

# Dark Territory Fallout

By DarkKush

## Part One: Knife's Edge

***USS Valour***  
**Sector 443**  
**September 2376**

"Is your captain always so disagreeable?" The attractive Boslic transport captain whispered in Commander Marc Bolden's ear.

He shrugged. "Yeah," he remarked, punctuating it with a quick grin. "But it's not personal. The captain just hates being left out of the action. I mean, you guys took more fire in the last couple weeks than we have since the end of the war."

The Boslic shuddered. "Believe me; it wasn't as easy or pleasant as you make it sound. My crew is mainly civilians you know, they're not accustomed to being fired upon."

"I'm glad there are some people who still aren't," Bolden said. "Listen, I didn't mean to make light of you or your crew. You've done great work, without the shields, weapons, or ablative armor of this baby right here," he paused to rap his knuckles on one of the ship's upper bulkheads. "Without you, hundreds, maybe thousands of Ellorans and Tarlac might've died."

The transport captain blushed, a pleasant shade of violet splashed over her yellowish cheeks. "Thank you commander."

"You're welcome captain," Bolden smiled again.

"Please, call me Delara," she replied, matching his smile. He nodded.

"Sure," he replied. "Delara, that's a beautiful name." Before the Boslic responded, Bolden's combadge chirped. As soon as he activated it, his commander's strident voice barked.

"Commander Bolden, have you finished escorting Captain Delara to the transporter room?"

"I guess I am now," he muttered.

"What was that?" The captain asked again.

"Nothing sir," he looked askance at Delara. "We're almost at the transporter room now."

"I'm sure the captain can find her way from wherever you are," his commander said. "I need you on the bridge...at once!"

"Right away captain. Bolden out." He sighed, smiling wanly at Delara. "Duty calls. Perhaps some other time?"

The Boslic matched his smile again. "You got it Starfleet."

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### ***USS Valour*** **(Main Bridge)**

Commander Bolden smoothly took his seat in the ring of consoles surrounding the command well. Captain Nandali Kojo sat ramrod straight in her seat. A beautiful woman, lean, cinnamon skinned, ash blonde hair, and with her face dotted with the alluring spots of her Kriosian birthright, it still amazed him how intimidating Kojo could be, even after he had saved her life on more than one occasion. Of course, she had saved his life and the lives of everyone on board the *Defiant*-class *Valour* more times than he could count during the war. That's why the crew remained loyal to Kojo and was tolerant of the woman's less than sunny disposition.

But even Bolden noticed that the captain had been more on edge than usual. Knowing what he did of her personal history, Marc had a few guesses why. She detested being put on the periphery of the Alshain crisis, protecting convoys instead of taking the fight to the Alshain head on. Kojo's birthworld, Krios Prime, had been subjugated by the Valtese, allies of the Alshain Exarchate for decades before becoming a Klingon protectorate. Surprisingly the Alshain-dominated occupation had been worse than becoming a Klingon subject world and Kojo continued to carry a burning hatred for the both the Valtese and the Alshain.

The captain had been vocal in criticizing the Federation's admission of the Alshain into the Federation Alliance during the Dominion War. She had argued, before the Admiralty, and later the press that the Alshain could not be trusted. Kojo's lack of political finesse had nearly cost her command of the *Valour*, but her service record shielded her from much of the political firestorm she ignited. Even her former commanding officer, Captain Terrence Glover, who had sponsored Kojo's promotion, spoke out against the Kriosian's incendiary comments. He had said they hurt the war effort in addition to being disturbingly biased. To Bolden's knowledge, Kojo hadn't spoken to the man since.

However, the months after the war proved Kojo had been right all along. The Alshain had used their alliance ties to occupy much of the former

Son'a Imperium. Along the way, they had sought to remove the Son'a, Ellorans, Tarlac, and recently the Ba'ku. After months of Federation inaction, Captain Picard had led a taskforce into the Briar Patch to put a stop to the rampage.

A shooting war had begun, but quickly resolved into an uneasy cease-fire after a coup occurred on Alshain Proper, the ruling Exarch being replaced by a junta. The junta had recalled all Alshain forces, largely ending the possibility of a widening conflict, except for a few Alshain that had gone rogue and were entangling shipping lanes near Alshain space in hit and run attacks.

Kojo, the widow of a Klingon warrior, mother of half-Klingon children, and a true adherent of the warrior ethos, was disappointed to no end that the *Valour* had not been chosen for the taskforce. Bolden had shared in the captain's commiseration, but he hadn't been able to tell her how he really felt about the subject. He knew that Kojo was a toxic subject for many of her peers, and the commander also knew that many didn't trust her: not where the Alshain were concerned. Putting Kojo in the thick of the Briar Patch would've been like throwing a match on a puddle of dilithium extract. Deep down Bolden shared their trepidation. But of course he would never tell the captain that. Marc had grown used to his head remaining attached to his shoulders.

"So glad you could join us Mr. Bolden," Kojo smiled wickedly. Marc nodded.

"Wouldn't miss this for the world sir...whatever this is?"

Kojo pointed at the screen. "Magnify." The Ops officer complied. The new hologrid that had recently replaced the forward viewscreen reconfigured to show a larger picture of three small catamaran-hulled ships approaching fast.

Bolden gasped. The captain might just get her pound of flesh after all, he thought with some trepidation. "Are those what I think they are?"

"Yes Mr. Bolden, those are Alshain war ships, and they are on an intercept course." Kojo replied. "*Howler*-class interceptors to be exact."

"Captain, I suggest we get the convoy out of here now," Bolden said, "Before they get here."

"ETA in eleven minutes," Lt. Meelek-Zar, the Skorr Operations officer, said without being prompted.

"Red alert," Kojo said, sitting back in her seat. The lighting immediately dimmed on the bridge, and klaxons wailed. The captain motioned for them to be deactivated before continuing, "Raise shields and power weapons."

"Captain," Bolden paused to make sure he phrased his comments correctly, "I think our primary mission should be escorting these ships safely to Yashklin'IV. The refugees there are in desperate need of these medical supplies."

The tone of Kojo's voice was unnervingly sweet. "The Boslic ship has light armament and shielding. It is more than enough to protect the other three vessels. I think its best that we take on these ships now. We vastly outmatch them in firepower. Whatever advantage they might have in speed, if we tie them up now it will allow the other ships to go to warp." Kojo paused, turning away from Bolden to the tactical console. "Commander Carrick, send a message to Captain Delara and the other ships. Tell them to go to maximum warp now. We'll provide cover fire for them until they've escaped."

"Aye sir," Lt. Commander Kirce Carrick said, quickly relaying the message. Seconds later, she looked up, "The ships have gone to warp sir."

Kojo nodded. "Excellent, now let's have some fun." At that instant Bolden didn't know what he was more afraid of, the attack vessels running toward them or the bloodthirsty gleam in his captain's eyes.

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## **Exarchal Grounds Nature Preserve Alshain Proper**

Chairman Orthlin C'Oemnm could get used to this. After another frustrating day moderating arguments instead of governing, C'Oemnm had been relieved beyond measure to shed his heavy clothes and his even weightier responsibilities to lope through the nature preserve as if he were a pup again.

Exarch Jedalla had spent several fortunes to build his elaborate private nature reserve, and he had populated the well-secured woodland with all manner of dangerous, though surely tasty prey from both the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. Though the myriad wedge-shaped arcologies that dominated Alshain Proper's skyline each had nature reserves filled primarily with native flora and fauna, there was no substitute for fresh air or animals untainted by modulated living. Only the Benzite geostructures rivaled the Alshain arcologies as blends of architecture and ecology but the Benzites dependence upon their hyperstructures had recently become evident after that planet had erupted into mass hysteria after a wave of malfunctions swept their habitats. Orthlin feared a similar fate for his people. He was well aware that his people viewed their habitats with pride, models of culture and advancement that were prominent reminders that weren't mindless beasts. So, it would be hard to convince them to return to a more natural state of living. Even the formidable Jedalla had treaded cautiously in that regard.

Though Jedalla, the Peerage and many others publicly disapproved of the old, feral ways of their ancestors, there was something primal and very instinctual about the hunt. It was something that reached down through the ages and touched each Alshain heart and rumbled each Alshain stomach.

C'Oemnm's mobility was terrible. He could feel the shameful burning in his chest after only a few miles run, and the aches in his joints sounded loud in his ears. He howled in disgust and despair. The noise startled a young fawn from its hiding place. It darted in front of him, the smell of fear an intoxicating aroma to the Alshain. He took after the frightened fawn, using his knowledge of the land to shore up his physical deficiencies. When he got close enough, he swiped at the fawn's leg, causing the creature to crash into a gigantic tree. He set upon her immediately, not allowing her to get up.

He broke the fawn's neck before he began to feed. His dull teeth made the rending and tearing of flesh problematic, but his hunger and the exhilaration of a fresh kill drove him onward.

By C'Oemnm's estimation, it must have been hours before Nauarch Yol A'Yaud found him. His military attaché, in full military dress, crashed through the forest, a phalanx of soldiers behind him. Ignoring even the customary sacredness of C'Oemnm's feast, the younger man blurted, "The Exarch has escaped!"

C'Oemnm nearly choked on the meat he was gnawing. He spat it out before replying, "How is that possible? The Unguis had him imprisoned at one of their secret installations? They ensured me of that!"

"We were fools to trust them," A'Yaud snarled. "And we might pay with our lives for your oversight."

