on a brief tour of the *Endeavor* while the crew was offloading supplies for the Corris 1 relief efforts. Every room and station filled Rigelle with wonder, from the Engine Room to Sickbay, but the best was saved for last when they emerged on the Bridge of the mighty Starship – such a wonderful modernization and yet homage to what made a ship’s bridge work. It felt like the same old home and yet like a new place in

the city all at the same time.

Outside, on the viewscreen, Rigelle noticed that the ship was breaking orbit – full impulse brought it swiftly out of the star system and then it leapt to warp – on its way already to their mission field.

“And now, to the Conference Room,” Captain Hivers beckoned. “To meet our other guest for this trip.”

The doors opened and Rigelle was shocked to not be presented a Klingon warrior dressed in full combat armor but a Klingon woman in a form-fitting red jumpsuit with a long-sleeved coat over it that was missing its sides. Gold metal ovals were inlaid into the arms and legs of the uniform.

Her gaze was piercing, but she almost looked human in some ways. She glanced with interest on her “associates.” Hivers stepped up for the introduction.

“Lt. Dutroi,” he motioned, “meet Commander K’Helem – Chief Investigator for the High Council and Special Emissary from Chancellor Martok.”

Wow, this was serious! Rigelle thought. “I am honored,” she said with a bow – truly humbled to be meeting such a lofty member of Martok’s renowned government. K’Helem bowed in return, but she did not speak – there was something imposing and dignified in her composure.

After the introductions were complete, Captain Hivers motioned for them all to take a seat at the long table. Rigelle found herself seated next to K’Helem, across from Barker. Once they were all comfortably seated, Hivers gestured to Barker. “Commander, if you would like to open the proceedings?” he suggested.

“Certainly,” Barker cleared his throat. “The mission directive from Starfleet is to locate the source of this Klingon debris in the Denebme System and ascertain its nature. There is a concern that it may be the remains of a missing Klingon vessel from the

Dominion War, which may or may not have been carrying a classified weapon of mass destruction. I don't believe I need to spell out why locating and retrieving such a device is so important, especially in a region polluted by piracy."

"I have been ordered to give your team complete cooperation and support for this mission," Hivers added. Barker gestured to K'Helem. "Is there anything you'd like to add, Special Emissary?" he asked.

K'Helem bowed. "Thank you, Commander," she began. "The missing ship in question is called the *Kraval*, which may or may not prove to be what has been located by your scans. The High Council's directive in this matter is to investigate crimes committed prior to Chancellor Martok's ascension to his seat – namely, questionable allegiances and actions made by his predecessor, Chancellor Gowron – both leading up to and during the Dominion War, which resulted in much pain and no little dishonor upon the Klingon Empire. It is Chancellor Martok's desire to investigate any claims of dishonor or injustice that his predecessor may have caused and to rectify them."

"That is very noble of him," Rigelle observed, earning the piercing gaze of K'Helem upon her.

The Klingon softened her composure when she observed her comment was genuine. "Indeed," she said, almost reverently, "Chancellor Martok is the noblest being alive."

Commander Barker cleared his throat again. "Is there any additional information the High Council has authorized in regards to this missing ship and its cargo or compliment?" he asked.

Rigelle noticed K'Helem hesitated ever so slightly, but then pulled up her Klingon PADD. She rested her left forefingers on her temple, like she was steadying her thoughts or comforting a headache.

“The vessel was a Vor’cha class attack cruiser with a standard crew compliment of 1,900,” she recited from her screen. “Other than upgrades to its shielding, engines, and weapon systems, it is not remarkable.”

“Any information on what the unspecified weapon may have been?” Fa’Lok asked, speaking up for the first time.

“None,” K’Helem replied, glancing sideways at Rigelle. “It appears to have been an ‘off the books’ development program that Gowron had commissioned, but he does not appear to have kept any detailed notes on it. However, there is some evidence that a salvaged Romulan singularity drive may have been a component as one went missing from our laboratories around the time this project was initiated.”

Fa’Lok punctuated K’Helem’s revelation with a significant rise to her eyebrow.

“What would they want an artificial quantum singularity for?” Barker asked.

“Unknown,” K’Helem answered. “But then, I am not a scientist.” She directed these last words towards Sullivan and Bailey who were busily tapping away at their PADDs.

Barker took her direction. “Any thoughts?” he asked the two Lieutenants, leaning into the table so he could see them at the far end of the table.

Sullivan glanced up after a second's delay. “Are you talking to me?” he asked distractedly.

Barker nearly choked on his frustration. Sullivan and Bailey may have been unparalleled in their scientific fields, but they were nearly insubordinate in their dissociative behavior.

“Yes!” Barker got out. “Do you have anything to add to our discussion?” Sullivan nudged Bailey who dropped his PADD and started right in as if he had been completely aware of the entire conversation.

“An artificial quantum singularity could be useful for a whole host of nefarious purposes,” he said, running his hands through his curly hair. “For example, you could harvest the chronitons that are a bi-product of the engine and induce some sort of time-travel...”

“...Although research shows experiments with time-travel often end badly and are highly unpredictable,” Sullivan added.

“So that is unlikely,” Bailey continued, “but you might also be able to use it to store a large amount of matter, compressing it down into compact form, which you then release when you shut-off the reactor...”

“Kind of like Santa Claus’ bag being able to hold an infinite amount of toys that he could dump out all at once and bury a town below his sleigh if he wanted to...”

“Wait,” K’Helem interjected, raising her hand to stop the duo’s flow of consciousness. “I’m not following the conversation – what is a santa?”

Barker shook his head. “It isn’t important,” he said dismissively, not desiring to share with the impressive Klingon woman the old Earth tradition of a fat man that descended chimney’s to give gifts to children. He turned to his Lieutenants. “How could that be useful as a weapon?” he asked.

“Well, say you create a mine-field using an artificial quantum singularity filled with a billion metric tons of spatial debris,” Bailey replied. “It would all fit nicely into a tiny little package until you collapsed the singularity...”

“...which would result in an almost instantaneously generated explosion of cascading matter,” Sullivan continued, “which would spread across a few thousand kilometers...”

“...like a magically growing asteroid field that appears out of nowhere,” Bailey added. “So, you could fill it with any variety of material.”

“Such as antimatter?” K’Helem asked. All eyes turned to her.

“If you figured out a way to transport the antimatter into the singularity, then yes,” Sullivan nodded and then reconsidered her suggestion. “Yes, that could be a truly devastating mine...”

“Millions of times more powerful than a photon torpedo,” Bailey added.

“A planet killer,” K’Helem said quietly.

“Indeed!” the duo said in unison.

In the pause that followed, Rigelle leaned forward. “I’m not a scientist,” she said, “but I’m pretty sure that transporting antimatter isn’t easy – it has to be in a containment field, so how would they get the antimatter into the singularity without destroying the containment field generator in the crushing gravity field and causing a massive explosion as the antimatter reacted to the matter of the containment generator that was holding it?”

