"WORMWOOD"
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# Wormwood

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INTRODUCTION: Perhaps the lone survivor of his ship's destruction, Lieutenant Peter Andrel crash-lands on an uncharted planet and stumbles upon the wreckage of a lost Starfleet vessel from the final days of the Dominion War. Searching the downed ship for a way home, he discovers a horrifying secret that threatens to make it his tomb.

Lieutenant Peter Andrel caught his breath on the edge of an ocean cliff looking down over the lost wreckage of an unknown Galaxy-class saucer, floating in the gentle waves. It was so surreal that it almost made the past couple days seem normal by comparison - almost.

He mentally reviewed his bizarre little nightmare, which had begun unannounced several days ago aboard his Science posting - the Nova-class Starship, *U.S.S. Dexter*. Andrel's commission had been winding down uneventfully to its last day before his scheduled leave. Early Tuesday morning the *Dexter* had nearly completed its survey of the Mumbandi System and only had a few more planets to catalogue. The ship crossed back through the comet belt inward bound, but then diverted to investigate some Tritanium fragments that popped up on the lateral scanners to starboard. Without warning, a massive explosion rocked through the ship, lacerating the hull and shredding the starboard engine!

The blast threw Andrel into a bulkhead and he struck his head hard on the duranium supports. It crumpled him to the deck like discarded laundry as shock bled through his concussion. His eyesight blurred. Outside a window, he thought he could make out the bodies of crewmembers tossed in the sea of debris blowing out from the side of the ship. Visions from the past mingled in the horror.

"Jem'Hadar Battleship off the port bow," he heard himself screaming. Flashbacks flooded his mind of his many campaigns through the valley of death. Terror drowned him. This was it! This was the time he was going to die!

A second tremendous explosion bucked the deck and knocked Andrel completely unconscious. How long, he didn't know, but when he woke, he found himself alone in an escape pod, adrift in space – without any idea how he had gotten there. His right temple was still tender from his collision with the bulkhead and he applied a medkit to relieve the concussion.

Of course, Andrel now recognized that trauma had invented the *Dexter*'s adversary - after all, the Dominion War was history - nothing more than a colossal monument. Although it still overshadowed his life, it stood four years now in the past, and there it remained, despite his nightmares persistent attempts to tear open the old wounds. Whatever had attacked them, it was an unknown hostile.

A review of the lifeboat's systems revealed the comms were destroyed and the thrusters were damaged, but the sensors worked well enough to locate an M-class planet less than 50 million kilometers from his position. It was Andrel's best chance of surviving alone out here in uncatalogued space.

"I hope there's room at the inn," he muttered, patting the hull of his pod fondly. Using all but the last gasp of the thrusters, he made the planet in the hour and landed hard in a deciduous forest, leaving behind a trail of broken tree limbs for a thousand meters.

"I've landed better punches," Andrel groaned, still strapped into his broken seat that had pinned him face-first into the deck. He wrestled out of the restraints and then clawed his way out of the boat, collapsing to the wooded grounds outside the smoking wreckage.

"It'll buff out!" he smirked, wiping a smudge off the battered hull, ignoring the tall red-barked trees that seemed displeased by his arrival, bending oppressively over the destruction of their meditation upon the central star. "What, it's just a joke!" he cried to the sullen rustle of the leaves in a stiff breeze. A bad habit, jesting was a symptom of how Andrel coped with the weight of anxiety during the Dominion War - making light of his circumstances brightened his outlook. It had gotten him through the War alright, so it couldn't be all bad!

"Doesn't look like anyone else was invited to this party," he groaned, reading the life-less scans of the near-environment with his tricorder. At least, no sentient life – as far as the tricorder could tell such things, anyways.

"Well, that's great!" he sighed. "Just when I've gotten used to the idea of a 'reception to follow', I wind up uninvited to my own shebang and marooned on this rock!" He tasted the bitter irony of his words and kicked a stone into his wrecked lifeboat.

"You heard me!" he yelled to the heavens. "I've somewhere to be!" This wasn't how this week was supposed to go – it shouldn't be happening – it couldn't be happening!

Suddenly, the tricorder lit up weakly, and Andrel read a faint Tritanium signature registering less than 50 kilometers east of his location. Perhaps it was another escape pod or some modern structure that lay in that direction – his best bet at getting a signal out to Starfleet or finding a transport home!

Packing some rations and a survival kit from the lifeboat, he set out through the woods to find the source. The going was hard at first through the undergrowth, but the forest gradually shifted to a sort of evergreen tree that grew tall but was clear of branches till about 3 meters up. Andrel made half the distance before night came and he set-

up camp in the utter darkness, lit only by the stars. The sky was so beautiful – he'd never seen one so pristine before.

"At least it's got good vibes," he joked, pretending he was reviewing a popular holiday destination. But it was true and the sound of unseen night birds cooing quickly lulled him asleep.

Darkness cradled him into black oblivion, but it soon gave way to a vision and he found himself standing wistfully on the Bridge of his first posting - the *U.S.S. Broadway*. He'd just finished scanning a nearby comet cutting across their patrol when the alarms went off. Before he could speak, the ship was shredded by the concussive force of powerful plasma weapons. The bridge sizzled with showering sparks and electrical discharges as it took a mortal blow. On screen, directly ahead, a massive Dominion battleship punched through the comet's tail and gazed triumphantly down on them.

He was going to die - Andrel knew he was going to die. But then like a large cat loses interest in its dying prey, the enemy vessel banked away indifferently and vanished. Andrel understood.

"We're already dead!" he gasped. The smell of hot alloys and the rush of evacuating air filled his senses. He tried to get up, but he couldn't move. A brilliant white light slowly swallowed the noise and chaos around him until he was completely engulfed by it. A few moments passed and then the light receded. Shapes moved in the white, and then he gradually made out the form of a woman passing through white curtains. It was Carol! She was wearing her wedding dress on the balcony overlooking the Arles sea on Pacifica. She was laughing and beckoning to him – her red hair flaring in an updraft from the fragrant ocean. "Come on, Peter…join me!" she called. Gorgeous waves crashed on the pure white sandy beaches below. They crashed louder… and louder!

Andrel woke with a start. It was early morning and it had only been a dream. A faint rain was drizzling around him and he scrambled to his feet, setting his jaw at the inclement weather. He looked up past the sky, his eyes trying to find home from this unknown wilderness.

"I'll find a way," he promised, digging out his Federation rations from his satchel and biting into a quick meal.

"I guess breakfast wasn't included," he called to the nearest tree, wincing his teeth over the hard, nutritional bar.

The hike was hard and long this time, but he'd almost made it to the location before night fell again. One more night on Starfleet rations and he rose early, setting out on the final leg of the trek. As the sun broke over the horizon, Andrel stumbled out of the woods and clambered down to the edge of a cliff only to pull up in shock at what he saw – an ocean! But more than that, a massive Galaxy-class saucer partially submerged in the waters just off the coast!

"How in heaven's…name," he gasped. The vessel looked mostly intact, but had clear signs of weathering and damage from a crash-landing. Questions flooded his mind. How had it gotten here? Were there any survivors? Was it one of the many ships still missing in action from the Dominion War?

It had been just over four years since the conclusion of that destructive conflict, but there were still many vessels unaccounted for. He'd have to see the registry to get some answers. Andrel's mind reeled – the dangers and hopes of the unknown equally pounding his head. He had to get inside, but even if he managed to enter its shell, what would he find inside the water-logged hull? It was unlikely that the comm system still worked! Perhaps there was an operational shuttle in the shuttle bay?

"Whatever other attractions you might serve up, please, no corpses," he pleaded, unable to get the idea out of his head. Luckily, he'd brought his respirator from the escape pod – the fusion powered device would make the journey to the ship and the search of its lower decks possible.

There was nothing for it – he was going for a swim. Hopefully, he'd find some answers, and if he was lucky, a way home as well.

It took an hour of hunting up and down the cliff to find a possible way down to the narrow strip of beach below, which was interrupted at intervals by rugged rock striking up into the sky like the jagged teeth of a Romulan eel. The cliff face was a pale sandstone-looking stone, which felt good gripped in one's hand, and Andrel carefully scampered down it to the firm, wet beach sand. The low clouds were not abating their migration overhead.

He searched up and down the beach looking for any evidence of survivors. No signs presented themselves.

"Well, if they survived that belly-flop, maybe they stayed on the ship," he shrugged.

Fitting his respirator carefully between his teeth, he took a few deep breaths through it, as he stared out at the massive saucer in the water. It looked to be about a kilometer out from the shore – he'd have to pace himself.

*It's just 20 laps at the Academy pool,* he shrugged to himself, remembering his instructor's insistence that swimming endurance would save his life one day. He hadn't believed it at the time – there was precious little water in space, but here he was proving the rule.