"Where is Jedalla now?" C'Oemnm's hunger had vanished. He stood to his full, impressive height. He did his best to wipe the drying blood from around his muzzle and mouth. "He's certain to be making his way here, and we have to be ready for him." C'Oemnm had been shocked that Jedalla had relinquished power so easily. It was completely at odds with everything Orthlin knew of the man, and he had known him for years. It had pained him deeply to depose the Exarch, but Jedalla had left him no choice. His plan to obliterate several Federation worlds in response to their arrogant intrusion into Alshain affairs would've surely led to the destruction of all that he and the Peerage had built over the last two decades. Jedalla's reaction and Orthlin's conflicted loyalties had caused him to spare Jedalla's life. The former ruler had been placed in one of the many secret prisons run by the Unguis, the Exarchate's secret police. Though the Unguis chief sat on the committee, he hadn't been able to totally insure the loyalty of his operatives.

To be truthful, Orthlin was surprised that the populace had taken Jedalla's removal as easily as they had. But there had been a growing restlessness among the citizenry, open acts of defiance, and calls for Jedalla's restoration. It appeared that the shock of the coup was starting to wear off. Now the people were waking to the reality that centuries of Alshain history, tradition, and custom had been subverted. C'Oemnm knew that in the court of public opinion, his nuanced reasons for his actions would never hold weight

to Jedalla's rightful claim to rule. C'Oemnm now understood that only by committing regicide would his committee stand a chance to consolidate power and steer the Alshain toward a path of peaceful coexistence with the Federation and the rest of its Beta Quadrant neighbors.

"I have already alerted the other committee members. They await you at the appointed place." A'Yaud said crisply.

"Excellent work Nauarch," C'Oemnm smiled gravely. Perhaps then might have a chance to stop Jedalla before word of his escape spread. "If we move quickly, we might be able to prevent civil war."

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### **Yashk'lin IV (Refugee Processing Center) Three days later...**

For once Lt. Jasmine Glover was glad to be wearing a biosuit, and she felt awful for it. People were dying around her, consumed by a horrendous outbreak of Uradai fever and she was happy she wasn't one of them. Though it was the truth, it still felt like a terrible and incredibly selfish thing.

Jasmine promised to beat herself up more about it later once she had finished installing the replacement isolinear chips to the center's primary generator. She couldn't believe anyone still used isolinear chips or rods instead of bio-gel circuitry anymore, but Glover had to remind herself that she wasn't in the Federation. The Yashk'ani was a fairly advanced species, but a decade or more away from the Federation's level of technology. She was certain that was a strong incentive for the Yashk'ani to offer Yashk'lin IV as a temporary haven for refugees escaping the carnage in the Briar Patch. It was a nice way to earn brownie points on the way to a Federation membership, Jasmine thought, and then began to castigate herself again: when had she become so cynical?

And why was she raking herself over the coals so much? She knew the answer, didn't want to go there, but couldn't help herself. Jasmine was looking for something to obsess over instead of her last conversation with Terrence. It had been almost two weeks since Terrence had visited her aboard the medical ship *Meharry*, her new posting. She still remembered the joy on his face when he saw her for the first time in months, and she could never forget the light that died in his eyes when she told him she wanted a divorce. Jasmine had anticipated, girded herself for, and actually wanted Terrence to argue or explode at her request. But he had done none of those things. He had merely sat there, quiet as a stone, blinking for an interminable time, his eyes glazed over as if he had momentarily left his body. Jasmine had never seen her husband react like that, and it had scared her. She had almost called

Sickbay, when Terrence snapped out of his trance. Without saying anything to her, he merely got up and left.

Jasmine still was disturbed by how easily Terrence had given up. She had never known the man to relent. Even though he had sent her a response via subspace asking her to reconsider, the message had been rote, robotic, given by a man who seemed to have already accepted the inevitable. She knew Terrence was going through a rough time. He had recently lost the *Aegis* and seventy-five crewmen, and his father, former Admiral Samson Glover, a man Jasmine loved as much as her own Papi, was missing. Terrence had taken an extended leave to find him. There was a part of Jasmine that wished she were part of that hunt. If not only to mend fences with Terrence again, but to make sure Samson came back to them safe and sound.

However Jasmine felt her place was here, aboard the *Meharry*, and she was sure Samson would understand. From what he had told her off his wife Deitra, Terrence's mother, the admiral had been very sympathetic to the pull of destiny. And Jasmine felt this posting was destined, it was her opportunity to return to engineering, to shake off the fear that had encapsulated her due to the injuries that had taken an arm, a leg, and more importantly, her ability to conceive in the Engineering section of the *Mandela*, during the Dominion War. Since that accident there had been nothing but darkness. Not even Terrence's formidable force of will had been able to penetrate the shroud that had fell across Jasmine's shoulders, and she knew she hadn't been a good wife or partner to him. Jasmine had been struggling with her own doubts, her own feelings of worthlessness for far too long, and she knew she could never be truly worthy of receiving and giving Terrence the love he deserved until she had conquered her demons. But she needed to do that alone, away from Terrence, to prove to herself that she could do it without him. Terrence could never understand that, or so she had convinced herself, and she had pushed him away, trying to give herself the necessary space to rebuild herself. Now she realized she had perhaps gone about it the wrong way, had been too harsh in her treatment of Terrence, but Jasmine had to make sure her husband didn't intrude on this time. She just hoped that he would still be there when she was ready.

After she inserted the final chip, the generator rumbled before sputtering back to life. "There," she said, with mild pride at a job completed, "Good work team," she said to the small engineering crew that had accompanied her. This was Jasmine's second time around as Chief Engineer and she was still working out the kinks as she sought to build a rapport with her new subordinates. The previous engineering chief had been beloved by the crew, and many still hadn't gotten over his retirement. Though none had voiced such sentiments to her personally, Jasmine had heard about them through the *Meharry* grapevine.

"Would've gone faster if we had beamed these guys down some bio-gel circuits," Junior Grade Lieutenant Luna McCall grumbled. Jasmine frowned. The grapevine had given Jasmine advance warning about the troublesome McCall as well as about her powerful mother. Luna had recently been transferred to the ship after an imbroglio aboard the *Sacajawea*. Jasmine hadn't been able to glean any details about the exact nature of the controversy, only that McCall's mother's clout couldn't prevent the young woman from being shunted down to a less prestigious posting. Though Jasmine knew of the value of gossip, she didn't always trust it, and had sought to develop a relationship with the woman in spite of it. So far, things hadn't gone so well. Luna was headstrong and argumentative. In part that was one reason she had picked the woman to assist her, to preclude any more arguments with her colleagues.

"Starfleet isn't in the business of giving away technology to non-member worlds, even warp-capable ones," Glover reminded the woman. "As Captain M'Bira had told you when you broached the subject before."

"I know," McCall whined, brushing an errant blonde strand away from her eyes, "still, bio-gel circuitry isn't as prone to glitches as this old isolinear crap, and plus it would've made our jobs a lot easier."

"If our jobs were easy, they wouldn't be work," Jasmine tried to joke, but McCall didn't even crack a smile. "Let's get ready to wrap this up." She ordered McCall to collect all of their tools. While the woman was doing that Jasmine tapped her compin and checked in with the rest of her scattered team. She had sent two engineers a piece to the four generators spread throughout the large camp. After she had checked on the progress with each team, Jasmine contacted the ship. She was looking forward to finally peeling herself out of the biosuit, but really looking forward to getting away from Lt. McCall.

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### **Cenobium Sanctum of Oshon Alshain Proper**

Striking down the syndic that tried to block his entrance into the temple had done nothing to cool the fires racing through his blood. Grenadier Lor V'Lon was oblivious to the howls and wails of protests, of the ancient curses that were hurled at him. He had one objective and not even Garm himself would stop him. In fact, V'Lon was certain that it was Garm, patron god of warriors, who now guided his hand.

He found Syndic Yarkedi kneeling before a towering bloodstone statue of the goddess Oshon, the patron deity of sacrifice. V'Lon smiled. The moment was too ironically appropriate not to have been designed by the gods.



He roughly grabbed the man by the neck and yanked him around. "You caused this!" He spat at the man. "You sought to strip away our Exarch's right to rule. You are the true blasphemer!" The syndic had been part of the traitorous plot to depose Exarch Jedalla. He had splashed Itrob bile upon the ruler, seeking to turn him into a nameless one. But everyone saw through the deception.

Why the Exarch had allowed the deceivers to go through with their plot V'Lon couldn't fathom. However, the wind was ripe with the news of Jedalla's return and he wished to present a special gift to him upon his return. Holding the quietly praying priest with one hand, V'Lon neatly loped off his head with the sword he held in his other hand.

Dropping the headless body, V'Lon licked the blood that spurted on his face while snatching the syndic's head before it hit the ground. He held it aloft before the stone eyes of Oshon. "May the unworthy blood of this traitor awake your hunger for more such as him, oh great goddess Oshon, for surely more sacrifices will be made before this day is over."

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***USS Meharry***  
**In orbit of Yashk'lin IV**  
**Sector 443**

**(Captain's Ready Room)**

Captain M'Bira of Cait put on her best face, but she couldn't stop her whiskers from twitching nervously.

"You can't leave us?" Burgrave Sarvanaga said, her brow crinkling with displeasure. "Not with a pandemic on our hands."

"I have orders," M'Bira remarked. "We'll be back as soon as possible."

"That's not good enough," Sarvanaga said, standing. M'Bira followed suit.

"I'll leave a medical team and a security detachment on the planet. That's the best I can do at the moment."

Sarvanaga folded her four arms and snorted loudly. "I will take my leave of you then."

M'Bira put on her best face. She tapped her compin. "Commander Sidhani, please ready an escort to accompany the Burgrave to the transporter room."