Sullivan and Bailey both lowered their fingers at her.

“Good point!” they said and bent their brows in silence. The room became very quiet.

“Okay, that is enough for now,” Barker announced. “I think we’ve had enough blue-sky speculation for the time being.” He rose from his seat. “We’d be better served if the scientists had some time to research the possibilities we may be facing on this mission. I expect a full report in six hours – we should be entering the Denebme System at that time.”

The team dispersed.

Rigelle remained, deep in thought – caught up in the mystery of the mission they were undertaking. She suppressed the dread she felt seeping up from her chest – cases involving weapons always gave her pause – ever since the time she and Fa’Lok had been in spacesuits trying to disarm an unexploded subspace mine that had drifted into a shipping lane. They’d triggered a failsafe by

accident and were barely beamed out before the blast knocked their Nebula-class transport into the stone age. They'd been adrift and without power for hours before rescue arrived. And the explosion seeded the shipping lane with radiation – spoiling it beyond repair. It was a bitter memory and she felt herself frowning.

Suddenly, Rigelle noticed she wasn't alone. K'Helem had turned in her chair and was watching her.

"You're the Betazoid, then," she said with a playful smirk. Rigelle regained her composure.

"Yes...yes, I am," she replied, adding quickly, "But I can't read your thoughts, if that worries you!"

"Because of the, um..." K'Helem pointed at the small fan-shaped jewelry over her upper forehead.

"Yes," Rigelle smiled, touching her hand to the cold metal. "It shields my mind from other people's thoughts."

"And thus, shields us, also," K'Helem observed.

"True."

"Your reputation is impressive for only recently having joined the SID," the Klingon Emissary observed. "I have read your file. I look forward to working with you."

"And I you," Rigelle agreed. She paused, unsure whether to ask.

"You want to know if I am only part Klingon?" K'Helem asked, reading Rigelle's thoughts as if she herself was a Betazoid.

Rigelle suppressed a blush. "Yes, I suppose I was wondering," she replied. "There is something very familiar about you."

"I am Klingon on my father's side," K'Helem said, and then hesitated. "And...I am human on my mother's side."

"That explains it!" Rigelle said. "I read a greater degree of subtlety in you than I have observed in Klingons of my acquaintance."

"I believe that is a diplomatic way of saying you suspect me of

dissembling,” K’Helem laughed.

Rigelle smiled. “Perhaps,” she said.

“Well, you learn to be guarded and suspicious growing up in a split household,” the Klingon said. “I felt pushed away by everyone and I pushed everyone away – even my older sister, K’Ehleyr, who proceeded me in this vocation.”

“Do you work together?” Rigelle asked, secretly wishing her own younger sister had chosen the investigator track at the Academy, instead of exobotany, so they could have more in common. K’Helem’s face fell.

“No,” she said distantly. “My sister was murdered by the Duras family some years ago during a political struggle. It was this event that caused me to pursue her calling as an investigator and take up her mantle where she left it.”

“I’m sorry!” Rigelle replied, feeling awful for having brought it up. The pain in K’Helem’s face fled with an infectious smile.

“Well enough of that,” she said, rising from her seat. “I think I will take my leave now, but I will see you again soon.”

She bowed and left the room, leaving Rigelle alone with her stewing emotions.

The hours took forever to pass as she tried to focus on the facts of the case, but they were so few and tenuous that she felt it a wasted effort until more data could be gleaned. She wondered what K’Helem was doing. Guiltily, she raised her Maang Tikka ornament. It wasn’t illegal to be a telepath on your time off! Instantly, her mind was flooded by voices – chaos. She fought to order them, forcing her mind to concentrate. Slowly, they seemed to condense in her thoughts – distinct minds with unique thoughts. She began to see them.

“She knows more than she is telling – she’s hiding something!” – that was Commander Barker’s inner turmoil breaking across

her thoughts – probably in reference to K’Helem. Rigelle moved on.

“Are neutrinos really neutral?” – that was Sullivan’s messy mental patterns. Rigelle quickly left him and carefully avoided Bailey’s equally abstracted brain.

“Best not get a headache,” she thought. She passed over Fa’Lok and stretched her mind down the decks, sifting through voices, searching for K’Helem.

Nothing. She wasn’t there. Rigelle’s suspicion deepened – how was she shielding her mind and why? Perhaps she was hiding something!

At that moment, she was distracted by the trailing stars transforming to points of light outside as the ship dropped out of warp. They must be arriving in the Denebme System. As if in answer, her commbadge chirped and she dropped her Maang Tikka back over her forehead, instantly silencing the voices of the crew.

“All SID members and Special Emissary K’Helem – please join me on the Bridge,” the Captain’s voice boomed.

Finally, a reason to budge! Rigelle was the first to step onto the bridge of the *Endeavor*, just as the Captain ordered the first sensor sweep of the star system dead ahead.

“Anything, Riley?” he asked.

“We’re getting faint readings of duranium,” a lieutenant answered from Ops.

“Localize,” Hivers ordered.

“Unable from this distance,” Riley replied. “We’ll need to get in closer.” Hivers turned to the helm.

“You heard the man, Ensign Bates,” he said.

The Prometheus-class arched ahead into the uninhabited star system.

“Definitely Korath duranium,” Riley nodded, analyzing the

higher resolution scans their proximity was giving him. That confirmed a Klingon origin. “And...it looks like it could be near the third planet from the central star.”

“Helm, take us in,” Hivers commanded, sitting back easily in his chair.

The planets grew as the starship owned the distance between them. Rigelle was awed by the speed of the *Prometheus* – even at impulse, it really was rearing to go.

“Sir, I’m reading the source on the planet’s surface,” Riley reported. “In the northern hemisphere.”

“Lock those coordinates into the Transporter,” Hivers ordered, and then turned slowly to Riley. “I suppose I ought to ask you whether the air is breathable and the gravity is doable?”

“Affirmative, Sir,” Riley responded with a smile. “It is in the lower limits of the green zone for an M-class planet.”

At that moment, Commander Barker entered from the turbolift.

“Commander Barker, we have the coordinates of your missing ship,” Hivers gestured to the planet before them on the viewscreen, quickly establishing itself as a pleasant host to the *Endeavor*’s orbit. Fa’Lok, K’Helem, Bailey, and Sullivan joined the bridge from the other turbolift and also gave their attention to the screen.

“It the source planet-side?” Barker asked with surprise.

“So, it would seem,” Hivers said. “Shall we establish orbit?”

“Yes, please do,” Barker answered distractedly, still trying to adjust to the fact that the wreckage wasn’t in space – he’d planned to have a few hours to scan and analyze it as it floated naked beneath the ship’s sensors – not blanketed out of sight below clouds in the dense atmosphere his eyes discerned on the approaching planet. He only hoped the sensors could penetrate that veil.

His fears were confirmed as they reached orbit.

“Sir, I’m having trouble pinpointing the exact coordinates of the duranium,” Riley reported. “And I also can’t quantify the amount of debris that is on the planet – the atmosphere is translucent to our scans.”