He cracked his neck a couple times, stretched, did a few squats and then jogged towards the waves.

The water was freezing! Andrel guessed it was around 14 degrees celsius. He fought the urge to retreat back to shore, knowing he had to wait out the shock and discomfort. Besides, given a few minutes, Federation uniforms had the impressive ability of adapting to very broad temperature ranges and environments. Already, he began to feel warmer and pressed further into the water, crouching down till it was up to his collar. Within a minute the freezing water had abated – the fabric of his uniform was serving like the ancient earth wetsuit Andrel had read about in primary school. A minute more, and he felt comfortably warm.

And then he dove – his emergency satchel dragged him back on the strap around his neck, but he pulled it down after him. He could see the gravelly sand and rock below him moving past his strong strokes through the water. The bottom sank gradually away from him until it vanished suddenly off a sea cliff into sightless grey waters below. A moment of panic flooded Andrel. Seeing the bottom had been grounding, but now the infinite "fog" of the ocean disoriented him. He fought the sensation he was sinking – sinking down into the crushing blackness of a never-ending depth.

He closed his eyes and remembered the clear water he and Carol had dived on Pacifica. Now, here he was a few weeks later, diving into an unknown ocean, willing her to be with him. He almost thought he could hear her playfully telling him to "look up, puddleglum!" He did so now and gazed up four meters to the faint light reflecting off the surface waves of this alien ocean. It helped.

This water was much cloudier than the clear seas of Pacifica! Yet, he could tell he was drifting along in a slow current. He took a few good, deep breaths through the respirator, calming his nerves with the steady supply of pressurized oxygen. Pulling his tricorder from his satchel he activated the pressure reading (for depth management) and homing directions on the wreck.

*Press on, Lieutenant!* He ordered himself, trying not to imagine what marine life might patrol the coast of this unknown planet. He swam forward with his tricorder held out in front of him, registering the distance he was covering and his direction. He'd covered about 600m, when he thought he heard a sound to port, but before he could turn, something struck him hard. The blow almost knocked him unconscious and when he snapped back, he saw his tricorder's blinking lights sinking down into the abyssal depths.

"No!" he blew through his mask. But before he could swim after it, a massive dark object sank down in pursuit of the shimmering device. Andrel's blood turned cold.

Whatever that "thing" was, it wasn't worth getting to know better. With renewed energy, Andrel swam forward like his life depended on it. Now disoriented without direction, he felt like hours passed, blindly swimming into the murk.

Suddenly, a dark shape appeared ahead of him. Andrel fought down his panic, as he braced for a massive mouth of teeth to focus into view – the last thing he'd ever see. But nothing happened.

The creature seemed to be stationary. With a wave of relief, he realized the dark shape might be the Saucer! Had he reached it finally? He pressed forward cautiously, and with each stroke forward the object grew in size. It seemed to recede inward like a cave. Had he gotten turned around and now was heading back to shore? With a few more kicks, it became clearer. Suddenly, he recognized it – it was the Starboard impulse engine of a Galaxy class starship! The outlet was massive – multiple decks tall! He gripped the wall and pulled himself upright until he was "standing" on the lower inside surface of the engine.

*There aren't many who can say they've stood here!* He thought. It was breathtaking! But he didn't come to dive this wreck for fun and he

considered his situation. He'd have to press on – there was no access to the ship's interior through the fusion reactors of the impulse engine!

If the ship still had power, he could have used his tricorder to interface and open external hatches on the dorsal face of the saucer. But he'd lost it to the depths and the ship was not likely to have any juice besides emergency battery power for primary functions.

He figured his best bet was to explore the saucer's underbelly, as it had likely gotten damaged in the crash and might have some breaks in the hull. He pulled himself down, passed the lip of the impulse engine, and slowly made his way deeper along the underside of the saucer. The light grew darker and his respirator adjusted to the growing water pressure. He swam under the first ring of intact escape pods, barely discerning their raised edges in the growing gloom. A few meters later, he couldn't see anything ahead anymore. Andrel pulled to a stop, pressing his hand against the cold tritanium of the second ring of escape pods above as he considered what to do.

*A light, you dunderhead!* He scolded his brain. Rummaging in his satchel, he felt the small oval object he was looking for and removed it. With a gentle squeeze, a powerful lance of light shot out into the darkness from the beacon. He pointed it above and ahead, revealing twisted shapes of hull, gouged open from impact. Or were they the open wounds of battle?

Andrel was close – a dozen meters and he'd reach the nearer hole that sank into the dark interior of the ship right around the ring of windows. He swam that distance quickly and shone his light up to reveal the flooded interior that had been someone's quarters at one time. Some of the furniture was floating up against the ceiling. No bodies, thankfully!

Around the fractured edges of the hull, Andrel noticed what looked like tendrils or vines that had grown in through the hull breaches. They were translucent. He shone his light over them, following them down

through the water to where they sank away into the depths. It appeared to be some sort of massive aquatic plant, rooted on the bottom of the sea or drifting nomadically in the currents. Well, now it had gotten entangled into the ship unfortunately.

*Focus!* He told himself sternly and drowned his curiosity for the time-being. Gently, he pulled himself up into the interior of the ship, careful to avoid the sharp edges of the multi-layered hull.

His movement disturbed the stagnant water inside and a fine layer of organic algae, or something like it, rose from the floor in faint clouds through the beam of his beacon. His light fell on the quarter's disheveled ornaments of landscape paintings, PADDS, articles of clothing, a flower vase, and bed sheets – all adrift in the water. He shone the beam across the room, looking for a tricorder. He felt so vulnerable without one, but his search was fruitless. The water was getting cloudy, now that he was disturbing all the algae which covered the floors and walls.

On the wall, a plaque commemorated a fencing tournament aboard the *U.S.S. Vital*. Andrel searched his memory and settled on a vague recollection of a missing Federation vessel from the last few months of the Dominion War. Presumed lost in combat, the wreckage was never found, and it was still an open case with the Starfleet Investigative Division. Andrel looked around the quarters.

*So this is where you ended up,* he thought. *But what happened to you?* He shook the mystery from his mind and focused on his own problem – finding a way up to the shuttlebay.

*Further in and further up,* he told himself. Cautiously, he swam to the door, which didn't open at his approach. He let his light float beside him and fit his fingers into the groove. With all his strength, he pried at it, forcing them open. Darkness beyond. He retrieved his beacon and aimed it ahead.

The light shone off something floating outside the door. He looked up and spat his respirator out in terror, flailing back into the murky water of the quarters. There before him, the lifeless body of a crewman drifted partially in through the door from the corridor outside! His grey, misty eyes staring straight into Andrel's. The horror of it struck the Lieutenant like a body-blow. Slowly, his mind regained sanity – he found he was up against the far wall, and he suddenly realized in a panic his respirator was gone. He'd been holding his breath! He desperately swam for his light, which he'd dropped at the door, shining up at the corpse, lighting it in an ungodly way. He clutched at it and shone it over the floor, hunting for his respirator. Where was it? He frantically sifted among the discarded PADDS on the floor. He could feel the oxygen burning up in his lungs.

There! – it was hiding in the shadow of the corner of the room! He retrieved it, blowing his last remaining air through it to clear it of water. And then, glorious oxygen filled his lungs again!

After a few deep breaths had restored his nerves, he considered the ghostly corpse, still staring at him from just beyond the door. It was a Trill crewman, judging by the speckles running along his temple. Andrel set his teeth and glanced around the room for a stick or pole of some kind. On the floor by the desk, he found a Bajoran staff – probably an heirloom of whomever had lived here. Andrel grabbed it and swam back to the door. With the staff, he carefully pushed the body out of the way. Cautiously, he poked his head out of the quarters and shone his light both directions down the outside corridor. Aside from the pale floating corpse, it appeared empty save for damaged conduits and debris.

He pulled himself into the hallway. He was in! But now what?

*Get out of the water!* He thought. That meant higher decks. A Jeffries tube would do the trick, and there should be one a few corridors down from him to the right, if he remembered his Galaxy-class blueprints

from the Academy. Holding his beacon tightly in his left hand, he tried to use the staff in his right hand to push himself along the hallway, but he was weightless and it always pivoted him off balance. More than once he found himself upside down, crashing into a bulkhead.

*I'll have to leave the staff,* he thought in frustration. It had been a source of comfort in his hand in case he ran into any more floating corpses.

He was almost at the point of dropping it when something bit around his ankle from behind like an icy cold vice. Andrel screamed a cloud of bubbles through his respirator. The iron grip dragged him back so violently, his beacon and staff wrenched out of his hands and sank to the deck. Andrel clutched at his respirator to keep it from falling away from him too. The light sank to the deck and cast its beam to the ceiling. Andrel looked behind frantically, trying to see what was grappling with him, but his eyesight had been blinded by the light.