"Aye Captain," was the crisp reply. M'Bira gestured toward the door. Sarvanaga left the room without saying another word. The captain understood the woman's frustration. In an effort to build closer ties with the

Federation the Yashk'ani had agreed to take in Elloran and Tarlac refugees fleeing from the Alshain pogrom in the Briar Patch. The Uradai fever outbreak in the camps had spread quickly to the Yashk'ani population, and as the deaths mounted the patience of the Yashk'ani citizens on the planet and in the central government had rapidly diminished. The *Meharry* shared the heavens with one Yashk'ani warship, sent to ensure that no one ships left the planet's spaceports.

The *Meharry* had recently relieved the *Satcher*, a sister medical ship, but their medical supplies had quickly been overtaken by the needs of the infected. M'Bira had been waiting anxiously for days for the arrival of more anti-viral medicine. The shipment might finally allow them to contain the disease before it engulfed the entire planet.

From the news M'Bira had recently received from Admiral Khamba at Starbase 116, she knew that things had gotten more complicated. Both the convoy and the *Defiant*-class vessel they were escorting them had failed to report in. Though they were still several hours from their expected arrival time at Yashk'lin IV, their failure to maintain contact with the starbase led both the Captain and the Admiral to fear that the convoy might've run into trouble. It was possible that the convoy had run afoul of Alshain marauders or the Phalkerian Domain, the bullies of Sector 443, which was almost as bad. Of course there wasn't much the *Meharry* could do in a firefight, but she had advanced sensors and a crew skilled in search and rescue operations.

Khamba had ordered the *Meharry* to investigate the communications lapse with the convoy and render assistance if needed. The kindly Chelon admiral had promised to send additional help if necessary, but M'Bira knew they would be days or light-years away. *Meharry* was likely on her own. Still not accustomed to the fourth pip on her collar, M'Bira only hoped she was ready to face whatever might be laying in wait for them.

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## **Space Station Lemuria**

### **Nautilus Café**

#### **A week later...**

"I can't believe I agreed to this," Commander Liana Ramirez grouched good-naturedly, holding her glass of Tenarian Schnapps up to the light, entranced by the rainbow effect every time light hit the beverage. Commander William Riker grinned. "This isn't poisoned is it?"

"Come on Commander Ramirez, I'm not so bad once you get to know me," he laughed softly before taking a sip from his glass. "We had a run-in or two, but that's in the past. I took exception to your opinions about Captain

Picard's motivations for the peacekeeping mission, and I don't make any apologies for that. I'm as loyal to my captain as you are."

Commander Ramirez paused, blinking a few seconds before meekly nodding. "Of course you are." The truth was she hadn't been all that loyal to her commanding officer Donald Sandhurst. In fact, she had regretted being posted to the *Gibraltar*, and had fought the assignment since the day she had arrived.

Over the last several months, she had come to respect Captain Sandhurst and had grown closer to the crew. However, she couldn't help but feel her time on the *Gibraltar* was a holding action, a stepping stone to bigger things. And because of that she remained a little distant. Liana didn't want things to get too sticky when the time came for her to leave.

"Though I stand by what I said, I also hope I'm a big enough person to respect differing opinions and empathize with other views." Riker added. "After all, we're all in the same Fleet."

"Fair enough," Ramirez said, still not quite ready to lower her shields.

"No hard feelings then?" Riker asked. Liana let the question hang for a few seconds, as a myriad of scenarios danced through her imagination. Though there was a part of her that wanted to tell Riker just where he could stick his feelings, Ramirez also knew that Riker was a fellow officer and he had a right to be wrong and an asshole on occasion.

"No hard feelings," Ramirez finally said. "If you say so, it's all water under the bridge." Though Ramirez said that, she knew it would take her a long while to fully believe it. A lot of feelings and egos were bruised over the last couple months.

Riker's grin broadened. "Please call me Will."

"Okay Will...and I guess you can call me Liana," the Schnapps eased down her throat, cooling and warming her at the same time. "This is a great drink. Thank you for suggesting it."

"I can't take the credit. Beverly-Doctor Crusher recommended it. You said that it many planets imbibe the stuff for its supposed medicinal properties. Some believe it's the cause of the Tenarian Glow."

"You can't be serious." Liana was incredulous. The Tenarians were considered a very physically attractive race, right up there with the Deltans. Some called their attractiveness 'the Glow' and many others had been trying to divine the secrets behind the Glow as if it were a cooking recipe for centuries. "I guess people have to have a reason for everything."

"I suppose," Riker said. "So, what's next for *Gibraltar*?"

"I'm not sure yet," Ramirez replied. "We haven't gotten our orders. Truth be told, I think the crew really needs a break so there's no rush."

"I understand what you mean," Riker said. "That little ship of yours has been through some rough times from what I've heard."

“ ‘Little ship?’” Liana’s hackles started to rise. “What do you mean by that?”

“Nothing,” Riker pleaded. “Really. *Gibraltar’s* a fine ship. Captain Picard can’t stop talking about that personal tour Captain Sandhurst gave him. It was a really thoughtful gesture, a nice olive branch. I wish I had had the time to join them.”

Mollified, Ramirez calmed down. “I’m sure it did mean a lot to Captain Picard. I mean, *Gibraltar’s* a living link to the past. One of the few *Connies* still out there.”

“Yeah,” Riker replied, his tone wistful. “The tour made Picard think about meeting Jim Kirk on Veridian III. Also Montgomery Scott, Admiral McCoy, and Ambassador Spock. He said standing on *Gibraltar’s* bridge allowed him to imagine what standing on the bridge of Kirk’s *Enterprise* was like, and it gave him a better sense of who they were and what they accomplished than he had before.”

Liana smiled, despite being slightly annoyed at Riker’s obvious name dropping. “I’m sure that Captain Sandhurst will be pleased to know that. You might not believe it, but he respects Captain Picard a lot. Captain Sandhurst was honored to be a part of Taskforce Peacekeeper despite all the head butting.”

“And we were honored to have him...despite all the head butting,” Picard’s sonorous voice cut through her buzz. Both Riker and Ramirez shot out of their seats. Picard was accompanied by Anij, one of the Ba’ku rescued from the clutches of Alshain marauders.

“Captain Picard,” they said in unison. He waved for them to retake their seats.

“At ease Commanders,” he said, “Mind if we join you?”

“Not at all,” both Riker and Ramirez said together. They both looked at each and grinned sheepishly.

“Excellent,” Picard said. He sidestepped them and plucked two chairs from an empty table. He gestured for Anij to sit down, and then he followed. Almost instantly, a waiter appeared at the table to take their order. After the drinks had been delivered, Picard smiled with pleasure after his first sip. “Saint Emilion, a good vintage.”

“It does taste very sweet, crisp,” Anij offered. “I like it.” Picard nodded in agreement.

“Though I must inform you that Saint Emilion pales in comparison to Chateau Picard,” the *Enterprise* captain said, his voice filled with exaggerated pride. Anij playfully rolled her eyes.

“So, I’ve heard ad nausea.” The beautiful Ba’ku drolly remarked. The four chatted amiably for almost an hour. Liana was pleasantly surprised that Picard didn’t totally fit his stiff shirt reputation. Underneath the cool, almost

Vulcan-like exterior he was a warm, and even at times, funny person, with a very well-honed dry wit. She definitely began to understand how the man elicited such devotion from his crew and across the Fleet. Before meeting him, Ramirez had often thought something was deficient in the supposedly top notch officers surrounding him that truly prevented them from leaving Picard's side. Now she realized that Riker, Data, LaForge, and the others chose to stay aboard, even though they could've each had their own commands by now. Captain Picard had been able to do a rare thing, turning a crew into a family. Ramirez had to admit that she felt familial strains forming among the *Gibraltar* crew, but she had been keeping away from getting entangled so far. Seeing the mutual respect and affection Picard and Riker held for each other, it made her wonder if maybe that's what Starfleet service was all about, building those kind of life changing, life affirming bonds, and not a lonely quest to the top.

For some reason that thought disturbed her. Unable to stop herself, Ramirez started withdrawing into a shell. "Is everything all right Commander Ramirez?" Picard asked, concern etched on his face. Anij was also frowning.

"Yes sir," Liana said. "I'm sorry...I was just thinking."

"I'm sure you have a lot on your mind," Picard said. "The last two months were harrowing at times for us all. And though we didn't always agree..." the captain let the statement drift, alluding to the tension that had built up between the *Enterprise* and *Gibraltar* crews during the mission, "In the end we accomplished our objectives and saved lives. That's the most important thing and the *Gibraltar* crew played a significant part in that."

Liana blushed, not expecting such a high assessment from the *Enterprise* captain of her crew's actions in the Briar Patch. If anything, she thought Picard would've put Captain Sandhurst on report for the actions he took to save Lt. Commander Pell. "Thank you sir."

"No need to thank me," Picard said. "Thank you. A lot of lives were saved because of your efforts." He paused, glancing noticeably at Anij. Now, it was the flaxen Ba'ku's turn to blush. "I will be forever in your debt. Anything I can do for you commander please don't hesitate to ask."

Ramirez nodded, not sure what to say. And that's just what she did say. Picard smiled.

"I can't believe you're actually speechless," Riker remarked. Ramirez nudged him with her elbow. "Oww!" Riker yelped seconds later. Laughter erupted from the table. When Picard and Anij finally got up from the table, Riker following suit, Liana was actually sad to see them go.

She sat alone, nursing her fourth Tenarian Schnapps and gazing at the starfield glimmering through the café's viewports.

"There should be a law against beautiful women sitting alone," a voice broke through her reverie. Liana recognized it immediately. She fought to

contain her surprising excitement. Turning around, her voice carefully modulated, Ramirez asked, "Jeff, what the hell are you doing here?"

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### **Captain's Yacht *Cousteau* (In orbit of Starbase Lemuria)**

*What the hell are they doing here?* Captain Donald Sandhurst thought, though he was too polite to ask. He merely looked at Lt. Commander Pell Ojana. The Bajoran woman gave him a pained smile.