“Meaning?” Hivers asked.

“Meaning we’re only able to get partial readings on what’s down there,” Riley clarified. “It could be a shuttle or it could be a ship.”

“Can we transport?” Hivers asked.

Riley hesitated. “I believe we could successfully beam a team down,” he said. “But we might have trouble bringing them back – I’m not sure I could get a proper lock on them with the interference.”

Hivers turned to Barker. “The risk is yours, Commander,” he said.

“We’ll take it,” Barker decided. “You can send us a shuttle to get back if we need it.”

In less than twenty minutes, the five-member SID team and Special Emissary K’Helem pressed into the primary transporter room with all their gear and equipment.

They wore heavy white coats, replicated to perfectly match the colder climate they were beaming into.

“Will you walk into my parlor?” Lt. Riley beckoned up to the waiting pad. He was personally going to handle the transport.

“Said a spider to the fly...” Sullivan tagged on from the nursery rhyme.

Bailey rose to the challenge and continued it. “Tis the prettiest little parlor that ever you did spy...”

“Alright, that is enough!” Barker raised his voice, cutting them off, and then muttered under his breath, “The Academy doesn’t make them like it used to!”

Rigelle climbed the pad and found her place next to K'Helem. The Klingon woman nodded to her.

"Energize!" Barker ordered. The familiar whine of the transporter took over the room and Rigelle felt herself fade away from it into a sea of white. She felt a chill seeping into her and then she coalesced onto a desolate snowy slope of an unknown world. Then she noticed that Commander Barker and K'Helem were standing nearby staring at her.

Barker leaned to his commbadge. "We have Lt. Dutroi," he announced to whomever was listening.

"What...what happened?" Rigelle asked, suddenly feeling a little queasy.

"The Transporters had a harder time than expected punching through the atmosphere," K'Helem explained. "The operator had to switch over to materializing us one by one."

"Sullivan and Bailey?" Rigelle asked worriedly, glancing around to mark their absence. K'Helem nodded to the ground before them.

"They should be coming through presently," she said. And at that moment, a transporter beam fell near them – shuddering and spurting a few times and then materializing Lt. Bailey safe and sound.

"Well, that was a trip!" he exclaimed. "It felt like it took 20 minutes or so."

K'Helem considered him with surprise. No one was supposed to experience the passage of time in the transporter, yet this Federation Lieutenant and accurately pegged the amount of time he'd been in the buffer!

As Bailey began glancing around for Sullivan, Rigelle reached out to steady him.

"We're having some trouble with the transporters," she said. "But we're almost all here now." And then Lt. Sullivan

materialized before them. As soon as he stumbled among them, Barker tapped his commbadge again.

"We've got them all here, Lieutenant," he announced.

"Good!" came the staticky reply. "Unfortunately, there...no way we're going to be able...beam you up through...interference. We'll...send you...shuttle."

"Understood!" Barker answered. "Barker out."

Now that everyone was together, they took in their surroundings more attentively. Tricorders came out and broke the still, quiet mountain peace as snow was gently falling down through the air. But scan as they would, there was no sign of the Klingon vessel or any wreckage.

Barker tapped his commbadge.

"Riley, are you sure you set us down in the right coordinates?" he asked. Static filled the line at first, but then the Lieutenant's voice came through.

"It should be somewhere within...radius of...kilometer," he replied. "You should...able to see it."

"Very well," Barker sighed. "We'll keep you informed." The team turned in place looking and scanning around their environment. Finally, K'Helem pointed along the slope of the mountain. There was a slanting ridge about 200 meters away that obscured the view beyond.

"This is the only direction that we cannot see for a kilometer," she said. "Perhaps we should investigate it?"

"I concur," Barker said.

The team set out in the still, cold air – refreshing, clean, and invigorating.

"There's more oxygen in the atmosphere than Earth standard," Bailey reported, answering everyone's question as to why they felt so bright, alert, and energized. It felt good! They trudged along through the shallow snow and the mountain detritus until

they reached the short ridge and climbed to its summit to see beyond. Barker tapped his communicator.

“Barker to Captain Hivers,” he called.

“Hivers here, Commander,” came the Captain’s strong voice.

Barker nodded to his team. “We’ve found it,” he said.

There before them – about 800 meters away – a massive Klingon Vor’cha class battlecruiser lay on its side buried halfway into the side of the mountain. Nearly half-a-dozen tricorders scanned the wreckage.

As they walked the slope to meet it, Sullivan’s tricorder busily scanned the ground.

“That’s odd,” he remarked, adding nothing more until Barker’s frustration couldn’t handle it any longer.

“Speak up Lieutenant!” he demanded.

“Oh, well...I’m registering matter-antimatter reactions all along this mountain slope,” he reported.

Rigelle scanned the ground beneath her feet and confirmed Sullivan’s scans. A massive antimatter explosion must have swept over the mountain’s face – the ground was fused to little grains of glass from the heat!

“It is unlikely that the antimatter came from the *Kraval*’s warp core as any breach would have vaporized the ship,” K’Helem added, “and as you can see the vessel is in remarkable shape... for beaching on a mountain.”

They continued on and soon reached the ship’s faint shadow cast by the port-side wing, which rose high above them in the overcast sky. No matter how many downed vessels she’d seen in her budding career as an investigator, Rigelle still was awed by the scale of starships when she was standing before them.

The faintly green, weathered Klingon hull looked like the battered armor of a dragon from a childhood story. Unfortunately, the hull was the only thing they were reading –

any deeper scans appeared to be reflected.

“They may have employed Klysidium,” K’Helem muttered as she too saw her scans being reflected.

“What is that?” Rigelle asked.

“Klysidium is a recently developed metallic alloy used to shield sensitive areas of a ship – it could be used to block radiation from getting out...”

“Or block scans from getting in?” Bailey added.

“Indeed,” K’Helem nodded. “They may have been employing it to prevent the Dominion from detecting that they were carrying an artificial singularity...whatever the case, I’m afraid we’re going to have to find another way to see inside.”

It was clear this wasn’t going to be a quick operation, and already darkness was creeping in on them from the plains and valleys below.

“Okay,” Barker decided, dropping his supply pack, “we’ll set up basecamp here for the night and conduct our examination of the hull in the morning.”

The team dropped their tent packets on the ground and at their command, the packets opened to unfold and materialize hemispherical roomy little tents that could withstand category four storms.

K’Helem took a little longer setting up her enclosure, but when it was done, it had what looked like duranium slabs forming a triangular enclosure. One tricorder scan of its impenetrable sides and Sullivan said it could probably survive the apocalypse.

“Well, one ought to be prepared,” K’Helem grinned.

They had a meal together around the heat lamp, which provided enough warmth for them to remove their coats.

“I’m sorry, we don’t have any Klingon food,” Barker remarked to K’Helem as he prepared the ready-made steak dinner. She shook her head.