He reached down, flailing for anything to hold or grab onto. His hands found the tail end of the Bajoran staff, and he just managed to grip it before it passed out of reach. Holding it firmly with both hands, Andrel struck out into the darkness. He felt it strike something behind him. He lashed out again and again with all his strength, until suddenly, the grip relaxed and slipped away. Frantically, Andrel swam forward, reaching for his beacon. He clutched it and shone the light back down the corridor, prepared to see some ferocious marine monster preparing to charge after him. But there was nothing! Only the still-dead corpse of the Trill crewman floating down past the entrance to the quarters. That did not comfort him. He sensed someone, or something, watching him. It was a very tangible feeling, like someone breathing on the back of his neck.

Where was a tricorder when you needed one! Andrel cautiously turned and swam, half-crawling forward, glancing over his shoulder every few moments. He made it to the Jeffries tube hatch and manually

pulled it open. Through the small opening, he entered and shone his beacon up the tall column of rungs. It rose several decks to a closed hatch. So far, so good. Things were finally looking up – literally!

He pulled himself upwards along the rungs, rapidly rising to the hatch, which he manually opened to reveal water on the other side. He swam through and continued rising up through the decks, almost as quickly as a turbolift. Suddenly, his light shone off a change in the water. He was nearing the surface! In a moment, he was bobbing in the air, a few rungs down from a deck access hatch. He climbed out of the water onto the ledge, feeling the warm liquid drain from his uniform. Removing his respirator, Andrel took a few shallow breaths of the stale air until he was satisfied it wasn't harmful.

He crawled over to the hatch, weak against gravity after the exertion of swimming so long. Squeezing the water from his jet-black hair, he used his remaining strength to pry the hatch open.

"Come on! Come on!" he groaned. It protested, but finally gave and he scrambled through to collapse onto the dry deck, panting in the stagnant air. He lay there for a few minutes, catching his breath.

"No rest for the weary," he chided himself, knowing if he lay there any longer, he might not get up for hours. Slowly, he crawled to his feet and stood up, uncaring for the sloshy mess he was making. He turned his beacon ahead and then he froze.

Dead bodies littered the corridor. Andrel instinctively covered his mouth and stepped back, only to trip over the limp arm of an Andorian Lieutenant sprawled out behind him. He nearly fell but collapsed into a nearby bulkhead and shook with horror. He passed his light over the entire corridor. Starfleet personnel lay haphazardly cast on the ground – twisted in unnatural poses.

What had happened to them all? He took a dreadful step nearer to the Andorian. If he had to guess, he'd say they'd all been dead for some time. All their skin was pale with some slight signs of decay, but they looked strangely mummified. Their uniforms looked old and worn, as if years had passed.

What caught his attention most, however, was that none of them appeared to have died from impact-related injuries – there were energy scorch marks, precise gashes from bladed weapons, and fractures delivered to them by someone or something – not the physics of a crash. That changed everything! Perhaps the killers were still aboard? Andrel's breath became very still. He listened for the slightest sound, but only the moaning and groaning of the hull in the ocean below came to his ears.

He fished the emergency phaser out of his satchel and subconsciously set it to kill.

"Better safe than sorry," he muttered and gingerly moved down the hallway, stepping carefully over the corpses, trying his best not to disturb them.

Suddenly, he heard a rustling sound behind him. He whirled around, but not before being tackled to the ground by a dark blur. Pinned to the deck, blows pummeled him and he held his arms up to protect his face.

"Stop!...I'm…a friend!" he tried to get out between punches to his face. He couldn't see the attacker clearly. Then he remembered the phaser. Instinctively he wrestled it up against the assailant's body and discharged. A beam of high energy struck them full in the chest and flung them off, collapsing to the deck at Andrel's feet.

Shaken and recovering from the shock to his head, Andrel sat up on the floor, found his beacon and shone it over his attacker. He gasped! It was the Andorian he'd inspected earlier! But he had been dead! Smoke

was still rising from the fresh scorch to his uniform. Well, he certainly was dead now.

"What the…" Andrel muttered in disbelief. "You were dead! I saw you!" A wave of remorse flooded him. Had he just killed a fellow Starfleet officer? It seemed so. The Andorian must have been unconscious somehow – maybe injured, and he came back to consciousness when Andrel tripped over him? Had he been mad or insane from the trauma of whatever had happened here and attacked who he thought was an enemy?

Perhaps. Whatever the case, there was no saving him now. Andrel suddenly felt the sense someone was watching him again.

"I really need a tricorder!" he growled in anger at himself, scrambling back to his feet. He searched the bodies in the corridor, but here were no Starfleet devices of any kind – not even Communicators. What had happened here? He noticed a white dust on the uniforms of the dead and on his hands also. It reminded him a little of fine powdered flour. And as he shuffled around, he could see it floating in the air. Was it some sort of weapon residue?

Andrel raised his phaser and cautiously moved ahead down the corridor. He'd make for sickbay on his way to the shuttlebay, and maybe find some answers there. It was slow going. Around every corner he found more corpses. Carefully, he stepped over them, desperately trying not to glance down into their faces. But no matter how hard he tried his eyes were pulled into their sightless gazes. That walk was the grimmest chore of his life, but at long last, he found another Jeffries tube relay. He climbed it up to deck six. The same morbid scene of carnage met his gaze here.

"Steady on!" he told himself, rubbing warmth back into his arms, as the cold, dead bodies seemed to be seeping into his soul. "Sickbay is just around the corner."

He rallied his resolve and continued his march, hoping not to disturb the dreamless sleep of the dead. Finally, he saw the doors ahead with the familiar markings, but piled up against it were half a dozen bodies – as if someone had stacked them there to barricade the door.

"Right!" Andrel choked, setting his beacon down. He closed his eyes and willed his weak stomach to hold back the gag in his throat as he shoved the dead aside, shivering as he heard them collapse to the floor on either side of the doors like dead weight. He felt like vomiting and frantically wedged his fingers into the seam between the doors to take his mind off what he had done. Straining against their resistance, Andrel pried them a few inches apart and then with a final surge of energy, they gave way, opening wide enough for him to squeeze through. He entered sickbay and stopped short.

A glow-lamp sat on a nearby console and food rations were stacked beside it. There were no dead in here, which seemed odd, considering the rest of the ship was strewn with them. But before he could give it much thought, his eyes settled on a tricorder on a medical cart near the main operating table. He reached out for it, and as his hands clasped around it, he thought he saw a shimmer in the air to his left. But before he could even shed a thought, something materialized next to him. It knocked his phaser from his hand. Then, a strong, merciless grip seized him by the throat and lifted him into the air. He looked down into the face of his attacker and his blood drained from his face. A Jem'Hadar commander! His reptilian horns and scaly skin made his face glimmer like a fluorescent demon in the glow-lamp.

"I do not believe I have killed you yet," the Jem'Hadar growled. Andrel fought to speak through the vice around his throat. He only managed some croaking words.

"The…war…is over," he managed before he felt consciousness slipping away. A dark tunnel collapsed in on him, but before it snuffed

his thoughts away, he felt the grip easing up and he crumpled to the floor gasping for air.

"You speak, Human?" the Jem'Hadar growled. Andrel gulped air, but realized he was nodding.

"Say something or I'll kill you," the Jem'Hadar hissed, pulling out a knife for emphasis.

"Tachyon bursts are cool," he heard himself croak – where that came from, he had no idea! The Jem'Hadar actually smiled.

"What is your name, Human?" he asked.

"Peter," Andrel answered, rubbing his throat and leaning up against a medical console. "Lieutenant Peter Andrel."

"Peter," the Jem'Hadar muttered suspiciously. "How did you come here?"

"My ship was attacked," Andrel coughed, glancing towards the door, weighing his options. "massive explosions…ripped our engines apart and we suffered…a catastrophic hull breach. I escaped in a lifeboat and landed on this planet. Finding this crashed ship…I am looking for a shuttle." The Jem'Hadar swayed noticeably at the words and sized him up for a long moment.

"Did you see who attacked you?" he said dangerously.

"No, it happened too fast," Andrel muttered, clearing his throat and staring weakly at his open hands. "I was in my quarters."

"If knowledge is any consolation, it was I who attacked your ship," the Jem'Hadar said evenly. Andrel looked up slowly.

"How dare you," he growled. "Do you think you'll get away with…"

"Peace!" the Jem'Hadar bellowed, raising his knife. "My attack upon you was years and years ago." Andrel swallowed his anger.

"What does that mean?" he asked dangerously. The Commander seemed to appreciate his bravery.