"This is sweet," Ensign Brett Lightner remarked, agape at the yacht's console. "It must be good to be a captain huh, especially of a *Sovereign*?"

"This is quite an engineering marvel," Lt. Ashok said with an engineer's eye. Sandhurst couldn't disagree with the imposing Bolian. A former engineer himself, he had been just as keen to explore the *Cousteau's* systems as he had been to share some alone time with Pell when Captain Picard had figuratively given him the keys to the *Enterprise-E's* yacht. Both junior grade Lieutenants Issara Taiee and Olivia Juneau also seemed pleased with the cushy environs. Noticeably absent were Commander Liana Ramirez, his second in command and Lt. Pava Lar'ragos, *Gibraltar's* El Aurian security chief and Donald's closest friend.

Donald was certain that his invitation to his senior staff came from Pell, because it certainly hadn't come from him. The captain was disappointed but also concerned. Things had been going well during for the first week of their forced shore leave, caused by the damage the *Gibraltar* had undergone in the Briar Patch. The ship was being tended to at the Pacifica Fleet Yards near Space Station Lemuria.

Donald and Pell had spent several pleasant days on the surface. The Bajoran diplomatic officer had recently vacationed there before joining the mission into the Briar Patch and she had happily introduced him to her new friends, two of whom were the in-laws of Captain Terrence Glover, the former CO of both him and Pell. Glover wasn't Donald's most favorite person, though he didn't hold it against the Mendes family. He had found that he enjoyed their company immensely and had even promised to return as soon as his duties permitted, something he rarely did. Donald wasn't given over to much sentimentality. He hadn't even seen his own family for far too long, and he was dreading his mother's wagging finger for his absence.

Things had been going so well that Donald began to gently inquire about Pell's time as prisoner of the Bajora-Tava, a group of out of touch religious extremists that still thought Cardassia occupied Bajor. Pell had told him and a battery of counselors and psychiatrists that she couldn't remember

anything of significance. Sandhurst had backed her up, protecting her from most of the pressure coming down on him from Starfleet Command. The Admiralty was paranoid about any potential security risks among Starfleet personnel. Relations were still strained between the Federation and the Bajoran Provisional Government over the assassination of Cardassia Premier Natima Lang, since Deep Space Nine turned its weapons array on the premier's ship. An investigation was still ongoing, but conspiracy theories had spread at warp speed through the quadrant alternately blaming the Bajorans, Federation, or Cardassians for the murder. Command was understandably nervous about the discovery of a fanatical sect of Bajorans still thirsting for Cardassian blood and on the loose. It was just one more match burning in a tinderbox of post-Dominion War troubles.

Despite Sandhurst's defense of Pell and his reignited passion for the woman, he also had to alert to any mental tampering Pell might've been subjected to. A recent victim of such tampering himself, Donald was concerned about her well being. However his probing had had the opposite effect than what he had hoped. Pell had begun to shut him out. Sandhurst had hoped the trip might lower her shields again.

Pell was still helping him get through his torture at the hands of the mysterious alien known simply as the Baron. It was only right that he provide the same outlet to vent and shoulder to cry that she had.

"So Captain, are we ready to get this show on the road or what?" Lightner asked, with puppy-dog eagerness.

"By all means," Sandhurst tried to smile but just couldn't. "Mr. Lightner you take the helm. I'll ride shotgun."

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## **Space Station Lemuria**

### **Commanding Officer's State Room**

"I know you're anxious to get some leave time in Jean-Luc," Rear Admiral Mermon said, his watery voice dripping with surprising sympathy. "After that trying time in the Briar Patch followed by our sessions...but I'm sure that you know far better than I the demands of the uniform."

Captain Picard nodded, pleased that the Aquan finally acknowledged the recent burdens his crew had endured to stop wanton genocide being committed by the Alshain against the Son'a, Tarlac, Ellorans, and Ba'ku. During the at times exacting debriefing process Picard had undergone at the station, Picard had come to suspect that Mermon's chilly demeanor and pointed questions masked the amphibian's bias towards the Briar Patch humanitarian mission. Though the venture had met with some success, there had been several prominent admirals opposed to it from the start; chief

among them was Admiral Covey at Deep Space Nine, Starfleet's foremost expert on the Alshain Exarchate. Covey had turned out to be correct in predicting the Alshain response, but the taskforce had been able to carry the day, barely. The loss of several starships, the near extinction of the Ba'ku, and the deaths of countless Tarlac, Ellorans, Son'a, Alshain, and others still roiled Picard's conscience. After rendezvousing with the *Challenger* to drop off Son'a prisoners and Captain Yejokk, an apparently rogue Klingon operative working with the Alshain, Jean-Luc had been hoping to spend some well earned vacation time on Earth. He hadn't seen his sister-in-law Marie in quite some time, and he was eager to show Anij his hometown of La Barre, France. Perhaps the idyllic French countryside could help take her mind off of the horrors she had witnessed over the past several months. He doubted it, but continued to hope nonetheless. Now, he would have to table his enthusiasm. However, Picard had never been one to shirk from duty or complain about whatever obstacles were placed before him. "*Enterprise* stands ready to serve Admiral."

The green-skinned Aquan actually smiled, another shocking event. "I expected no less." He quickly informed Picard of the situation. After Mermon finished, Jean-Luc sat back in his seat, momentarily overcome not just with concern, but also by a gnawing guilt. His actions in some way had caused this; his mission to save innocent lives had now cost others and might lead to still more deaths. He would do everything in his power to prevent that.

"We'll leave immediately," Picard said, waiting for permission to rise from his seat.

"Oh Jean-Luc," Mermon called to Picard just as he crossed the threshold of the admiral's door. The captain stopped and turned around.

"Yes Admiral?"

"What about your yacht? Perhaps I could contact Captain Sandhurst for you while you are briefing your senior staff?"

Picard smiled briefly at the courteous offer. "Thank you Admiral, but I think the *Cousteau* is in good hands. I'll retrieve it when I return from Alshain Proper."

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## **Space Station Lemuria Habitat Section**

Their lovemaking had been fierce. After seeing so much sorrow and death recently, Commander Ramirez grasped Commander Jeffrey Thorpe as if he were life itself. Her ardor nearly overwhelmed the man, but he stayed in the game long enough to make it pleasurable for her. From his flushed



appearance and the sheepish grin still on his face, Liana knew it had been pleasurable for Jeffrey too.

"Bet that Haliian chick can't make you grin like that," she knew it was the wrong thing as soon as it came out of her mouth. The grin quickly evaporated from Jeffrey's face. He sat up in the bed, and placed his back against the bed rest.

"You know I really shouldn't be here," he said. "I think...I thought I might've been falling for Aquiel. There is something there, I know it. But when the reports start coming into DS9 about the hell you guys were catching from the Alshain, all I could think about was you. I prayed...something I hadn't done in so long I damn near forgot how to...I prayed that you would be alright. I knew if I could see you one more time things would be different."

"Well, are they?" Liana asked, Thorpe's tone making her slightly uncomfortable. Ramirez was a career-oriented person. Though she preferred real flesh to holograms, she hadn't made relationships a priority in her life. She always told herself she could do the love stuff after she made captain. By then, Liana realized she would probably push the time back to after she was admiral and so on.

Jeffrey Thorpe looked at her long and hard. "I...don't know." Thorpe was a very honest and decent man. In good shape, but a fairly unremarkable face and, to be honest, presence, it was the man's empathy that shown through. He cared about people in a way Liana didn't think she ever had or could, and it was comforting being around someone so connected to the pulse of life.

"Look Jeff, I really appreciate you taking leave to come visit me. This stress reliever was well worth it. But I want you to know this doesn't have to be anymore than what it is now," her voice betrayed her, cracking before she got out the last word. Liana hoped Thorpe didn't notice.

"You don't mean that," the human feeling detector replied. Damn, Ramirez thought. She really hadn't expected to fall into a relationship today. She had a ton of refitting requests to approve.

"Yes...well, no...I guess," Liana's mouth felt like cotton. She rolled out of bed, wrapping the bed's top sheet around her and dashed to her replicator. After ordering a glass of Altairian water Ramirez took her time drinking it, as she tried to get her thoughts together. Partially satisfied with her come back, Ramirez strolled back to the bed. She sat on the edge of the bed. "Listen Jeff, I'm not sure what I mean right now. But I don't think I could handle a relationship right now. Especially a long distance one, we are two very busy people after all."

"I know," Thorpe said. "The galaxy's going to hell. But you know what it's always been going to hell. And to be honest, I'm getting tired of dealing with it all." He reached out and gently grasped the back of Liana's nearest

arm. He caressed it as he continued. "I've already submitted my resignation to Admiral Covey. She asked me to reconsider. I told her I would, but my mind's made up."

For a few seconds Ramirez was speechless. "You're joking right?"

Thorpe shook his head. "I've never been more serious about anything in my life."

"Jeff, stop kidding. We're Starfleet officers. What else would you do that could be half as exciting as this?"

"Actually I've thought about teaching. Going home to New York...giving back."

"You do that everyday already," Liana rejoined.

A shadow crossed Thorpe's face. "I used to believe that...before the war and then the *Nightingale* and *Aegis*. It seems that all I do is hurt other people these days. I want to get back to doing good and being able to see it with my own eyes. I can't say that right now about my Starfleet service. It seems like every problem we've tried to solve since the war ended mutates into another, even worse problem. To be honest, I'm tired of it."

"I never thought you were a quitter," Ramirez said, more harshly than she intended.

"Is that what you think?" Thorpe asked, his gaze pierced with hurt.

"I don't know," Liana replied, and she really didn't. She had never been given up and she had little respect for people who did.

"I thought you might understand," Jeff said, his voice dry. "I even thought that you might consider one day joining me in New York."