“Not to worry,” she said. “I am a versatile eater.” And she proved it – having seconds of the mashed potatoes and gravy. After the meal, they decided on a course of action for the morning – planning to explore the hull of the ship for any breaks or openings to gain access to the interior.

They said their goodnights and retired to their tents.

Rigelle lay awake for nearly an hour, listening to the wind outside, which had picked up as the sun sank behind the overcast sky.

What would they find in the morning? As she removed her Maang Tikka shield, she wondered what the others were thinking, but she resisted the temptation to gaze into their naked thoughts.

With a sigh, she turned over on her cot and drifted to sleep.

Instantly, she found herself in the woods, walking down a faint dirt trail. It was dark and gloomy. She thought she heard someone calling ahead, but it was faint in the wind. Where was she going? Rigelle thought she recognized her surroundings. Was this the Calypso 7 Colony that she had spent a year at when she was a girl? If so, there was a large stone well up ahead down the path. She brushed through the Carvallum trees and their strong musky odor until she emerged into an overgrown clearing where the abandoned well stood, looking little more than a stubby stone wall. It was the water-well her human Grandfather had dug years before she was born after the Great Solar Storm fried the replicators and the water condensers. He’d had to draw on his memories of growing up in Ireland after the Greatest War to remember how to construct it.

One of her earliest memories was as a child, climbing over the edge of the well to spy the bottom. The walls descended into pitch blackness. As she strained to see the deep water, Rigelle had lost her balance and fallen. She fell forever into darkness.

She felt her heart stop, but then she struck the water at the bottom. She plunged deep into it, flailing wildly in the wet, tangible darkness. As the air burned out of her lungs, she felt consciousness fading away. She was going to die! But then, at the last moment, her head pushed out into air and she gasped, drinking in deep, greedy gulps of air that brought her back to life.

She floated in that horrific pit for hours, screaming, crying for help, pounding her hands on the thick stone walls with only the small pin-prick of light above as hope. She reached out with her telepathic mind, but there was nothing. She was cut off from all the reassuring voices of the planet - alone - more alone than she had ever been - and afraid, terrified to death in that hopeless hell. The very stones of the well had turned against her.

At long last, her grandfather had found her and he drew her up on a loop of thick coarse rope. Up, foot by foot, she had risen from the darkness into the light. The experience had traumatized her for years. She'd forgotten it since joining the Academy, but now it had come back in her dreams to haunt her.

Yes, here she was again – drawn to the well as she had been when she was a child. She couldn't stop herself. Dread drowned her with each step forward. Suddenly, she stopped. She thought a sound was coming inside.

As she prepared to take a final step towards the well, she froze. Had she heard a voice? It sounded like a whispered cry for help! Had someone fallen into the well?

She ran to the edge of the well and stared down into the hole, which receded into a pitch-black aperture. If only she had a light!

"Hello?" she called. "Who is down there?"

"We are trapped!" a faint voice cried, and then it overlapped with many other voices, "Let us out! Take us home! Help us!"

Suddenly, the darkness rose up and stuck her in the face! Instantly, Rigelle woke from her dream. She was sweating. “What a nightmare!” she gasped. She could see from the translucent walls of her tent that it was still nighttime outside. She checked her Tricorder for a time and it was just past midnight. She leaned back on her cot and stilled her mind. Then she reached out into the camp.

A flood of disjointed and fantastical images flooded her mind. She smiled. Dreams! So many dreams! But as she tried to focus on them, she noticed none involved Klingons. Why couldn’t she read K’Helem? She reached out further beyond the camp. Nothing.

She turned on her side and slowly found some sleep again – this time it was dreamless.

Rigelle woke as the system’s star rose over the distant mountains on this uncharted planet. She dressed quickly and exited her tent to find Commander Barker already making the coffee and getting started on breakfast. The first thing she noticed was the port wing strut of the *Kraval* rising high into the sky above her, catching the first of the sunlight gleaming bright and golden on its intact nacelle. The wreck was still where they’d left it, offering up the tantalizing allure of mystery. She glanced around and noticed that everything was calm and warm in the camp, but the wind was wild just beyond the perimeter, driving snowdrifts around them. Her eyes fell on the mobile deflector generator set up on the windward side of the camp. Sullivan had brought it along – a very useful device to protect a camp-site from harsh wind environments on inhospitable planets. It was generating a deflecting bubble around the camp, forcing the wind to travel around it.

Speaking of Sullivan, he and Bailey were just groggily climbing

out of their tents, stretching and yawning as they stumbled towards the smell of camp coffee.

Rigelle found a seat by the heat lamp and ate the breakfast that Barker handed her. The eggs were delicious! She wondered if K'Helem had ever had eggs. She glanced around the camp, but didn't see her. And where was Fa'Lok?

"Is Fa'Lok not joining us for breakfast?" she asked Barker.

"She's been up for an hour scanning along this side of the wreckage already," the Commander answered between blowing on his hot coffee.

"And...where's the Emissary?" Rigelle followed up. Barker nodded towards the massive wreck.

"She also wanted to get an early start," he said with a grunt. "She even turned down breakfast, saying she wasn't hungry. But she and Fa'Lok are like matter and antimatter, so I suggested they choose separate paths this morning."

Rigelle set her plate down forcefully. "Someone should be with her!" She said hotly. "That woman is trouble!"

Barker smiled. "You afraid she's up to something?" he asked in a voice that gave away his own suspicions. Rigelle fought down the urge to share her misgivings, especially in the presence of Sullivan and Bailey who were both so socially awkward that they might very well just mention it in passing to K'Helem as small talk later.

"No, I just think we shouldn't be splitting up at this stage of the investigation," she answered, and then leaned in towards her Commander and lowered her voice. "Klingon investigative procedures aren't as considerate or detail-oriented as Federation procedures, Sir," she explained. "I'm worried she might inadvertently tamper with evidence." Barker nodded, but then shook his head grudgingly.

"K'Helem is a very well-respected investigator," he said, and

then raised his hand to stop her further objections, “however, if you would like to skip my famous camp coffee and join her, be my guest. You won’t know what you’re missing!” He raised a cup of thick, black coffee roiling with grits and grounds and took a deep swallow.

That was good enough for Rigelle. She got up and put her coat on, retrieving her tricorder and satchel kit from her tent, before heading out of the safety of the camp.

“We’ll be along shortly!” Barker called after her.

Rigelle waved and crossed the deflector barrier, instantly feeling the wind drive her up the mountain a few steps, nearly shoving her off balance!

She stumbled forward, buffeted back and forth by gusts blowing up the slope of the mountainside. She looked down at the impact crater, hundreds of meters down the mountain from her where the rock and soil had been displaced by the duranium vessel as it slammed into the side of the mountain. Luckily, it had been at a shallow angle so the *Kraval* had scraped up the mountain, carried by its momentum to rest here. Its starboard wing had been torn off by the collision and it lay down the slope nearer to the impact site. After a five-minute walk, Rigelle reached the embankment of rock and soil, pushed aside by the enormous vessel. To her left, over a hundred meters away, she could just make out the form of Fa’Lok scanning along the hull towards the rear of the ship.