"It means, Human, that I seeded this space with subspace mines during the second year of the Founder's Campaign," he said slowly. "And your ship seems to have fallen prey to my snare like a Cardassian fly untimely caught in an abandoned Palukoo web."

Andrel sank back down. It made sense. The Allies were still dealing with unexploded mines left over from the war. He rubbed his temples as the news filtered through his mind. How many of his fellow crew had died because of weapons left over from a concluded conflict? Had any more survived? What a tragedy!

"I believe your story," the Jem'Hadar grunted at last, lowering the knife and retrieving Andrel's phaser. "I never would have thought I'd be happy to hear a human voice, but here I am…and here you are!" He strode to the door and pulled it shut. Andrel took the few moments to choose his words carefully.

"You know the war is over," he said uneasily, "the war between the Alpha and Gamma Quadrants?"

"I do not," the Jem'Hadar answered evenly. He considered Andrel carefully. "I am going to trust you, Human, because I need you – but you should know if you try to cross me, I will kill you." He pointed the knife at Andrel before holstering it at his side.

Trust him? Andrel wondered if the Jem'Hadar was toying with him, but what choice did he have but to play along?

"Very well," he said half-heartedly. "And you are?"

"You may call me Kormet'iklan," The Jem'Hadar answered, straightening his shoulders. Andrel tried sounding it out, but it kept getting garbled in his mouth.

"How about I call you Kormet?" he asked. The Jem'Hadar shrugged.

"You may call me a phase-inverter for all I care," he replied, pulling out his knife. "Just don't call me coward." Andrel fought the childish urge to shout it out.

"Wouldn't dream of it," he heard himself say. "How did you come here?" Kormet gestured at the hull around them with his knife.

"It was our minefield that caught this vessel," he answered matter-of-factly. "But it proved resilient to capture and in the ensuing battle, my ship and this vessel were both heavily damaged – pulled into orbit of this planet, we crashed into the sea. The Federation ship stayed afloat, but our ship took on water and began to sink. I ordered my men to swim for this vessel. We boarded it. We fought its crew. We killed them all in combat – well, some. I admit there were many executions."

"Oh?" Andrel answered with a cutting edge. Kormet shrugged.

"I was…foolish," he grunted. "And you are well in your right to say so. At the time, I was blinded by my loyalty. The war was going badly and I decided that I would do my part to aid the Founder's cause – and to me this meant that I would cull as many animal races from the Federation as I could."

Andrel fought down a surge of visceral hatred. It was hard letting go the animosity he felt towards an enemy responsible for so many of his friends' deaths during the war. He wrestled the emotions back and took

a deep breath. The war was over. It was past. Now was a time for healing, not nursing old wounds.

"How long ago was that?" he asked hoarsely, filtering his emotion through the moment.

"I've lost count of time here," Kormet replied. "We downed this ship in 2373, your time."

"That would be…four years ago," Andrel commented. Kormet stopped in his tracks and stared.

"Four years?" he grunted. "It felt much longer." In the awkward silence, Andrel noticed suddenly that the Jem'Hadar did not have a Ketracel White delivery tube, which always jabbed into the side of their necks.

"How have you survived without the White?" he asked curiously. Kormet glanced instinctively at his chest.

"It seems I overcame my need for it," he said matter-of-factly. "It was painful – be assured – and I must have died, for I slipped into unconsciousness, but somehow I came back." Andrel nodded knowingly.

"There have been a few recorded cases of your kind surviving withdrawal," he said, "but it is rare – I could provide you with the research if you would like to…" He stopped under the unflinching gaze of the Jem'Hadar who clearly was not interested in an academic discussion about Ketracel White.

Andrel awkwardly glanced around the room and wondered if there were other Jem'Hadar watching him from behind their shrouds – That would explain the menace of unfriendly eyes observing him since he'd entered the ship.

"Where's your legion?" he asked. Kormet glanced up with fire in his eyes.

"I am all that is left," he growled.

"What happened to the others?"

"They were killed by the enemy," the Jem'Hadar answered.

"What enemy?" Andrel asked, uneasily. He certainly didn't want to find himself standing in league with a Jem'Hadar commander against fellow officers, a Federation ally, or a disgruntled third party that had no quarrel with him. Kormet considered him carefully.

"You do not know?" he asked incredulously. Andrel raised his hands in frustration.

"I don't understand anything that is going on!" he cried. "I just need to get out of this ship, off this planet, and get home! But can I? No! At every turn, I'm nearly drowned, frightened to a heart attack, mauled, and choked to death!"

Kormet seemed to be examining Andrel's reaction religiously. "I have observed," he said slowly, "that humans act irrationally when they are frightened. Are you frightened, Human?"

Andrel waved his hand dismissively. "Sure," he sighed and then met the Jem'Hadar's eyes. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I am scared."

"It is okay, Human," Kormet said in a softer voice. "I too have learned about fear…in my prison here. I had not known it before, but here…in this hell, I am paying for my crimes. Perhaps I can atone for what I have done by helping you escape this prison that I have made for myself."

Andrel wasn't following the Jem'Hadar's personal sililoquy but seeing the imposing figure of the Commander wax theological turned his blood cold. What had happened here to result in a Jem'Hadar speaking of "atonement"? Kormet straightened his shoulder and nodded to himself.

"I will do it, or I will die," he said, "And I will do it now." He reached down and pulled Andrel to his feet.

"Let us take a walk!" he said and returning to the door he carefully pried it open. Kormet picked up his Kar'takin, the Jem'Hadar's shock-blade, and cautiously looked out into the corridor before waving Andrel to follow him through. But he stopped Andrel just before he crossed the threshold.

"Here, take this," he growled evenly, returning Andrel's phaser. "It has been too long since I used an energy weapon – I have become accustomed to my blades and will have no use for this." Then he turned suddenly and stared fanatically into Andrel's eyes. "If you shoot me with it, make sure you've set it to maximum," he said. "I will surely live long enough to kill you otherwise."

"Uh…okay," Andrel replied confusedly. "Sure, I guess." It just felt good to have his phaser back in his hand. He guiltily considered for a moment doing just what Kormet had advised, but he shook himself free of the thought and turned on his light. Together they stepped out into the corridor, pausing long enough to take in the scene of death. The bodies of the dead lay strewn about haphazardly.

"Where are we going?" Andrel asked.

"We need to make it to the fourth deck," Kormet whispered, cautiously stepping over the dead.

"You mean the main shuttlebay?" Andrel inquired. Kormet raised his finger to his mouth dramatically.

"Yes," he whispered. "I have seen serviceable shuttles there."

"Why have you not used them to leave before now?" Andrel asked in surprise.

"I never made it far enough to try," Kormet replied evenly.

"But why?" Andrel asked frustratedly. "What aren't you telling me?" Suddenly they heard a shuffling sound ahead and Kormet froze. Andrel realized the sound was behind them as well.

"Look to your vanguard!" Komet hissed without turning around. Andrel confusedly glanced back the way they'd come and shone his light around. He froze. The bodies piled around the Sickbay doors were moving!

"What the…hell" he began, stumbling into Kormet's unmoving rigid back.

"Steady!" Kormet roared, posturing defensively with his Kar'takin. Andrel didn't hear him. He was drowned in horror as the silhouetted shapes of half-a-dozen Starfleet officers writhed up from the deck and jerked erect like puppets, spasmodically lurching on their feet. Andrel's adrenaline kicked down his urge to faint as the lolling heads of the decrepit corpses bobbed with every motion of their poorly coordinated bodies.

"Oh…hell!" Andrel whimpered.

"Shoot them!" Kormet growled. But Andrel was deaf to the Jem'Hadar, and he nearly died when the corpses surged forward,

shuffling off the walls of the corridor – falling, crawling, writhing forward – dead, lifeless eyes – arms outstretched to grab him. Before he could respond, a dozen hands tore at his face, and throat, and limbs. He heard himself scream as the sound of hungrily clacking jaws and grinding teeth filled his ears. He strained against the bony grip on his right wrist – wet with slime and torn skin! The stench of death and decay filled his lungs with every hyperventilating breath.

His vision filled with emotionless, rotting faces and their dead, milky eyes, bulging at him in sightless observation. Terror exploded through Andrel's brain, draining newfound horror into his soul! He lost all sense of consciousness in his mad, mindless state as a new surge of adrenaline kicked in. Somehow, he instinctively rotated his phaser around, even as the bony fingers of several decrepit hands cut into his arm, drawing fresh blood. Just when he felt his windpipe crushing under their unrelenting grasp, he fired! The beam caught the two closest bodies and flung them back into the horde, buying Andrel just enough time to aim and fire like mad from where he'd collapsed – striking deck-plating, walls, and even the ceiling of the corridor in his mad panic, but at least he'd managed to kill every last thing that moved, twitched, or so much as flinched – striking them down in terrifying poses along the corridor. Andrel stared in horror and shock at their lifeless, twisted bodies. Everything had grown dull and distant – noises thickened and the light blurred. But then, slowly, the sounds of struggling brought him back to his senses.