"Starfleet is my life," Ramirez replied.

"No, it isn't," Thorpe countered. "Or at least it doesn't have to be. If you marry it, it's a demanding, exacting spouse."

Liana humorlessly grinned, "Tell me something I don't know."

"All right," Jeffrey said, oblivious to Liana's attempt to bring levity back into the conversation, "You don't understand me now, but I think you will come to see my point of view before too long. And when you do, look me up in New York." The hand that had been caressing Ramirez's arm moved to her face. Thorpe made small circles around the woman's cheeks, before tugging at her chin, bringing her face closer to his. He pressed his lips softly against hers. Liana couldn't help but close her eyes and savor the moment in spite of herself, because deep down she knew when it ended, it would be over for good. Ramirez's destiny was somewhere in the stars. It was her blessing and her curse.

Pulling back from Ramirez, Thorpe gazed deeply into her eyes. With mutual sadness, he realized it too. "Good bye Liana." Jeffrey Thorpe said, his eyes brimming with tears.

After he left, Liana, the bed sheet still wrapped around her, walked to her viewport, and cursed the stars that compelled her.

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## **Escape Pod 5 Somewhere in Sector 443...**

Lt. Commander Kirce Carrick pounded the walls of the small, confining pod, rattling the tiny vessel with another string of epithets.

"Done venting?" Commander Marc Bolden asked, the pressure on his chest increasing with each labored breath. He had stopped looking at the drooping life support readings hours, perhaps days ago. "You know you're just wasting what little oxygen we have left."

"So?" Carrick asked. "We're going to die anyway."

"Love your optimism K.C.," Bolden grumbled. "But we're not dead yet."

"Yes we are," the woman said with absolute certainty. "We're stuck in the middle of nowhere, with the *Valour* gone or possibly space dust. And if anyone finds us it'll probably be those Alshain bastards coming to finish us off. I'm surprised we got away in the first place."

"So am I," Bolden said, his brow crinkling as he tried to focus his thoughts, but the lack of oxygen was making it hard to think clearly. About the only thoughts peeking through the haze were memories of his bunk back on the *Valour*. What he wouldn't give to be laying on his bed now. He closed his eyes, savoring the thought.

"Stay awake Commander," Carrick said. "Keep your eyes open."

"I didn't know you cared," Bolden smiled.

"I don't," Carrick replied. "It's just the smell in here would be even worse if you were dead."

"Thanks," Bolden rolled his eyes. "Tact is definitely not your strong suit."

"If I wanted to be tactful I would've been a counselor," Carrick remarked. "I like to get my hands dirty, or bloody, cracking the occasional skull or two."

"Don't worry," Bolden said, "You'll get a chance to rack more than a few Alshain heads before this is over."

"I better," Carrick said. "Because somebody has to pay for what they did to us."

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## ***SFS Yokkai* Alshain *Slayer*-Class Destroyer Somewhere in Sector 443....**

Syot Graf D'Grekker leaned forward in the command chair, his dead predecessor's medals clinking against each other across his broad chest. "Are you certain that this is the last escape pod?"

"Yes Syot," the oyan at the sensors terminal nodded vigorously.

"Shall I power weapons?" Weapons Officer Kveld Jast asked. D'Grekker snarled with displeasure.

"The Sutahr's orders were specific. One convoy ship and one pod must be left as bait."

"But how can the Sutahr be so certain that another starship will arrive soon?" Jast challenged.

"Because that is how the Federation operates. They don't appreciate the value of traveling in packs of equals, which is terribly inefficient, and so it requires them to always send a rescue party after one of their own encounters difficulty," D'Grekker said with as much pedantic disdain as he could summon. Jast had been a thorn in his dewclaw for days now.

Why the Sutahr had permitted Jast to remain breathing was beyond D'Grekker's comprehension. The *gark* had been a member of the former Syot Wadel G'Wura's circle after Sutahr R'Vott was relieved due to the loss of standing as a result of the failures of two of her extended Sept, Sutahrs R'Vor and R'Voss in recent actions against the Federation. D'Grekker had chosen to follow his commanding officer into disgrace. The Sutahr had removed the taint of D'Grekker's omega-birth by giving him an officer's commission aboard a Starforce vessel. Growing up on hardscrabble Risulfr colony, as far from the Exarchate as one could possibly be and still be considered Alshain, D'Grekker never imagined a life beyond toiling for scraps beside the Itrob vermin also living on the planet.

However, a group of sagacious Peers, under the direction of Exarch Jedalla sought to reinvigorate the Starforce by opening admissions to officer school and making graduation merit based. It had roiled a great many among the Peerage, but the reform had given D'Grekker his shot, and he had loped off with it as far as he could. He had made it all the way to first engineer, obtaining the rank of Kveld. And now he was a full fledged Syot. Once the rest of the Peerage came to its senses and restored Exarch Jedalla to his throne, D'Grekker might one day command his own vessel. D'Grekker hadn't been the only one in the crew that felt they owed either a personal debt to the Exarch, or supported him for making the Starforce a formidable threat again, and service within it one of the most prestigious honors in the entire empire. Wadel's captaincy ended as soon as the attack wing received orders from the so-called Coordinating Committee now ruling the Exarchate to cease hostile actions against the enemy and return home. Wadel and several of his reporters were jettisoned into space, and the crew begged R'Vott to put aside

her disgrace and return to command. The loss of the Third Fleet's entire 5<sup>th</sup> Squadron, in addition to the failures of R'Vott's kin demanded blood.

D'Grekker knew that R'Vott understood that, and he also knew the woman could perhaps secure her families' entrance into the Great Terrace despite the loss in station and respect they would endure in the material world. Her daring had kept them alive while continuing the fight, the attack wing's crews surviving off the bounty of whatever unfortunate ships crossed their path. However, many of the warriors had grown restless with the hit-and-run attacks. They had wanted to strike a major blow against the Federation, to draw blood. D'Grekker was a bit ashamed to say he shared their sentiments. He had succumbed to frustration; he hadn't seen the Sutahr's endgame. Now that she had struck, D'Grekker couldn't be more thrilled, or frightened. There was truly no turning back now. He feared for the Sutahr and the mission she had undertaken. He comforted himself with the gloomy thought that at least Jast would be braying in his ears instead of hers. With a clear mind Sutahr R'Vott was unstoppable...or so he prayed.

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### **Unnamed Planetoid Somewhere in Sector 443...**

"We have fulfilled our part of the deal," Sutahr Visla R'Vott said as she strode toward the wedge-shaped ship that had recently landed inside the planetoid's makeshift hold. The silver-white hull was crisscrossed with disruptor burns, dented in places, and perforated in others.

"Yes," her colleague Nardin sin Phalzan of the Phalkerian Domain replied, with disapproval as he inspected his prize. "But your paladins could've left the ship in better condition." He snapped loudly and the gaggle of purple-skinned, elfin-eared engineers behind him rushed by him to swarm around the vessel. There was a range of emotions on their dark, tattooed faces, ranging from complete rapture to mild fascination. Neither the Phalkerians nor the Alshain for that matter had such a war craft in their fleet. R'Vott was reluctant to let it go, but it was the price she had to pay to enlist the Domain's cooperation.

"It took all of my authority to keep my brethren from sending these infidels to the Desolate Plain," Nadfar Tarwez, captain of the Paladin contingent assigned to the attack wing, gruffly replied. "Be thankful that you received the ship as intact as it is."

Nardin grumbled before remarking, "But why did you take prisoners? No one must know of the Domain's involvement until the proper time." Unlike most Nardin didn't seem intimidated by the massive Tarwez.

"And no one will," R'Vott smoothly promised. "However, my warriors are restless, waiting here on this planetoid. The few raids we do aren't

enough to sate their war lust. The prisoners will provide some much needed distraction... until the Exarch arrives.”

“Yes,” Tarwez agreed. “Especially the *Valour’s* captain. She slew three of my paladins before she was subdued. She is mine.” He thumped his crimson chest plate for emphasis. R’Vott knew not to argue.

“Of course,” she said graciously. “While we’re awaiting both the Exarch and Syot D’Grekker’s next report, you can have your fun.”

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### **Ministry of State, Central Ministries Complex, Governance Arcology Alshain Proper**

The crowd outside the Central Ministries Complex had been steadily growing for days. The protests had started out respectful enough, but a more unruly, corrosive pall had recently settled over the mass. Interminable reports of violence were being transmitted to the Coordinating Committee’s chambers on a nearly continuous basis.

“Chairman C’Oemnm, we have to do something about this!” Committee member Boree L’Bek huffed. “We can’t let this crowd swell anymore. Things are already past the dangerous point. If we hesitate further, this mob will spiral out of control.”

C’Oemnm turned to the heavysset, silver-gray coated woman. “And what do you suggest Boree?” He asked, shocked at how old he sounded. “That we fire on our own people?”

“Yes,” Member Rulf T’Riav answered without equivocation. “This display is unseemly. The rabble should learn their place.”

“It’s just not the rabble out there,” Member Phalin K’Phrey, head of the dreaded Unguis, countered. “Some of the Peerage is protesting too.”

“The lower nobility,” T’Riav sniffed.

“No,” Member Nez G’Nesh replied, her voice coating with disbelief. “The latest reports spotted Dowager Managa among the crowd.”

“Impossible,” T’Riav spat. “No one of her high station would ever consort with the rabble. Not even if we deposed her son.”

“It’s true,” C’Oemnm said. He hesitated before he activated the terminal before him. He had ordered that reports be brought in, in a vain attempt to stave off the growing paranoia and desperation spreading among the Committee. A three-dimensional image of the scene just outside the complex showed the surging mass. Orthlin adjusted the controls until the cameras found Dowager Managa, Jedalla’s mother, standing up her the hand-held carriage, bedecked in a flowing gold-embroidered red robe. Appropriately she was being held aloft in front of a statue of Exarch Jedalla.