Rigelle climbed up the embankment and touched the cold metal of the Klingon hull just behind the massive head of the “beast.” She’d always thought Klingon vessels looked like dragons or mythical creatures. Her thoughts strayed for a time, but at last she brought out her tricorder and began scanning. The device was only picking up the outer hull layer, since the mysterious alloy was blocking deeper scans, but that was what she was

curious about. What had caused it to crash? Was there any weapon residue or a fracture from a collision with another vessel?

“Nothing,” she sighed and began to stumble along over the debris, following the hull as it angled up to make the head. She walked around, stopping to scan from time to time. At last, she rounded the nose of the vessel, where its massive disrupter lay, staring blankly down at her. It was like looking into the gaping mouth of dead monster. Steadying herself on the prong, Rigelle peeked past it to the underbelly of the *Kraval* – shadowed and colder. The Vorcha’s deflector array obscured her line of sight and she carefully made her way below the ship’s chin. She saw no sign of K’Helem. Where had she got to? Gradually, Rigelle picked her way along until she came to the massive cargo bay door – sealed.

But before she could get too discouraged, she caught sight of an opening in the hull ahead – a docking port on the underbelly! She shuffled ahead faster now, propping herself along the cold hull until at last she scrambled to the ground beneath the ventral docking port. The lip of the port was a good four meters above her. That’s when she noticed a jumbled pile of rocks at her feet forming a sort of rudimentary stairs that could bring her within reach of the port.

“K’Helem, you wily Targ,” Rigelle grinned, figuring the Klingon woman had laid the stones to reach the same entry point into the ship. Without waiting for the others, Rigelle clambered up the stones and clutched at the edge of the opening. Using her boots, she scampered up the hull, climbed through the port, and collapsed into the corridor beyond. To her left, the corridor receded a dozen meters into almost utter darkness, presumably heading to the cargo bay and back to the head of the ship. Steadying herself along the nearer edge, she leaned in

cautiously.

“K’Helem?” she called, a little weakly. No reply came and there were no sounds of movement from within. Rigelle’s tricorder readings were equally in-determinant and she fished out a lamp from her satchel. Flicking it on, the beam fell across the ceiling to her right with the deck to her left. She picked her way carefully along the starboard wall of the ship, stepping over the intruding bulkheads that broke into her way.

As she reached the third bulkhead down, she froze. A body lay a dozen meters away on the ground. It wasn’t K’Helem – what a relief – but it did look like a Klingon corpse, frozen and desiccated in the cold mountain air. Dread washed over Rigelle and she instinctively tapped her commbadge.

“Dutroi to Commander Barker?” she called. And then she realized in the static-filled silence that the ship’s hull was blocking her communicator. She was truly alone and she fought off the chill sinking into her bones. Now what? Should she go back and wait for the others or push on ahead and find K’Helem?

She pressed on down the corridor, gingerly passing the body of the Klingon warrior. Her tricorder scans confirmed his demise from blunt force trauma some time ago – likely from the crash. After a few minutes, she came to a “T” in the corridor and she took a left and then a right shortly afterwards, coming suddenly upon an open doorway into a dark expanse beyond. Cautiously, Rigelle approached the door and cast her light over the scene. It was the cargo bay! Below her, the bay’s starboard wall shone, corroded by years of exposure to the elements. As the *Kraval* was beached on its side, that wall now served as the ship’s “floor.” And there, cargo containers lay strewn around haphazardly, presumably from the crash. But despite all the jumbled debris below, a large cylindrical structure lay ahead,

adhered to the bay's deck, reaching to the ceiling. It stood on the far side of the cargo bay, beyond the massive bay door in the floor. She ran her tricorder over the scene. It registered various Klingon foodstuffs, medical equipment, scientific apparatus, weapons, and shuttles mostly below her.

"No sign of any sort of superweapon," Rigelle muttered to herself, kneeling against the cold duranium. "unless you count frozen Gagh!" But then she began picking up faint energy traces. They seemed to be coming from the cylindrical structure ahead. Large power cables ran across the floor to it. Could this be the containment cell for the artificial singularity?

Rigelle wondered how she was going to get to it.

"There's nothing for it," she sighed and sat down, dangling her legs over the edge of the door. It was a 20ft drop to the starboard wall below, but thankfully the ship was banked up at a slight enough angle that Rigelle slid down the deck to the starboard wall of the bay. Still, she picked up enough speed to crash into a jumbled pile of cargo containers and sprawl out in the chaotic mess. It was cold in here, but at least there was no wind. The air smelled stale and metallic.

Rigelle made her way toward the rear of the bay, climbing and clambering over the containers and shuttles that formed a rubble heap in her way. She'd never been aboard a Vor'cha before and her knowledge of the layout was hampered further by the fact the ship was on its side. She was walking on the starboard wall of the cargo bay, and to her left, the actual roof of the bay rose up like a wall high above to the port wall that was now the effective ceiling.

"K'Helem?" she called again. "Are you here?" Still no answer. She reached a power cable that rose from the wall up the slope above her to the containment cell that stretched like a structural pillar between the deck and the ceiling. She could hear a faint

humming now emanating above her from it. Gripping the cable, she climbed up the sloping deck and clambered up the side of the humming cylindrical structure until she crouched atop it. Thankfully, a control panel was on this side. She reached down and tapped it. Nothing happened.

“Clearly, there is power keeping the singularity contained – probably a dedicated backup system,” Rigelle muttered to herself, “but there is no power to the main electrical systems. Just then, she heard a popping, thudding sound from the rear of the ship and as if in reply, the lights in the Cargo bay flickered on, dimly at first and then more brightly. The console flashed alive.

“K’Helem,” Rigelle muttered. The Klingon woman must have made her way into the Engineering quarter to see if any power systems could be restored. Rigelle scratched an itch from her brow and felt the Cavarian crystal pressed against her forehead. She was suddenly tempted to see if she could sense the Klingon now. It really bothered her that she couldn’t seem to read anything from her.

Not only that, she thought, defensively, but where has my team bumbled to? And can I sense through this Klingon alloy? Curiosity got the better of her and she slowly adjusted the crystal away from her skin. Instantly, she was swallowed by darkness. Above her she saw the cargo bay shrinking away like a closing aperture – or the opening of a hole that is falling away from you as you fall in!

With a terrifying start, Rigelle realized she was falling! She tried to wake out of this trance, but she couldn’t seem to replace the crystal. Still she was falling down. With a wave of horror, she realized she was falling down her grandfather’s well!

She screamed – one long high cry until all the air left her lungs. And still she fell. Below her, she heard a sea of voices, coming

from the pit. And then she was among them.

“We are trapped!” a faint voice cried to her left, and then it overlapped with many other voices, “Let us out! Take us home! Help us!”

Rigelle was conscious she was not dreaming. This was telepathy – this was real! She hesitated as the voices grew silent.