"A little help…Human!" Kormet bellowed. Andrel whipped around to see the Jem'Hadar locked against the corridor wall by the inhuman strength of 5 or 6 cadavers. Andrel didn't hesitate this time. He aimed and fired. The beam knocked the closest three to the floor. That was all Kormet needed. With two powerful thrashes, he severed the spinal cords of the remaining corpses and stumbled down to the center of the corridor, breathing heavily in the sudden silence.

"There!" Kormet announced. "That should keep these ones down for a few minutes at least!"

"Who…what...are they?" Andrel gasped, unable to stand on his quivering legs. He absently bled from his right forearm and from shallow gashes along his neck. Kormet opened his mouth to speak, but before the Jem'Hadar could answer, dreadful sounds returned from the direction of sickbay. Andrel dragged himself away from them, along the deck until he could prop himself against the wall. His heart was pounding out of his chest and his skull was ringing. A shuffling, scratching, dragging sound approached and from around the corridor, the Andorian officer that had earlier attacked Andrel appeared, leading a procession of decrepit, rotting corpses reeling towards them.

"Shoot!" Kormet urged. Andrel fought his will through his trembling hands. He saw himself aim and fire, and he didn't stop firing until a dozen new corpses lay strewn at his feet. But even as he finished, he was suddenly aware that the cadavers from before were beginning to convulse again! They were struggling up from under the bodies of the new ones that had fallen over them!

"Im...possible!" Andrel gasped. He aimed and fired at each one in turn, but even as he finished with the last one, the Andorian at his feet began to twitch his fingers and his arm slowly stretch along the deck after the Lieutenant's boots.

Andrel raised his phaser's setting to "vaporize" and fired. In a blur of writhing energy, the Andorian vanished, leaving an unpleasant burning odor in the air.

"You mustn't do that!" Kormet barked. "You must conserve your energy for what is coming!"

"What is…coming?" Andrel yelled. "What *is* coming, Kormet? What has happened here? How is this possible? Answer me!" Kormet shook his head.

"I do not know," he said, genuinely perplexed. "It began a few weeks after we won this vessel. We were holding it as a prize for the Dominion…and that was when the dead of those we killed came back to life!"

"What, just like that?" Andrel asked incredulously.

"Truly," Kormet replied. "We fought them off for months until we drained our weapons. But it was all to no purpose. There were twelve of us against a thousand – and none of them remained dead! Finally, we devised a plan to reach an intact shuttle and escape. With our blades, we fought our way to the shuttlebay. But there we were overwhelmed and my men perished – I alone survived. And I have managed to survive these many years – but barely – only venturing out from sickbay when in need of food and supplies."

An awkward silence settled upon them – Andrel first felt a little sorry for Kormet, but then he remembered it was he and his men who had butchered this crew in the first place! It did seem a sort of justice to be trapped in a prison of your own making by those that you have murdered.

But what a bizzare horror! No story his grandfather had ever told around the campfire could have prepared him for the terror he was feeling now. It had to be a dream! Surely, he'd slipped and hit his head and this was all just a torturous nightmare.

"Carol," he whispered, pressing his fingers into his eyes. "Carol!" Her name steadied his mind. In a flash, he saw her, running along the beach, laughing as he chased her into the queenly glory of the sun, setting, as it seemed, right at her feet. She was engulfed in its warm,

resplendent embrace and a joyful hope had filled Andrel that this woman would soon be his. And he remembered what he had said – unguarded and unabashed: "I will make you my very own angel!" It sounded so silly now, but there on Pacifica, it had been more real and true than the cold hard deck he was lying on now.

"You have a woman?" Kormet asked, breaking into his thoughts. Andrel startled into the Jem'Hadar's piercing gaze. He hesitated, as a man may who does not wish a clean and sacred thought to be handled by blood-soaked hands. But then, against his misgivings, he nodded in defeat.

"Yes," he said. "Her name is Carol. We're getting married in two days – on Pacifica." Kormet did not blink or nod – he simply stared until Andrel thought his misgivings had been correct. But then the Jem'Hadar spoke.

"We Jem'Hadar do not join," he said, distantly, "but I have always been curious about the experience as I have observed the strength of what you call 'love' and what it drives your people to do." He shifted uncomfortably before continuing. "In the war, I killed many lovers," he said. "And always, they did not beg for their own lives, but offered their lives in the place of those they had joined – those they truly… 'loved' as you might say." Andrel was not sure what to say. The horror of what Kormet was saying seemed equally balanced by the depth of his observations. Kormet continued.

"On the day I took this ship and executed its crew, I asked a Starfleet Lieutenant – not much younger than you – why he pleaded for the life of a nearby woman, instead of for his own. He replied, 'greater love has no man than to give his life for another.'" Kormet paused and the air hung heavy with words. "What he said as he met his death has haunted me these many years," Kormet concluded. "So, I envy your love for this Kar-ol, Human, and I swear to you that you will see her again."

Again, Andrel didn't know what to say and he was almost grateful that they were interrupted by the approaching sound of scraping bodies across the floor. Andrel startled back to his senses and crawled to his knees as the corpses in the corridor spasmed and jerked slowly awake again.

"We must keep moving!" Kormet ordered – he reached down and dragged Andrel upright, steadying him against the wall. "Can you run?" he asked.

"I think so," Andrel coughed.

"Good man," Kormet smiled. "You've already lasted longer than I expected." But then he pressed his face into Andrel's. "You must use your phaser better – it will not last forever!" The Jem-Hadar turned and led away down the corridor and Andrel staggered after him, weakly finding his stride. In a dozen yards or so, they found a vertical Jefferies tube and Kormet opened the hatch above. Behind them, the scraping, shuffling sound of the undead continued its approach.

"You first, Human!" Kormet gestured up the tube. Andrel didn't look twice. He jumped and scrambled up the rungs, madly rushing up the tube. He could hear Kormet slashing away behind him. Andrel reached the hatch to the tube-junction and pried it open, poking his head through, straight into the horrific gaze of a corpse, lying face-down on the deck plate. He ducked back and almost fell down the Jefferies tube, catching himself on a rung painfully. He hung there, hesitating, waiting for a dead hand to reach down after him.

"Move!" Kormet bellowed from below. Andrel took a breath and leapt up through the hatch, flashing his phaser wildly. But nothing happened – the corpse of the young science officer remained motionless.

He scrambled to his feet just as Kormet launched up into the junction and slammed the hatch down over the tube. As he locked it, Andrel

could already hear the scratching and pounding of the undead on the other side. After a few seconds, it subsided and then came the sound of shuffling, falling, and thudding to the deck below. He winced at each sound. It was dreadful and disgusting. But then he began to wonder.

"It's almost like they turn on and off somehow," he muttered to himself. In that moment, he suddenly remembered his tricorder. He'd been in too much shock and panic to remember it before. He pulled it from his waist and began to scan the corpse at his feet, looking for irregularities. But he found nothing, aside from what you'd expect to find in a corpse. This officer had neck trauma that looked to be natural – probably from the battle or the impact.

"What are you doing, Human?" Kormet asked, rising from where he'd been crouching, regaining his strength.

"Scanning for irregularities," Andrel answered absently.

"It is a waste of time," Kormet replied. "We must push on while we have time!" The Jem'Hadar pried open the doors to the corridor outside and poked his head through. He listened carefully before gesturing Andrel after him. "Let's move," he whispered.

Andrel followed him into the dark passage, scanning his light over the walls and ground. They were getting close to the shuttlebay. But Kormet suddenly raised his hand to stop their progress. A shuffling sound approached from around the corner and Kormet backed up, bracing himself in the center of the corridor. Andrel raised his phaser, peeking around the tall broad-shouldered Jem'Hadar. He left his tricorder open to scan. The sound distracted Kormet.

"I told you it is a waste of time!" he growled.

"I'm only recording what happens," Andrel replied. "We may learn something to our advantage!"

Kormet shook his head and muttered, "Humans!"

But before he could add more, a writhing mass of dead Starfleet officers stumbled and surged around the corner ahead – their heads lolling side-to-side as they stretched out their arms unnaturally towards the unlikely team. Andrel let them have it. His phaser strikes pushed the first wave back, but more and more flooded the corridor, climbing and crawling over the fallen. Kormet and Andrel surrendered inch by inch of the corridor until they were up against the corridor's termination. It was a basic related rates problem – the number of undead pouring into the corridor was simply too great for him to keep up with phaser strikes. He set his phaser to a wide-beam, hoping to drive them all away with a wall of energy. He fired – the blast did nothing – and then the corpses reached Kormet. The Jem'Hadar swung his Kar'takin – left, right – lashing out with powerful blows. Bodies piled up around him, but in only a matter of seconds, he was overwhelmed by the sheer press of the undead that dragged him to the deck. Luckily, this had given Andrel time to reset his phaser and now he lashed out, striking the cadavers off Kormet. More and more appeared around the corridor. They were overwhelmed!