T'Riav snorted. "We should've razed that statue, and we should've sent Dowager Managa into exile along with Jedalla and his family. Another mistake..."

"We all agreed with Orthlin's plan to keep the Dowager and Jedalla's eldest son on Proper as de facto hostages, a tacit restraint on any ideas Jedalla might've had for pulling something like this," G'Nesh interjected.

"And we see how well that turned out," L'Bek hotly retorted.

C'Oemnm rounded on T'Riav, his fatigue pushed back by anger. "Are you questioning my leadership?"

"Yes," T'Riav said. "Exarch Jedalla should be dead now, his family too. Then there would've been no real legitimate claim to leadership, except whoever we picked to be the next Exarch. The paladins should've been purged, as well as the leadership of the Exarchal Guard and the Starforce. But in your desire to build consensus, to create some illusionary normalcy, you left a lot of loose ends, and now they will strangle us all if we don't act decisively."

"Is that a challenge?" C'Oemnm rose slowly out of his seat. The other committee members looked on with expectant eyes. Orthlin was disappointed that none had risen in his defense. T'Riav rose, his teeth bared.

"Gentlemen please," the only offworlder in the room stood up as well. Federation Ambassador Depek, Xin Dejong's replacement, quickly placed himself between the two men. "You have more important things to concern yourselves with at the moment than bruised egos."

"This isn't about my ego Xindi," T'Riav said, pushing lightly against Depek's restraining hand. "This is about the future of our race." Depek didn't budge.

"No," the sallow-skinned Xindi primate said. "This is about preventing a civil war. And you can't do that if the Coordinating Committee is divided."

C'Oemnm nodded. "You speak truth Ambassador." The Xindi grinned, which made him look even more formidable.

"And do you really think sending a Federation starship back into our space will dissuade the mob outside?" T'Riav was incredulous.

"Especially the *Enterprise*," L'Bek's voice was filled with bile. "It's the *Enterprise* that led the assault on our forces in the Briar Patch."

"That betrayed us by choosing the Son'a over us," K'Phrey concurred. "We were your allies; we deserved our share of the spoils of victory as much as the Klingons or Romulans. Yet, you sought to intervene in affairs that didn't concern you."

"*Enterprise* was the closest, most able ship available," Depek made no apologies. "And I guarantee you if Jedalla shows up and finds her above Alshain Proper it might give him pause."

"Or it could enrage him as surely as the *Enterprise's* appearance will do once the populace hears of it," G'Nesh said softly, her brow heavy with concern. "Not to mention our military forces. They are as likely to turn on the *Enterprise* as help them repel any assault from Jedalla."

Depek frowned. "Well...that is a possibility."

"It's a certainty," T'Riav said. He knocked Depek's hand from his chest, before returning to his seat. He flopped down and crossed his arms.

"The only thing that is certain is that *Enterprise* is the only ship you can trust right now, as much as it galls you to realize it," Depek said. "And the Federation's the only friend you've got."

C'Oemnm sighed, lowering his shoulders before he retook his seat. "I've removed our people from Jedalla's thumb only to be placed under yours," he put his head in his hands. "What have I done?"

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### ***USS Enterprise-E*** **(Observation Lounge)**

"Mr. N'Saba, a moment of your time please," Captain Picard said as soon as he finished his briefing. The rest of the senior staff dispersed quickly, though Commander Riker hesitated. Picard nodded, sending the larger man a non-verbal cue that he wished to speak to the Alshain Science Officer alone.

The Alshain's ears drooped in resignation, but he set his large shoulders as if preparing for an attack of some kind. Picard rose slowly out of his chair. "I know about your resignation request. I regret to inform you that it has been denied."

Alshain blinked, his blue artificial eyes eerily similar to Geordi's. "Because of this crisis on Alshain Proper I suppose?"

Picard nodded. "I wasn't informed of the exact reason why, but if I had to speculate I would say yes."

N'Saba sniffed. "It figures. Alas diplomacy is not one of my prodigious talents. Being the token Alshain during Taskforce Peacekeeper did little to stop the bloodshed. What does Starfleet think I can do to stop a counter coup?"

"Your information about Alshain tactics was pivotal to our understanding and success," Picard countered.

"You call what happened in the Briar Patch a success?" N'Saba retorted, his broad chest puffing out. "I don't call the slaughter committed by my people and that Starfleet committed upon them successful at all. When your own crew celebrated the destruction of the Starforce's 5<sup>th</sup> Squadron all I could think about was the Nauarch that died with the squadron. Edim S'Elani was a friend of Sept N'Saba. I knew his family; I attended the same schools with his



children. Not only will they grieve his loss, his disgrace will lower their social standing, a terrible blow. To make matters even worse, Sept N'Saba is a distant relation of the Exarch on my distaff line, who was deposed because of our 'success'. In times past I cared not for such seemingly trivial things, but they've started to become more important to me now."

"Mr. N'Saba, I understand how you might feel in terms of divided loyalties," Picard said, his voice softening slightly. "Ambassador Worf, the current Federation envoy to the Klingon Empire, once served on the *Enterprise-D*. I witnessed his struggle to reconcile his Klingon heritage and his Federation upbringing and I sympathize with your plight. However, even if your experience saves not one life, it could make a difference, and we need all the advantages we can get right now."

N'Saba glared at the captain, his muzzle twitching. "With all due respect Captain," he said, his tone bordering on insubordinate, "you don't know how I feel. I wasn't raised in the Federation like Worf, I wasn't indoctrinated like him. I am Alshain. I thought that I needed to be more, but now I realize it's enough. Starfleet can deny my resignation all it wants. That won't stop me from leaving."

Picard was taken aback. He hadn't been expecting this reaction from the Science Officer. The captain knew the man had been difficult on his various postings, but his achievements shielded him from harsh repercussions. Despite the man's reputation, Picard wasn't prepared for such open defiance. "Lieutenant Commander!" Picard snapped. "As long as you wear that uniform..."

N'Saba bristled. "You don't get it. I no longer desire to wear this uniform," he said, ripping his combadge from his breast and throwing it on the polished black table in front of the captain. "Are we done here?"

"No," Picard shook his head. "Starfleet Command has not accepted your resignation and this tantrum you've just engaged in has not changed that fact. You will be accompanying the *Enterprise* to Alshain Proper, and it is your decision whether you wish to do so on the bridge or in the brig."

N'Saba glared down at Picard for nearly a minute, ears pinned to the back of his head, his thick, black fur bristling. The captain pushed down his fight-or-flight response to stare back at the lupanoid.

The Science Officer snatched his compin from the table and reattached it to his chest. "Permission to return to my cabin sir?"

Picard nodded. "Permission granted."

At the conference room's door, N'Saba turned back to Picard. He grinned, rows of sharp teeth glinting from the ceiling's lights. "You're good Captain. I didn't think you had it in you. The only other man I've known to stare me down so was Captain Glover."

Picard remarked dryly, "The next time I see Captain Glover I'll make certain to compare notes." N'Saba literally howled with laughter as he exited the lounge. Picard hoped he could defuse any problems they encounter in Alshain space as easily.

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### ***Cousteau***

"Just sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip..." Ensign Lightner sang as he strummed his ukulele. Lt. Ashok did his best to try to accompany him with his Vulcan lyre, but the collaboration proved a discordant mess. However, Donald couldn't be too judgmental. Pell seemed to be enjoying herself, and even Lieutenants Juneau and Taiee were coming out of their respective shells. Though he hadn't accomplished anything he had set out to do, Sandhurst also had to admit that he was enjoying this trip, and even Lightner's horrendous singer. The last several months had been hell, and this excursion was a nice tonic to combat the madness surging around them like a turbulent sea.

Of course at his moment of contentment, Donald noticed a light at the communication console was blinking. "Intermission please," he said as he got up and walked over to the terminal. The cabin quieted almost instantly. "What's going on?" Sandhurst asked Lt. Para Lar'ragos, the other person on the line. Donald knew from the pinched look on the man's face that his vacation was over.

"Donald, Commander Ramirez has been called into a meeting with Admiral Mermon. I think you better get back here."

"What's going on Pava?" Sandhurst asked, his voice tightening with dread.

"I don't know yet, but the look on Mermon's face wouldn't win any beauty pageants."

"Understood," Sandhurst said. "See you in an hour."

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### ***USS Gibraltar***

#### **(Main Bridge)**

#### **En Route to Sector 443...**

Captain Donald Sandhurst couldn't believe how much the center seat had grown on him. It had never been his desire to be a captain. He had been content getting his hands dirty in the Engine room and really feeling his work after long hours keeping his ship running. But fate had other ideas for him.

And he couldn't deny the catch in his voice, or the goose bumps he sometimes felt each time the *Gibraltar* set course on a new mission. And he

gazed out at the stars from his elevated perch, as if he could see across the universe.

"The mate was a mighty Sailin' man, the Skipper brave and sure," Ensign Lightner started another round of the torture he had begun on the *Cousteau*.

"Can it Mr. Lightner," Sandhurst ordered. "My ears can't take the abuse anymore. Swiveling in his seat, the ensign grinned at the captain.

"Sorry sir, that song just has a tendency to stick in my head."

"And thank you for now passing that tendency on to me," Sandhurst dryly remarked, feeling good about the repartee. It actually felt wonderful to be a bit frivolous and silly, even though he had never considered himself to be those things. "Commander Ramirez, what's our status?"

"We're riding into an unknown, possibly hostile situation half-prepared," she replied, with absolutely none of the good humor that Donald possessed.