“Who...who are you?” she asked.

“We are like you, Dutroi,” the voices replied. “We are like you when you were trapped in the well! Yes, we see your life story in your thoughts, Dutroi!”

“You are trapped?” Rigelle asked quizzically. “Where?”

“We are trapped in the well!” the voices said. “In the well of darkness!” Rigelle sifted the words through her mind and then recognition dawned.

“Are you in a gravity well?” she asked.

“Yes, yes!” the voices overlapped. “We are trapped in the gravity well!”

This was crazy! Rigelle steadied her thoughts. *Keep up the line of inquiry*, she thought loudly to herself.

“But...how did you become trapped in there?” She asked.

“We were taken by force from our home...stolen from our home...forced into this prison by corporeal beings!...They burned us! Burned us and killed some of us!”

“How many are you? Rigelle asked, staying focused by mentally ticking off her standard interview routine.

“We are a thousand thousands,” they replied.

“And, who are you?” Rigelle asked again. “What do you call yourselves?”

“We are the Calentee,” the voices replied.

This situation made no sense to Rigelle. If the voices were referring to the Klingons, why would they have imprisoned lifeforms in an artificial gravity well...as a weapon? Was it a

mistake? Rigelle had heard of lifeforms planted inside artificial singularities before – it was a mission report she remembered reading in the Academy about the *Enterprise-D*'s encounter with a Romulan Warbird that had been selected as a “nest” for a life-form that incubated its young in black holes. So, was it an accident?

“Were you accidentally trapped?” Rigelle asked.

“No!” the voices sounded in unison. “Purposeful...malignant...cruel. Please help us! Let us go home! Free us from this pit, Dutroi!”

Rigelle realized that if she shut down the artificial singularity, the entities would likely be freed from the gravity well that was entrapping them. “I will try to help you,” she said, and she felt herself released from the mental grip of the lifeforms. Her crystal fell into place and she was instantly back in the cargo bay of the *Kraval*, teetering on the containment cell.

She stood for a few minutes looking down on it. Were there really a million life-forms trapped and imprisoned inside there? If there were, every second she hesitated was a cruelty that her own traumatic memory loudly accused her of being an accessory. It was imperative to free them.

She crouched down over the control panel and flicked it alive. Her Klingon was pretty rusty, but she thought she could see what looked like the power-down routine. She reached for it. But at that moment a bolt of green energy scorched the metal just a foot from her head. Rigelle whirled around to see K’Helem standing in the corridor to the Bay. She held up a Klingon Disrupter.

“Step away!” she growled.

“What are you doing?” Rigelle cried, still feeling the dreadful crackle of disrupter energy dissipating in the air.

“Saving your life, fool!” K’Helem answered, holstering her

weapon.

“By shooting at me?” Rigelle bellowed.

“You were never in danger, Betazoid!” K’Helem grunted and leapt down atop some cargo containers, making her way towards Rigelle. “Make room for me up there,” she ordered as she neared the containment cell.

“Or what?” Rigelle asked indignantly. “You going to save my head right off my shoulders?”

K’Helem growled with irritation. “Oh, you Betazoids are far too sensitive to suffer the hardships of life!” she cried. “How ever did you survive into the stars!”

Rigelle crossed her arms and didn’t budge. “You tell me what is going on and I’ll move,” she said evenly, her voice lowering to flint.

K’Helem weighed her words and then nodded. “That is reasonable,” she said with a sigh. “Very well, if you had powered down the containment cell, as you appeared to be doing, you would have incinerated yourself and everything on this mountain side.”

“How?” Rigelle asked dangerously.

“I am not authorized to say, by command of the High Council,” K’Helem replied and then nodded as she anticipated Rigelle’s rejection of the explanation. “But, I feel I can trust an investigator of your reputation, and since we are here, it can’t hurt.”

“Well?” Rigelle asked.

“I have not been entirely forthcoming with your team about the nature of these experiments,” K’Helem said, ignoring Rigelle’s sarcastic surprise. “During the Dominion War, our scientists isolated a new source of antimatter with unique properties,” she continued. “They discovered it by tunneling into a parallel universe. The discovery cost two hundred Klingon scientists

their lives as an antimatter geyser surged into our universe, destroying the moon that the laboratory was based on. Subsequent experiments revealed that a Romulan artificial singularity could contain vast amounts of the antimatter if they siphoned it out of the parallel universe in discrete stages – like a Rhinehorn flagon filling at the bloodwine tap.”

“But what was so special about this antimatter that they had to get it from somewhere else?” Rigelle interrupted. K’Helem sighed.

“It behaved like discrete life-forms...antimatter lifeforms,” she said, allowing her words to resonate in Rigelle’s mind for a few seconds before continuing. “They could be transported, they coordinated in groups, they seemed to ‘think’ strategically on some basic level, and they were highly dense, meaning that their interaction with normal matter could be prolonged.”

“Oh, K’Helem!” Rigelle said in horror as her Betazoid intuition leapt ahead. “They *are* life-forms that were taken from their home and enslaved to fight and die for our war! Oh, their pain and agony at being forced into this matter universe causing them to burn at even the touch of dust and vapor! How they must have suffered!”

“Yes,” K’Helem answered, the dishonor of the situation seemed to taste badly in her mouth. “In battle, the Klingon forces would power down the artificial singularity just enough to transport the antimatter life-forms into close proximity of Jem’Hadar targets on a contended planet. There, in a desperate attempt to escape the agony of contact with normal matter, the lifeforms sacrifice themselves to destroy what they perceived was their enemy - the Jem’Hadar. The surviving lifeforms would be transported back up into the singularity on the *Kraval* afterwards for holding until the next engagement.”

Silence engulfed them. It was slavery, it was murder, it was

genocide. More than that, it was evil! And it struck the deepest nerve in the deepest layer of Rigelle's being.

"You ought to know that I have been in contact with the lifeforms," Rigelle said finally, gesturing from her head to the containment cell. "They call themselves the Calentee."

"Naturally," K'Helem replied.

"So, what are you here to do?" Rigelle asked, fearing the answer. K'Helem shrugged.

"Well," she said slowly, "my orders from the Council are to set the *Kraval's* fusion reactors to overload and bury this sad saga under the mountain."

Rigelle started and glanced back towards the engine room. That was why K'Helem had been back there, rigging the ship to explode! Slowly she reached into her satchel and drew her own phaser. "I can't let you do that," she said. "These are living beings and they deserve justice for what has been done to them!"

"Relax, Starfleet," K'Helem smiled. "I have no intention of following through with the orders of a dishonorable bureaucracy intent on hiding the shame of its past deeds. I do not answer to them, but to the most honorable man alive – Chancellor Martok himself. I am here to set the captives free."

"Oh!" Rigelle said with embarrassment. Sheepishly, she lowered her phaser and quickly stuffed it back in her bag. "Well, in that case, I'd like to help."

K'Helem nodded to the containment cell. "Can I please come up there, now?" she asked.