"If you…are going to be…resourceful, Human…now would be the time!" Kormet grunted as he grappled with the incredible strength of the dead. In desperation, Andrel set his phaser to overload, holding it close as it built up to maximum – and then, he threw it – bouncing it off the far wall and beyond the corner where the undead were coming from. A terrific explosion shook the deck, throwing Andrel and Kormet to the ground. This time, the Lieutenant lost consciousness for a few seconds, but slowly he and the Jem'Hadar picked themselves back up. Kormet grunted.

"I'm not certain whether to congratulate you or knock your head," he said, drawing his knife and handing it to Andrel. "Things are going to get more interesting without that phaser."

Andrel took the knife, feeling defeated. There was simply no way they were going to get through this with a knife and melee weapon. Kormet nodded down the corridor.

"Quick," he whispered, "before they wake!" They crawled over the piles of the dead until they reached the other end and passed where the detonated phaser had scorched and mangled the deck plating. Almost on cue, the corpses were already twitching back alive. Dread filled Andrel's senses – there was simply no point in going further if this knife was all he had to protect himself. He clutched at his tricorder and read the data that he'd captured. He shuffled a little slower as he tried to understand the bizarre readings.

"Proto-glutamate…and plant-based hormones?" he muttered. "From where?" As he passed a dead Bolian Ensign on the deck, he scanned the body. The results were extraordinary.

"This body's spine is intertwined with a fibrous tissue," he called after Kormet, adaptively scanning along the corpse's back. A stream of hormones was being released from the corpse into the air and a sea of responding hormones were floating to it – invisible in the air. It was communication! This was some form of complex hormonal "modem"! This was an intelligence!

He scanned deeply. It looked like the parasitic grafted tissue proceeded from some sort of spore that had seeded in the initial wounds of the cadavers – of course! The white dust Andrel had seen covering everything in the corridors! These spores had landed on the corpses and seeded the tissue growth into the nervous system of the host! But where had the spores come from? And how were the parasitic nervous systems being controlled so precisely. He scanned the air and then down below them as many decks as he could see.

"Some sort of central nervous system?" he muttered, reading an incrementally increasing concentration of spores and hormone traffic the lower he scanned into the ship. But from where, exactly?

Suddenly, Andrel remembered the tendrils he'd seen growing into the Saucer from the bottom of the sea. Yes, that had to be it! Could this be some sort of semi-intelligent, macro-plant life-form – perhaps even a floral version of something like a Terran jellyfish?

"A communal intelligence!" he gasped. It had probably reacted to the disturbance of ships crashing on top of its habitat by investigated the objects, penetrating the hulls and overtaking them – commandeering any biological tissues it found inside – as a defense mechanism!

And that was why the undead crew of the ship seemed to "die" when struck with a phaser blast or a blade – the shock to their nervous system had to be repaired before the cadaver could be "animated" again!

"Of course!" Andrel cried. "I'll bet these spores are its way of providing sustenance and defending itself!" If the central collective regularly released spores that travelled in the water around it, they'd populate the environment, waiting for fish and other sea-creatures to naturally die before moving in past their immune systems and taking over their nervous systems ahead of necrosis setting in. Then, it would be able to direct any infected organisms to return to the collective intelligence and provide it nourishment – a carnivorous plant! Or it could even direct infected organisms to travel away from it and spread its spores – a means of reproduction.

"Or," Andrel gasped, "even take control of creatures to defend itself from attackers!" Yes! That had to be it!

It wasn't unprecedented. Out of his memory, he recalled learning of a fungi that had once existed on Earth, *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, as

he recalled – a sort of insect-pathogen-fungus which released spores that would land on primitive insects, seed on them, penetrate their exoskeleton and take over their nervous systems. They would take control of the insect's body, making it walk around at its bidding. Eventually, it would force the insect to climb the tallest plant around and latch itself to the stem, where the spore would then bloom and spread itself more widely in the ecosystem, landing on more insects and repeating the cycle.

While clearly this organism was much more advanced, the basic principles were the same! That was why the infected dead were acting like a defense mechanism to any living organism on this ship. After all, this mysterious central intelligence would naturally view any organism inside this metal can as a threat – how could it not when the Saucer had "attacked" it while it was minding its own business in the sea?

This organism was a groundbreaking discovery! A find that would surely be celebrated by the Starfleet Science Academy!

At that moment, his thoughts of academic acclaim vaporized as the Bolian corpse bolted upright into his face, clicking its jaw hungrily. Andrel leapt back with a cry. Out of the darkness, a blade sang. It sank deep into the Bolian skull, and the cadaver crumpled back into an unanimated stupor.

"What are you doing?" Kormet asked sternly, pulling Andrel to his feet. "We must keep moving!"

"I've discovered what is behind all this!" Andrel cried, excitely, pointing to his tricorder.

"Will it help us survive?" Kormet asked, disinterestedly. Andrel paused as if the question was a new idea to him. The Jem'Hadar was such a practical creature!

"I don't know," he said, absently rubbing some blood from a scratch on his forehead.

"Then I don't want to hear it!" Kormet answered, heading off again down the corridor. "Keep up!" Andrel trotted after him as he racked his brain for an answer to Kormet's question. How could they use the data? The real question had to do with motive.

*What is the organism's defense mechanism responding to?* he wondered. *Is it something we're doing?* He distractedly jogged after the Jem'Hadar, opening his tricorder and running through the data again. He thought back to the corpse in the Jefferies tube junction. Why had it not reacted to them?

He snapped his fingers mentally. Because, with the environmental systems off, the creature's parasitic spore mechanism could not have reached that corpse through the air! It had been isolated since the crash in that junction!

*Yes!* he thought, *It all makes sense!* But like the Jem'Hadar had said, how was this going to help them? Andrel pondered the information and almost didn't notice when Kormet stopped suddenly before a doorway.

"We are here!" the Jem'Hadar announced, leaning his Kar'takin against the bulkhead and digging his fingers into the seam of the door. Andrel scanned behind it.

"Hold up, Kormet!" he said. "We need to figure out what we're doing after we access a shuttle." Kormet paused.

"You are right," he said. "Do you have any thoughts?"

"Well," Andrel answered, modulating his scans across different spectrums. "Bad news first. There are over a hundred bodies scattered throughout the shuttlebay beyond, but I'm registering at least one

shuttle that seems intact. It looks like it bounced off the port bulkhead during the crash, but I'm not reading any significant damage."

"And the shuttlebay door?" Kormet asked impatiently.

"We've no primary power," Andrel announced, "but the battery backups are still intact. We should be able to open the shuttlebay door from the primary control console on the port side of the shuttlebay." Andrel suddenly lit up. "What about the phaser lockers?" he asked. "Did you remove them?"

"We did," Kormet replied. "We piled all Federation weapons in a heap in the center of the bay."

"Perfect!" Andrel cried in relief. "We should make for that first and arm ourselves."

"Agreed!" Kormet nodded. There was a renewed energy in their voices – the buoyancy of hope. They were so close! Kormet pried the door open and the two survivors stepped into the dark interior of the massive shuttlebay. Andrel shone his light around the debris and wreckage strewn about them. There was a faint blue light filtering down from above. He glanced two stories up to see a jagged tear through the hull running the length of the ceiling. A dark blue light filtered down, carrying rain and mist. He shielded his eyes against the dripping water, catching his face.

"Must be a storm outside!" Andrel gestured up. Kormet ignored him, casting his eyes warily around the floor, keeping the corpses under close observation. "Right," Andrel muttered to himself, following suit and sweeping his beam over a heap of objects about 100 yards away – the pile of phasers. He stepped over a few bodies cautiously – observing them carefully on his tricorder. Suddenly, he began reading elevated levels of hormones in the air. He whipped around to Kormet.

"Run!" he cried. They sprinted full-out across the deck, leaping over conduit, broken cargo containers, tools, implements, and the corpses of the dead, which were beginning to twitch and writhe awake beneath them.

Andrel's light flashed across the deck as he ran, and as he neared the jumbled pile of weapons, he slid into home base. He clutched at the weapons and managed to untangle a phaser rifle. In that moment, it was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He dropped his flashlight and flicked on the weapon's light. Not a moment too soon. A wall of undead corpses stumbled and shuffled towards them, only a dozen yards away. He raised the weapon's settings to maximum and took a test shot, vaporizing the nearest corpse.