"What else is new," Lt. Pava Lar'ragos said, beating Sandhurst to the punch. The captain turned in his seat and regarded his long-time friend. The events in the Briar Patch had tested their friendship, and both men hadn't quite restored their fellowship. Sandhurst thought that now was as good a time as any.

"We missed you on the *Cousteau* Pava...you too Liana, what we're you guys up to?" Donald was surprised when he noticed Ramirez's cheeks reddening. The woman stared holes into her terminal without replying.

"Somebody had to do some work around here," Lar'ragos remarked. "While you guys were gallivanting about."

"What you call gallivanting, I call exploring," Donald replied, with exaggeratedly wounded pride.

"Flying around, strumming ukuleles and Vulcan lyres doesn't sound like exploring to me," the El Aurian shot back. "Commander Ramirez and I were picking up the slack."

"Is that so Commander?" Sandhurst turned back to the woman, trying to divine the cause of her sudden bout of silence, an unusual state of being for the normally outspoken First Officer.

She nodded. "Yes sir."

"Okay," Donald decided to leave it alone. He didn't know what was going on between Pava and Liana, or if he was imagining things. In any event it could wait until after they had returned from Sector 443.

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## **Deep Space Nine**

### **Commanding Officer's Office**

Admiral Monica Covey hated bad news, which was all she had been hearing since the end of the war. First on Cardassia Prime, where she had to contend with blowhards like the Romulan Admiral Goma and the loutish Klingon General Wo'toth, and then her transfer to DS9 in the aftermath of Premier Lang's assassination.

Covey had done her best to try to restore the tattered relations between the Federation and Bajor since she had arrived, but after Picard had convinced Starfleet to wade into the Alshain-Son'a war the admiral felt she belonged elsewhere. No other Starfleet officer understood the Alshain like she did. And it was obvious that the ignorance of her colleagues would continue to enflame the Alshain to a point of no return, unless she did something about it.

"You're kidding me right?" She asked, with a humorless half smile, "They really didn't send the *Enterprise*."

"It was the closest ship available," Commander Leslie Travers of Space Station Lemuria said. The blond Englishwoman's lean, florid face filled the tiny screen on Covey's desk. Though Covey had already received the official head's up from Starfleet Command, Travers owed her a few favors, and Monica decided to cash them in. Besides Monica knew that Travers was less than enthused about Admiral Mermon setting up shop on her station and wouldn't mind doing an end run around the Aquan.

"What about the *Gibraltar*?" Covey asked. "I thought it was docked at the Fleet Yards for repairs. Even though it doesn't have the firepower or cachet of the Federation flagship, it's not as widely known or hated as the Big E."

"Truth be told, that hunk should've stayed mothballed," Travers said, wincing seconds later. She had forgotten for a second that Covey had been responsible for Captain Sandhurst gaining command of the ship. Beyond that, Monica had placed one of her most trusted aide-de-camps, Commander Ramirez on board to insure Donald had a smooth, but appropriately challenging transition into the big chair. Covey also knew that a stint on the *Gibraltar* would give Liana the seasoning and humbling she needed before she got her own command.

"I'll let you slide this time," Covey said, "But I warn you not to underestimate Donald or his crew. They've pulled the proverbial rabbit out of the proverbial hat too many times to call their success a fluke."

"Of course Admiral," Travers said, not even trying to hide her disbelief. "Well, I hope Sandhurst has some more magic up his sleeve, especially if he encounters any thing bigger than a space mite in Sector 443."

"Why did Mermon send Gibraltar there?" Covey asked.

"I don't have all the details," Travers frowned. "Admiral Mermon thought it best to keep me in the dark...even though it's my station," the

woman rolled her eyes “Anyway, there appears to be a missing convoy that he’s sent Captain Sandhurst to help find.”

“Hmmm,” Covey rubbed her chin. “Sounds fishy to me.”

“Sounds wolfier to me,” Travers remarked. “You know the Alshain have been attacking shipping lanes around their space, the territorial buggers.”

“Thank you for this Leslie,” Monica said after a few seconds of deep thought. “Now I owe you one.”

“And you better believe it’ll be a doozy,” Travers said, with a mischievous smile. By the time Monica had turned off her screen, a plan had already half-formed in her mind. She opened a station comline.

“Lt. Commander Uhnari here,” the Haliian responded seconds later.

“Commander power up the *Defiant*, we’re going on a little trip,” Covey ordered.

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### ***IKS Kajh***

#### **Commanding Officer’s Ward Room Somewhere in Sector 443...**

“Deviating from the plan is not an option,” Brigadier Qorb stood his ground.

“Do you know who you are addressing?” Exarch Jedalla towered over the almost equally burly Klingon.

“Yes, the deposed ruler of a third-rate power,” Qorb spat. “I follow General Lorath’s orders, not yours!”

Jedalla grunted, folding his massive arms. “For all I know you’re leading me to a firing squad or an Orion slave processing center.” The Exarch cut his gaze to Polemarch Zef A’Zel, the Alshain general that had accompanied the Klingon strike force that had attacked the prison. The general stepped back, fear flashing in his amber eyes.

“Don’t tempt me,” Qorb riposted, unbowed. “No one forced you or your family to come with us.”

“There really was no alternative,” Jedalla remarked, his voice taking on a far away cast. “Either we could rot in that Unguis prison, or take our chances with you.”

“Even though your kind had a hand in betraying us,” Queen Symea, Jedalla’s mate, hissed.

Qorb was taken aback. His face muddled with embarrassment and rage. “K’Vada was the traitor! Not Lorath. General Lorath is an honorable man. He supported your efforts to inflict righteous vengeance against the Son’a. But the usurper Martok joined forces with the Federation to destroy both you and the general. The Federation wanted to stanch your ambitions and Martok

wanted to turn back Lorath's growing popularity by making him look foolish. The *pe'taQ* K'Vada and his lackeys were merely the instruments."

Jedalla nodded. "I devised as much." His voice and bearing were now more settled. "However Brigadier Qorb you can't deny that the reports coming in from Alshain Proper reveal that the people-my people-are slaving for my return."

Qorb conceded that, but added, "We don't have the arms. Both you and General Lorath can't trust the warriors who swear loyalty to you. You both need time to sort that out, and to rebuild your forces. The general is wise in understanding that, and he is certain you see the same."

Jedalla pounded his fists on the table and roared, both actions rattling the walls of the stateroom. "Of course I do. But it doesn't mean that it sits well with me."

"If it did," Qorb smiled wickedly, "I would jettison you with the next batch of refuse." The walls rattled with mingled laughter as the *Kajh* sliced through the vacuum.

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## Part Two: Trial by Fire

### *USS Meharry* Sector 443...

"Captain, we're picking up something on long range sensors," Ensign Kaneq, the Siberian Yup'ik at the Helm, said, his voice raising an octave.

"What've we got?" Captain M'Bira asked, her stomach muscles tightening. She refrained from voicing her wish that whatever it was wasn't hostile.

"I'm getting a transponder signal," Lt. Ra-Goran at Tactical said. For once the Efrosian Tactical officer sounded remotely interested. "The signal's registered to one of the convoy ships, a transport named the *Fortunate*." He paused, pursing his thin beige lips. "We've also got something else, coming up on the side of the *Fortunate*, in an elliptical orbit."

"On screen," M'Bira ordered. The screen shifted from panoply of stars to a small, in descript shape. "Magnify." Immediately, the sensors zoomed on the ship. Circling it in a dead dance was a tiny escape pod. The Caitian gasped at the battered appearance of the ship. "Is anyone alive onboard that ship or in the pod?"

Junior Grade Lieutenant T'Lok replied from the Operations console adjacent Kaneq. "Ma'am we've got twelve life signs on the ship and two in the pod, all extremely faint."

"What was the total number of crew aboard?" M'Bira asked, her voice welling with sadness.

"Thirty-six," T'Lok responded, the Tiburonian's elephantine ears drooping with sorrow.

"With due respect," Commander Anchal Sidhani interjected, "we should be more concerned about the ones still alive." M'Bira glanced at her intense First Officer. Sidhani was older, with far more executive experience. She had served aboard the *Galaxy*-class *Aeneas* during the Dominion War, before mysteriously leaving that ship at the behest of Dr. Elian Paskor, *Meharry's* Chief Medical Officer. M'Bira hadn't gotten the full story behind that and neither one of her subordinate officers had been very forthcoming. The Caitian chalked it up as a personal matter and decided not to stress the issue. Whatever secret the two shared hadn't affected their ability to perform their duties, and M'Bira resolved herself with that.

In fact she had come to lean perhaps too much on Sidhani. M'Bira was a doctor by training, a command-line officer second. She had only decided to make the switch to the command path at the urging of one of her mentors from Starfleet Medical. M'Bira had always believed in serving where needed,

and the war had depleted the officer's ranks drastically. As soon as she stepped aboard the *Meharry* she realized that perhaps she had bitten off more than she could chew, that her learning curve would be steep, but the Caitian attempted to continue climbing it until she felt more confident in her abilities to command.

"You're right Commander," M'Bira responded. "Hail the vessel," she paused, throwing a toggle switch on the armrest of her chair, "Transporter chief, prepare to beam twelve people aboard." After that, she contacted Dr. Paskor in Sickbay.

"I'm getting no response," Ra-Goran said.

"Their warp containment is finally starting to go!" T'Lok nearly shouted. M'Bira toggled the switch. "Transporter chief, emergency beam now to Sickbay now!" She glanced at Sidhani. "Commander go down to Sickbay and see what you can find out about what happened to the unfortunate crew of that ship."

"I'm on it," Sidhani bolted out of her seat.

"It's about to blow, and it's going to take the escape pod with it," Ra-Goran noted.