"Certainly," Rigelle said, stepping aside to make room. Without aid, the Klingon woman leapt clear to the structure and climbed up beside the Lieutenant. She knelt over the control panel and interrogated it with her Klingon tricorder.

"This is more complicated than I am able to manage," she said with frustration. "Any chance your two brains will be along

shortly?"

"They should have been here ages ago!" Rigelle huffed, tapping her communicator before she remembered all signals were shielded by the hull. Suddenly, she noticed K'Helem was staring at her intently.

"What?" Rigelle asked. K'Helem glanced away, but then her voice began from a deeper place.

"Like you, I am a firm believer in justice," she said. "I have fought my whole life for it, and it is my desire to bring justice into this situation."

"How?" Rigelle asked.

"I want you to be my advocate," K'Helem said. "Can you link them to me?"

Rigelle blinked in surprise. "You want to speak to the Calentee?" she asked. "The ones your people enslaved, tortured, and killed?"

"The very ones," K'Helem said.

Rigelle sensed her resolve and the righteousness of it. "Very well," she said. "Give me your hand." She gripped the Klingon woman's wrist firmly with her right hand and then raised the crystal from her forehead with her left.

Instantly, she was pulled into the abysmal blackness again, dragging K'Helem consciously down with her - down, down towards the sea of voices at the bottom of the gravity well, which suddenly became distinct.

"Why have you not freed us, Dutroi?" the voices demanded. "We thought you would help us!"

"I have learned of your plight," Rigelle said. "You are antimatter lifeforms, stolen from your dimensional reality and held captive in an artificial gravity well by agents of the Klingon Empire. They forced you to fight for them against their enemies in a great and terrible war. You thought you were fighting those that

had taken you captive, but you were actually fighting their enemies. You were burned, pained, and injured...some of you even died. But then the ship that carried you captive crashed and had been lost for three years until we found it. We want to help you. I have brought a representative of those who enslaved you. Her name is K'Helem. She wants justice for you – she wants restitution – to make things right between her people and your people for what they did to you.”

Silence flooded the darkness.

“We will take a life,” the voices answered, finally. “A life for life – it is the way of balance. Bring us the one who enslaved us.”

“They are out of our reach currently,” Rigelle answered.

“Then find us another,” the voices replied. “Or we will wage war upon this people when we return to our home.”

“Take my life!” K'Helem cried. “I will pay it gladly for the sins of my people – to spare them from your retaliation!”

“Yes, yes, we will accept your life in payment for the crime of your people!” the voices said.

Rigelle felt horrified at the idea of K'Helem being sacrificed for the crimes of others. How was that justice? She reached into her mind and heard her grandfather's voice speaking of his faith.

“No!” Rigelle screamed. “There is a better way!”

“Explain!” the voices demanded.

“There is the way of law – a life for a life - but there is also the way of grace!” Rigelle explained. “It is underserved favor, forgiveness, and mercy shown to one's enemies! K'Helem is innocent of harming you, yet she is offering her life in exchange for forgiving her people. But you can rise above the law, as she has done with her innocence and self-sacrifice. Forgive those who harmed you! Show them mercy, even though they don't deserve it!”

“How is this justice?” the voices asked.

“You are right, it is not justice,” Rigelle answered quietly. “It is higher than that. Without grace, violence and vengeance cannot be abated,” Rigelle said. “If you take K’Helem’s life, her family will be forced to seek vengeance upon you. And if you retaliate on her people, you will have endless war and suffering. Grace has a powerful dampening effect on the tendency of life to oscillate out of control from tribe against tribe, grudge against grudge, maliciousness to maliciousness, and violence against violence. But only the noblest beings can understand its merit and act on it for the good of all.”

Her words were swallowed by the silence. And in that silence, she continued. “Where I come from, we have a wise teaching,” she said. “We call it the Golden Rule, and it teaches us to treat other people exactly how we want to be treated. Put yourself in K’Helem’s place. She is innocent of the crimes against you. Would you want to be judged in the place of the guilty?”

“But how will we have justice for our people?” the voices asked. “I don’t know,” Rigelle answered quietly. “My life has been in pursuit of justice for those who don’t have it – same as K’Helem – that is why we are here. But despite our best efforts, sometimes in this life, we never find it! However, I believe we will all have perfect justice in the end.” She paused and glanced at K’Helem, who nodded her ascent. “I am assured that K’Helem will swear a blood oath to seek justice for you among her people,” Rigelle continued. “And it is no small thing that she is backed in this by the leader of her people who had no hand in your treatment – to investigate and punish the guilty parties who enslaved and murdered your people. Although, I cannot promise that they will all be caught.”

“It is not our form of justice that you speak of, Dutroi...but we see in your words an ancient wisdom,” the voices answered.

“We agree to your proposal. Now, can you return us to our home?”

Rigelle breathed a sigh of relief. “We will return you to your home...I just need some help,” she said and let the crystal drop over her forehead again. Instantly, she and K’Helem were back standing on the containment cell in the cold cargo bay of the Klingon warship.

“You had no right to prevent my sacrifice of my life!” K’Helem barked. “I would gladly have paid it in service to my people!”

“Well, now you don’t have to!” Rigelle returned heatedly. “And you can pursue justice on those who actually *are* guilty!”

“Excuse me?” came a disembodied voice. “Have we missed something?” Rigelle glanced down below them to see Commander Barker, Lt. Fa’Lok, and the brain trust, Sullivan and Bailey peeking out from behind the cell. They must have made an entrance to the bay while she and K’Helem were telepathically communicating to the “voices.”

“Well, don’t you all look fat, happy, and warm?” Rigelle said irritably. “Pays to stick around the fire, apparently.”

As quickly as her breath would allow, she brought the team up to speed with K’Helem’s help. They listened in shocked silence to the stream of consciousness from both women.

“Antimatter beings,” Fa’Lok said evenly. “How logical.”

“So, if I get this right, we need to find a way to return them to their own dimension?” Barker asked incredulously.

“Right.” K’Helem replied.

“How do we do that exactly?” he asked.

“Easily enough in principle,” the Klingon replied. “The extraction process was periodical – when the current supply of Calentee was expended in a tactical operation, the ship would need to siphon more out from the parallel universe.”

“And...” Barker asked, not seeing in her explanation a trail

sturdy enough to carry his thoughts.

“And,” K’Helem continued, impatiently, “This containment cell beneath my feet has as part of its apparatus a Verteron stream generator, which is what was used to tunnel into the parallel universe.”

“Wormholes!” Sullivan interrupted. “Brilliant!”

“Correct,” K’Helem replied. “This way, they could funnel the Calentee straight into the gravity well of the singularity to contain them for later use.”

“Elegant,” Bailey commented.

“Simple,” Sullivan replied.

“A genuine piece of cake,” Bailey answered.

“Then get on with it!” Barker growled, deeply in debt with his patience.

“Will do!” they both saluted. They climbed up the containment cell to the control panel and fired it up.