"These still…" he began, but was cut off by a phaser blast vaporizing a corpse that had shuffled up silently beside him. Kormet grinned at him down his own barrel. "…work!" he said, finishing Andrel's sentence. Jem'Hadar sure knew their way around a weapon. Together, they took a couple more shots before Andrel stood and glanced for the door controller. He thought he could see it, another hundred yards away.

"Keep them busy," he yelled, "I'll see about that door!" Kormet nodded and began laying down suppressive fire, hitting twice as many undead corpses as before. Andrel raced across the deck towards the control console – hidden in the shadows of the port side of the bay. Silhouetted shapes crossed his path ahead and Andrel didn't hesitate – blasting them into vapor. There! – the post reflected ahead in his light. He skidded into the console and wildly tapped at it. Nothing happened.

"Come on! Come on!" Andrel hissed. "The emergency battery power must have been engaged!" He pounded it with his fist, and against all hope, it lit up with a flicker. "That's what I like to see!" he cried, tapping fiercely at the door prompt and glanced up. The deck shuddered, but the door did not rise. The distraction of desperate phaser-fire and the sounds of shuffling approached from behind earned

his attention and he spun around to vaporize a few more corpses before returning to the screen.

"You can do this!" he whispered to the computer and reinitialized the prompt. The floor shuddered again and the sounds of straining metal and malfunctioning clamps screeched through the air. Then, the door prevailed – it broke free and began to rise. Cold stormy light poured in around his feet. As the door rose, a strong gust of cool sea air flowed into the stale environment, carrying driving rain in with it. Suddenly it ground to a halt, and the motors whined in agony as they burned out on either side in a searing shower of sparks that rained down like lava on the deck.

"Damn!" Andrel growled. The impact with the ocean must have strained the housing and distorted the tracks. The door hung halfway open – but still large enough for a shuttle to pass. Lightning flashed outside, lighting up the deck. He turned to see Kormet in the squally ambiance, retreating from the weapons pile as more and more corpses shuffled into the bay from the ship.

"Take the high-ground!" Kormet yelled above his phaser-fire, pointing to a jumbled pile of nearby cargo containers, barely as tall as Andrel. "We've the firepower and the advantage now!" Andrel nodded and retreated. He was first to scramble atop the containers and, crouching on the surface, he began laying down fire, vaporizing the undying corpses of the former Federation officers.

"You're clear!" he called down to Kormet. In response, the Jem'Hadar turned and leapt up beside him. The wind to their back buffeted them and Andrel glanced behind to the swelling ocean waves beyond the edge of the Saucer.

*I hope the ship stays afloat in this tempest!* he thought. Lightning seared the sky and the shuttlebay was lit for a moment as all around them, the corpses surged forward. They horded around the containers,

pressing and stumbling against each other as they sought to reach the intruders. Kormet tirelessly poured phaser-fire into their numbers, which were growing by the minute as new and familiar faces emerged into the bay from within the ship.

"Like shooting Kimmenik minnows in a stream," he smiled, lancing out energy on the corpses. Together they had vaporized about a hundred or so but they simply could not prevail against the numbers. The dead pressing against the containers began falling under the ascending stride of the new corpses and they were getting closer in their soulless grasps. Andrel realized that in a few more minutes their position would be completely overwhelmed.

And then he noticed with horror that Kormet had ceased fire. He glanced aside to see the Jem'Hadar staring in shock down below them. Andrel followed his gaze. There, in the crowd of dead Starfleet officers, eleven Jem'Hadar soldiers were mixing into the same lifeless march. Kormet teetered on the container and stumbled to its edge.

"Refal'ikan?" he cried. "Fas'ikan? Is that you?" He was seeing the ghosts of his brothers, long dead – those who died to save his life. The pull was gravitational and his mind, weakened by guilt and long isolation, faltered.

"They are dead!" Andrel called to him, reaching out to stop him. "They are not here!" Komet staggered back from his stupor and gazed into Andrel's eyes.

"Yes…Yes, you are right!" he cried, seeing through the fog of his senses. He seemed to also recognize the impending doom of their situation and turned to his friend. "Get to the shuttle!" he cried, setting his phaser to overload. "And give my best to your Kar-ol." With a terrific leap, he crashed down among his dead brothers and instantly submerged below a sea of writhing cadavers.

"Kormet!" Andrel roared, resetting his phaser from vaporize to kill, and lancing beams into the horde, trying to knock the undying off the Jem'Hadar but trying not to hit his friend.

The rifle blew and a terrific blast rocked the shuttlebay, knocking Andrel off the containers and tackling him to the deck behind.

"Kormet!" Andrel moaned, cradling the back of his head as he struggled to get up. Fragments of cadavers were still filtering down through the air. Andrel dragged himself to his feet and stumbled forward, searching through the strewn corpses for his friend. He would not leave him behind, even if that meant giving up his chance to make the shuttle unmolested.

But, he couldn't find Kormet under the eviscerated corpses where he'd last seen the Jem'Hadar. Desperately, he pried the cadavers up and hunted through the remains. Even in his hands, the bodies began to shiver back from the dead. Andrel tried to hurry, but he was running out of time. As the cadavers shifted and spasmed along the deck, Andrel thought he saw a familiar uniform thirty yards ahead from the blast. He ran to the spot.

Yes! It was Kormet, buried beneath a heap of his fellow Jem'Hadar! It almost looked like they had been defending him – perhaps some small aspect of their genetic programming had kicked in momentarily and overrode the parasite in their nervous system? Had they dragged him to safety from the blows of the others? He pushed the bodies off Kormet and dragged him free, kneeling beside him to check vitals. With a sigh of relief, Andrel closed his tricorder.

While his valiant sacrifice would have been a noble end for the Commander, he was still breathing – shallow, but observable. Andrel gently shook him.

"Kormet!" he hissed. "Kormet!" The Jem'hadar did not respond – unconscious from a probable head trauma. Andrel needed a medkit. There was one in the shuttle!

He stood up and almost stumbled back over Kormet's body. They were surrounded by the shuffling corpses, which were lurching, dragging, and crawling themselves along to encircle the survivors.

"Stay away!" Andrel bellowed, brandishing his rifle. There was no way he could save Kormet or himself now. It was over. He dropped his weapon and held his hands out. "Take me!" he cried, "but leave him alone!" He gestured to his friend, lying helpless on the deck.

The closest corpse to Andrel teetered to a stop – its jaw hanging loose and crackling. Andrel shuddered. The other cadavers awkwardly jumbled against each other. An awful silence filled the bay – disturbed only by the wind rustling through debris and organic matter that skipped across the deck. Suddenly, the cadavers turned aimlessly and slowly began shuffling away in random directions.

Had they given up? Andrel barely dared to breath. And then a miraculous thing happened. The corpses stumbled, collapsed, and crumpled to the deck – one after another.

What was happening? Why had they stopped? Andrel glanced to the shuttlebay door – out at the storm – and then back to the bodies strewn around the deck of the shuttlebay. Lightning flickered and he snapped his fingers.

"The wind!" he cried. "The wind is ventilating the hormones out of the air!" He pointed to the gash in the ceiling along the far wall as if someone had asked him to explain. "Yes! The storm has created a circulation cell inside the bay and it is venting out the..." He stopped short and ducked down. New undying corpses were entering the bay

from inside the ship, but as Andrel watched breathlessly, they stopped and stood quivering and floundering, swaying by the inner wall.

Andrel renewed his resolve. Yes, as long as the wind held, the undying bodies would be quarantined near the calmer air of the ship's interior. Without further encouragement, Andrel bent down and gripped Kormet's vest.

"Let's get out of here!" he whispered, dragging the Jem'Hadar across the deck towards one of the intact shuttles.

"If we pull through this, we are going to have a talk about how many rations you've been eating," Andrel groaned. He reached the shuttle at last and prompted the ramp to lower. Thankfully, it responded. As Andrel waited for it to touch down, he mopped his brow with his sleeve. Was it just him or was it feeling warmer in here? He bent down to drag Kormet up the ramp, and then he froze. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed some movement nearby. He started and when he looked up, he saw a corpse standing less than a yard away.

*How?* Andrel's mind exploded. *How?* echoed through his thoughts. It struck him then. The wind had changed! He didn't feel the same gusting wind across his back – and that had allowed the untroubled air around them to once again carry molecular information from the central intelligence to the alien parasites. He tensed, but nothing happened.

There must have been enough of a breeze to cause some interruption in the hormonal modem. Like a sluggish computer program!

*Stay calm!* He ordered his mind, even as he instinctively reached for his rifle. It wasn't there! He realized in horror that he'd left it on the deck where he'd found Kormet.