“Uh, huh...” Bailey mumbled, tapping a few keys. “Yep, okay...got it.” Sullivan stood up to explain.

“So, opening the wormhole to the coordinates of the parallel dimension is easy,” he said, “but it looks like the Klingons designed it to funnel into our universe, not pass things back...so, unless we can find a hot air balloon or a life preserver, we’re out of luck.”

“A...balloon?” Fa’Lok repeated quizzically, nearly lifting her eyebrows to her scalp.

“Yep,” Bailey replied. “What my esteemed colleague means is that we need a buoyant driving force that will carry or direct the Calentee against the current of the Veteron stream – it isn’t much but they will be going against it.” Rigelle pushed her hood back.

“But won’t using the wormhole just draw more Calentee in from their world?” she asked.

Sullivan wagged his finger at her. "Not necessarily," he answered. "We can create a weak link, which means the current won't be strong enough to trap any more of them. At the same time, we'll shut down the artificial singularity, which should give them enough momentum to spring up the wormhole like soap bubbles rising in a vase. They just need to do their part."

"They need some encouragement," Bailey explained.

"Some resolve," Sullivan nodded.

"Then I think I know just the thing," Rigelle said, removing the crystal from her forehead. "Start the stream."

Instantly, she felt herself descending telepathically again into the abyssal pit of the gravity well.

"Have you come to rescue us, Dutroi?" the voices asked, surrounding her with their whispers.

"I believe we have found a way," she answered. "We will be creating a stream connecting our worlds – yours and mine, but there is a current that we will have to swim against. Are you strong enough to rise against it?"

"Only if you guide us, Dutroi," they said. "You have escaped a well before...you know the way." Before Rigelle could answer, a light suddenly shone above them and she felt a rushing flow of something like the current of a river around her.

She looked up at the glowing light.

"Follow me!" she beckoned. She thought of her Grandfather rescuing her and how she'd risen from the darkness of her own prison – first in the desolation of the well and then in the years that followed, the blackness of her own mind. She swam against the current, fixing on the thought of the hope of the light above her and her desire to be free from the horrible pit of despair. She passed her thoughts onto the rest.

"Rise!" she cried. "Rise up!" It was working. With her encouragement, the Calentee were lifting out of the well. She

could see them now. Their forms were very unlike that of a humanoid – they looked more like octopi, but with something like living flames for tentacles, and they glowed with a strange light, probably owing to their elementally different nature. Their eyes were large and deep and soulful - a peaceful and gentle race by nature.

Suddenly, the darkness below them vanished and they shot up and away. Rigelle's consciousness followed them into the mouth of their universe. It was dazzling! A place of fire and lights – a sea of energy and warmth. She tried to take it in, but it was so alien to her, she had no language to describe what she was seeing. And then she felt the aperture closing and she was pulled back down.

"Thank you, Dutroi," she heard the Calentee say in a million voices. "Thank you for saving us!"

And then Rigelle snapped back to the cold, stale cargo bay, standing on the containment cell. She swayed and almost passed out.

"Steady on!" Sullivan cried, catching her.

"I'm alright," she said, wiping away her tears. "They made it – they are home!"

"Shut it down," Barker ordered. "All of it."

After ensuring the system was completely dismantled and all the evidence catalogued, the team clambered out from the carcass of the *Kraval*. Rigelle dropped down into the fresh mountain air. It was early evening already and the sun was lowering on the horizon.

"Oh, it feels good to be free!" she cried. The air was surprisingly still and snowflakes were gently falling around her. She felt reborn.

A slave to the job, Commander Barker was already on the

comms, calling down a shuttle from the *USS Endeavor* to collect them and the remains of the superweapon.

Couldn't he wait ten minutes?! Rigelle sighed. She walked with the team back to camp and helped pack it up. And then, she got her ten minutes after all as she waited in the golden sunset for their ride off this rock. She found herself next to K'Helem.

"Well," she said suddenly, breaking the silence like thin ice, "what will you do now, aside from shooting at Federation investigators and offering up your life as a sacrifice?"

K'Helem smirked down at her. "My, but you are a feisty little targ," she smiled mischievously. "I don't care what the others say, you're alright."

"Well?" Rigelle asked.

"Well..." K'Helem sighed, "now that I have verified the facts of the case, I believe I have a blood oath to fulfill," she said. "It is back to Kronos for me, where I am under Martok's orders to carry out justice...Klingon style."

Rigelle winced. Klingon justice almost always meant bloodshed by steel, but in this case, she felt it was justified. "Let me know if you need any investigative help," Rigelle said. "I could stretch my legs."

K'Helem took her in anew. "I will," she smiled. "How about you? What is your next case?"

Rigelle glanced up to see Commander Barker deep in conversation over his Communicator before he signed off and turned in her direction.

"I have a feeling I'm about to find out," she said.

K'Helem nodded, knowingly. "I'll leave you to it, then," she said, rising from her seat.

"Before you go," Rigelle said, "on a personal note, do you mind telling me how you shield your thoughts from me?"

K'Helem tapped her temple with a wink. "You'd think with all

the Betazeds out there, we Klingon investigators would have some telepathic resistance training, don't you?" She turned on her grin and strode away to playfully harass a certain Vulcan.

"Lieutenant," Barker called breathlessly. "That was headquarters. Guess what they wanted me to pass on to you?"

"An early retirement?" Rigelle sighed.

"Ha! Still got your sense of humor – I think you can skip that sickbay checkup when we get back to the ship," he chuckled.

"No, they've got another commendation for you – what is that 25 now? I've never known anyone to make 30 – you only have 5 more to go!"

"Relax, Barker," she rolled her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm afraid this job has become my life, whether I want it or not, and recent events have convinced me again of its merit – it isn't always dead bodies, mass graves, and unexploded ordinance – sometimes it is saving lives and rescuing the innocent." Barker failed to conceal his pleasure.

"Indeed it is," he said, drifting into memories for a moment and then made like he'd remembered something. "Oh, we've got our next assignment! A mining vessel in the Pertockian Nebula claims to have had a run-in with a Karemma sleeper ship which marooned his crew and took his vessel. He claims they were boarded by none other than the infamous Weyoun himself."

"But all the Weyoun clones were killed in the Dominion War," Rigelle objected.

"Were they?" Barker asked. "How do we know? We'll just have to..."

"Investigate, yeah, I know," Rigelle smiled.

"Well, it is in the name...Starfleet Investigative Division," Barker grinned.

Just then, the shuttle dropped from the sky into their campsite and saved Rigelle from more mental sparring with her mentor.

With one last look at the wasted mountains of this wasted world, she left the wreckage of the *Kraval* to the ravages of time and carried the burden of its offense with her back into the heavens. She knew in her heart, now more than ever, that she would continue to strive to right wrongs done in any and all names - done for any and all reasons. Her life's calling was to smooth out the wrinkles of injustice that attempted to dishevel the ancient truth that "all men...all beings are created equal...with liberty and justice for all." And for that she was made.