*Okay, okay…don't panic,* he thought. *I'll just slowly carry on.* He reached down quietly, under the dead gaze of the corpse – a Tellarite engineer, by the looks of it – and he slowly dragged the Jem'Hadar up the ramp, keeping a steady eye on the jerking cadaver near him. All around, corpses were twitching alive and stumbling to their feet. The hormonal modem was reconnecting!

"Close enough," Andrel gasped, setting Kormet down halfway up the ramp and pressing the shuttle's door prompt. The ramp began to slowly rise from the deck. Would it latch in time? He took his eyes from the Tellarite corpse and adjusted Kormet's body so he wouldn't wake to find any of his limbs missing, caught as they could be in the closing door. The ramp continued to rise. Now, the undying began approaching the shuttle, shuffling and spasming towards it. Finally, the edge of it rose above the heads of the corpses.

We're going to make it! Andrel thought extatically.

But at that moment, arms reached through the rapidly shrinking space between the ramp and the shuttle. Andrel jumped back and sought anything he could use for defense. The hands clutched and clawed, gripping Kormet's leg as the ramp continued to close in on them. Andrel surged forward as the Jem'Hadar's foot was partially dragged through the closing opening.

"Hey!" he yelled, stomping at the clutching arms. "Get back!" Desperately, he gripped Komet's vest and pulled with all his might. He just managed to pull his friend's foot past the seam when the ramp finally pinned the clawing arms. A terrifying moment passed and then three arms were severed, falling to the deck of the shuttle, still twitching and still crawling forward in the dark shadows of the shuttle! The nightmare just wouldn't end!

Andrel flew into a panic. He rushed atop them and stomped with all his might. First one and then the other, he repeatedly crushed the forearms,

which clutched at him like some horrific snake or eel. Andrel lost track of time as he danced wildly across the shuttle's deck. At long last, the limbs finally ceased moving and fell twitching on the ground. Andrel collapsed backwards atop Kormet. Lightning from outside lit the shuttle's shadowy interior, but the Lieutenant didn't even blink. His eyes fixedly on the limbs. Nothing happened. Slowly, he stood and cautiously kicked the severed limbs to the back of the shuttle, opening up the storage unit. He took a moment to steady himself and then reached down and threw the cadavers into the unit, slammed it shut, and locked it.

He took a deep breath and shivered. Kormet's condition returned to his mind, and digging out the medkit, Andrel knelt at his side, cycling through a few hyposprays before running his tricorder. The Jem'Hadar was stable and peacefully sedated. Feeling suddenly dizzy after all the exertion, Andrel collapsed to the deck and tried to recover his nerves. Slowly, through his dulled senses, he began to perceive the sounds of clawing, scratching, and pounding coming through the hull of the craft. The light dimmed for a moment and he glanced forward with a start to see silhouettes of bodies writhing on the nose of the craft. Would it never end?

He slumped to the floor and shook with emotion. His mind and body were done. He desperately needed to rest. His eyelids closed under the heavy toxin of sleep – and instantly, flashing through his thoughts, a face appeared. Carol! The angelic vision of his betrothed, standing against the ocean, her dress whipping in the breeze. He felt a sudden urgency. Why? He remembered he had an appointment – an appointment with her tomorrow!

Andrel clawed himself awake – staggering, reeling forward, collapsing into the pilot's seat.

"Hang on Carol," he croaked. "I'm coming!" Closing his eyes from the nightmarish visions outside the shuttle, he straightened his shoulders

for action and took a deep breath, opening his eyes to focus on the panel in front of him.

"The moment of truth," he muttered, tapping the blank pilot console. Glory be, it lit up! Andrel felt a surge of hope again, but ran a ship-wide diagnostic before he got too high on it. Life-support checked out – along with a cascading report of functional reactors, deflector, and engines.

Suddenly, a warning light flared up. Navigation was non-functional. It must have been damaged in the crash! Andrel ground his teeth.

"Fine!" he growled. "We'll do without!" He powered the shuttle up, but when he looked ahead, but couldn't see anything past the pressing corpses of the undead writhing across his window.

"Blind as a bat!" he muttered, powering up the thrusters. He steadied his hands, rubbing the adrenalin out of them.

"Okay…Z plus 2 meters," he muttered tapping the altitude thrusters alive. The inertial dampeners prevented him from feeling any motion, and all he could do was trust his console, which reported the shuttle was now 2 meters off the deck.

"I need to feel it!" he growled, flicking off the inertial dampeners. He tried to visualize where the shuttle had been in the bay. "I think we're too near the port wall," he mumbled, clicking the front and aft starboard thrusters. "X plus 12 meters; Y plus 3 meters," he punched. He could feel the motion beneath his feet as the shuttle answered. Suddenly his seat jolted and something crashed outside.

*Right!* he thought. *There had been a stack of containers there!*

"Okay, we should be clear," Andrel said aloud, rubbing his face awake, "now for some visibility! Computer, rear port thruster only…one

second burst," he prompted, "maintain altitude…on my mark." Andrel sank into his seat. "Mark!" he ordered. The thruster fired and the shuttle began to rotate, accelerating in place. Andrel clutched at his seat with all his strength as he felt the blood draining from his head. Darkness crept into his vision, and Andrel decided that the next time he did this maneuver, he probably should kick the Inertial Dampeners on after all. In a nightmarish brew of fading consciousness, he saw the undying corpses being flung from the hull as the shuttle spun up, casting them off. Then, just before he lost all consciousness, the thruster shut off and the shuttle slowly spun down until Andrel found the strength to reach up and tap the port thruster to stop the motion and bring the shuttle back to station-keeping.

"Got you!" he laughed, nearly falling from his seat. He leaned up to look out the window at the undying corpses picking themselves up from where they'd been scattered across the deck below. "Whoa!" he gasped, clutching at his console to steady himself from the wave of dizziness that overtook him. Swaying back, he fell into his chair and reinitialized the inertial dampeners, hitting up the rear thrusters at the same time. He kicked them on to a steady 3 meter/sec² acceleration.

Slowly the debris and chaos of the shuttlebay slipped below him and he watched the changing dimensions around him religiously. Without navigation, he was flying entirely by sight. the shuttle picked up speed, bringing the open door closer.

"Careful!" Andrel chided himself, adjusting his altitude a little. "Almost there!" All at once, something slammed across the window and he leapt back in surprise as the writhing corpse of a Trill medical officer – or what was left of them – obscured the view of the approaching doors. Andrel sat up.

"Close enough!" he growled, punching the impulse engines. The shuttle surged over the deck, slipped under the doors, and blasted out from the shuttlebay into the wild wind and rain of the storm. The

corpse tore away from the shuttle in the unyielding grip of atmospheric drag, and it was over. It was over!

The shuttle surged up and away from the doomed wreckage of the floating Galaxy-class saucer below, leaving with it the doomed crew of the *U.S.S. Vital* and the horror of their end.

Andrel didn't hesitate on his almost vertical ascent upwards, driven on the raw power of the impulse engines – he had no desire to see again the terror he had left, nor gaze upon the ship Kormet had long called Hell – even from the comfort of the edge of the heavens. He punched the shuttle into the clouds, blurring all sight in their sheets of rain and vapor. Lightning flickered and flashed, searing the air around them. Thunder shuddered in the deck plating.

And then, the craft reached up beyond that realm and crossed into a growing halo of light. Suddenly, the clouds fell away like a veil and Andrel was bathed in the warm evening light of a setting sun. Had that eternal hell down there only been a day?

The simple beauty of the infinite celestial sea approached. The kindling stars washed over his soul – the veil slowly dropped and Andrel entered the expanse of the heavens.

"We did it, Kormet!" Andrel gasped. "We made it!" The Jem'Hadar did not answer – he lay peacefully unconscious behind him, dreaming perhaps of a better future – unchained from servitude to an unholy cause. Andrel smiled.

"Sweet dreams, my friend," he said, and then guessed a course for home, straight through the invisible net that had begun this nightmare in the first place. A momentary dread crept into his mind. They may have just wrestled out of hell itself only to end in a flash of incinerating energy, as a subspace mine punctuated his life-story with a fragment. Into his assailing doubts, Andrel felt a certainty course through his

thoughts, drowning all his fears. It did not come from himself – it was beyond his mind, from outside himself. It showed him the certainty of his future – one with the woman he loved more than life itself.

Without a moment more of hesitation, Andrel leapt on that certainty offered his soul and engaged the warp engines. He set his face into the hypnotic snowfall of passing stars.

Nothing – not Dominion mines, undying hordes, or even the very fires of hell – could keep him from her whom his soul loved. He would make it to that balcony on Pacifica, and he would stand beside her overlooking the oceans in the pure morning light. And as the chaplain read their vows, he would give his life into her hands – for as long as life was in his veins.

"I'm coming Carol," he whispered. "I'm coming!"