"Shields Mr. Ra-Goran!" M'Bira nearly shouted herself, her hackles rising as she saw an infernal light knife through the battered ship. Instead of hearing the anticipated prompt, though cheerless reply from the Efrosian, the ship trembled as a power surge swept through the bridge, causing some consoles to explode and knocking some crewmen out of their seats.

M'Bira held back her scream, though the smell of her burnt flesh and fur, courtesy of her fried armrest terminals, roiled her stomach. But her concern for her crew outweighed her pain. She hopped out of her seat, her feline eyes quickly adjusting to the now darkened bridge. "What the hells just happened?"

Ra-Goran staggered to his feet. He hunched over his console, pounding it until it sparked before going dim. He looked up at her, his voice more lifeless than she had ever heard it. "I...don't know."

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### ***USS Meharry*** **(Turbolift One)**

Commander Anchal Sidhani threw herself against the doors of the turbolift, trying to pry open the elevator with her bare hands. She knew it was futile, but she had to do something. The lift's controls were dead, she couldn't raise anyone on her combadge, and the emergency hatch on the roof of the lift wouldn't open either. She felt the trembling of the ship in her bones. Sidhani had seen enough action against the Dominion to know when a ship was being fired upon. Someone was attacking the *Meharry*, and she was stuck in the lift,



helpless, useless...like so many times before. She wailed, screeching for help, feeling ashamed and outside of herself.

Sidhani's deeply rooted fear of tight enclosed spaces began to slither from the mental walls she had built around it. The pitch blackness didn't help mollify her growing anxiety either. She began hyperventilating as the darkness coiled around Sidhani, clutching her in its grasp, stripping off the mask of normalcy she wore and had almost come to believe in more than her reality. But in the darkness she could never hide from herself, or what she had done. She could never lie to herself like she had to others, or deny that she didn't like it, that the power hadn't given her a thrill she hadn't felt since she had first ventured into space.

She kneeled onto the floor of the car, before eventually wrapping herself in a fetal position, hoping to protect as much of herself from the darkness as possible. "Go away," she whispered. "Not now...Please."

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***USS Meharri***  
**(Main Engineering)**

Lt. Luna McCall tossed Jasmine a wrist-light. She fumbled the device a couple times before successfully latching it onto her wrist. For once Lt. Glover was glad the woman hadn't waited for orders. Because as soon as the ship had trembled and the lights went out, Jasmine's mind teleported back to the *Mandela* and the burning ooze of the coolant that had spewed over her body, taking so much away for her. For a second she had hesitated, and she was ashamed. Glover promised to make up for it by taking charge of the situation as quickly as possible. But she couldn't help but glance up at the large, cylindrical warp core, it's normally vibrant colors now obsidian, and shiver.

"Ellis, I want the lights back on ASAP," she roughly ordered. "L'Tev and McCall check the status of the warp core." She swept over the darkened room with her light, gasping when she encountered several prone bodies. She ran to them, checking pulses as she sought to get a sense of their injuries. There were several badly burned crewmen, but she hoped their injuries weren't fatal. Glover attempted to contact Sickbay, but got no response, likewise the bridge.

"We're dead in the water," McCall reported back seconds later. "The power surge or whatever it was fried our dilithium crystals. They've fused in the dilithium chamber. We'll have to scoop them out before replacing them."

"Do it," Jasmine ordered, trying hard not to fidget.

"Any word from the bridge?" McCall asked. Several of the engineering crew paused to hear Jasmine's response. She definitely didn't need her crew to see her anxious or doubtful.

"No," she answered truthfully, "but that's not our primary concern right now. When we do get back in contact with the captain, she'll want our engines running."

"We're on it," Ellis said. The perpetually upbeat man radiated positive vibes even in the gloom. Glover was gladder to have him on her team at that moment than she could describe in words. Jasmine rushed to join McCall and L'Tev in restoring warp power. She had contemplated using the Jeffries tubes to travel to the bridge. If this was the *Aegis* and Terrence was up there, she would've have she knew. But he wasn't, he was far away from here, and she might die without ever resolving things with him. Jasmine promised herself that she wouldn't allow that to happen, no matter what.

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### ***SFS Yokkai***

#### **Alshain *Slayer-Class* Destroyer**

"Shall I drop the cloak," Kveld Jast asked, his eagerness infectious. Syot D'Grekker gripped his armrests and ran his tongue over sharpened rows of teeth.

"It's time to claim our prey." He said with relish.

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### **USS Meharry (Sickbay)**

Commander Marc Bolden hadn't believed he would ever open his eyes again...not in the mortal world. "Are...are you an angel?"

"For some, for others I'm a devil," the gorgeous Ktarian smirked. "But you can just call me Nurse Rema." She playfully puffed up her hair.

"Nurse?" Bolden croaked, his eyes finally focusing on the bluish-gray strip covering the woman's shoulders. "Where?" And that's when his bed shook, the lights went out, and he knew. Bolden bolted from the bed, slamming into a person he believed to be Nurse Rema from her surprised shout. He caught the woman before she fell and gently lowered her to the ground. "Where is your captain? I've got to warn him! The Alshain ambushed us! Destroyed my ship! They're back, we've to do something!"

"Calm down sir," Rema said beneath him. "I'm sure it's just a minor malfunction of some sort. Power will be restored momentarily."

"You don't understand," Bolden wailed. "They'll kill us all." He looked around frantically, frightened by the shapes he could barely make out in the gloom. He blinked and then threw up a hand to shield his eyes from a blinding light.

"It's alright," he heard a patient male voice. "You're among friends here, fellow officers. What's your name?"

When Bolden's eyes adjusted, he saw that the voice belonged to a pale green Orion, also in a Starfleet uniform. "I'm Doctor Paskor," he said, reaching out a hand. Bolden didn't shake it.

"You're the CMO?" He pointedly asked.

"Yes," the Orion said good-naturedly, as if Bolden's rebuff had never happened.

"Where is your captain? I need to see her at once!" Marc demanded.

"Just hold on there officer," Paskor said calmly. He placed a hand on Bolden's shoulder. The ship rattled again.

"I don't have time for this." Shrugging off the hand, Bolden looked around, trying to find the exit. "What the hells is the matter with you people?" He muttered, before he heard a hiss by his ear, coolness on his neck. And then things got real heavy for him, forcing him to the ground. Marc wasn't sure if it was his imagination or not, but he thought he heard the baleful cry of a wolf somewhere in the distance.

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### ***USS Meharry*** **(Main Bridge)**

Captain M'Bira's ears twitched painfully as the sound of cutting metal filled the bridge. Sparks lit up the seam between the duranium doors leading to the Main Corridor from the Bridge. She looked at Ra-Goran. "What's happening?" The Efrosian was bathed in the blood red of the emergency lights that had finally come back on.

"I think we've been boarded," he said, with enviable serenity. He moved to the armory wall locker in the aft portion of the bridge. It had been one of the newer innovations on medical ships caused by the Dominion War. M'Bira never thought she would have to use it in the post-war period. Ra-Goran unlocked the compartment, and the captain ordered the bridge officers still standing or alive to line up to receive a weapon. She took the last one. The Efrosian then slid a bandolier filled with stun grenades across his chest.

Trapped on the bridge, disconnected from the rest of her ship, with unknown hostiles cutting their way into her bridge, M'Bira hoped she would live to recount this story to her mentor one day.

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### **Unnamed Planetoid** **Sector 443**

Captain Nandali Kojo snapped the Alshain warrior's neck without hesitation. She laughed harshly at the canid's final mewling. It was as pathetic as his feeble death rattle seconds later. She glared at the large, white-furred Alshain covered in crimson armorweave, "I can do this all night. Are you brave enough now to face me?" She challenged, her naked chest heaving from a mixture of exhaustion and exhilaration.

She had just killed her third Alshain in as many hours, to the rapturous applause of the red-garbed Alshain, and the snarling curses of the other lower-ranking Alshain forming a circle around their makeshift ring.

The white-furred warrior laughed. "You are quite intriguing Captain Kojo. I'm glad we stripped you of that Starfleet uniform. It was undeserving of you." Nandali stood before the circle, wearing only a black loin cloth, made from her tattered uniform. Her body was riddled with scars, old and new, and her skin was covered with the blood of her enemies, and quite a bit of her own.

But Kojo felt no embarrassment or pain. She was still too furious about losing her ship. She still hadn't figured out how the Alshain had neutralized her shields, or where they had gotten cloaking devices from. The Starfleet Intelligence reports she had read about the Briar Patch mission reported that only one Alshain vessel had been outfitted with a Klingon cloaking device, supplied by rogue Klingon elements that had been apprehended. Perhaps the Alshain had more friends in the Empire than SI or the So'taj knew about or perhaps the damnable Romulans had provided the technology to the lupanoids.

Before she died, she vowed to find out. It was the least she could do so that she could explain her dishonor to her husband Kojo when she saw him in the afterlife. He had to know why she could never spend eternity with him in Sto-Vo-Kor. Kojo knew she could never wash herself of the blood of the *Valour* crewmen who had died for her blood lust. If she had listened to Commander Bolden perhaps her dishonor could've been averted. She was certain he would be among the shades rightfully damning her as she journeyed to Gre'thor on the Barge of the Dead.

Kojo cracked her swollen knuckles. "You still haven't answered me," she said. "I see the Alshain are still cowardly beasts." The crowd surged forward, surrounding her.

"Stop!" the white-furred Alshain bellowed. The warriors froze immediately. "No harm will come to Captain Kojo...yet. I'm sure that the Exarch will wish to speak to her." He parted the circle to glare down at the Kriosian. "And after that, I promise you will get your wish."

"Not soon enough," Kojo replied, striking the looming Alshain in the throat. The crunch of his trachea, and his desperate gasps were the most

satisfying sounds Kojo had ever heard, more beautiful than any Kriosian sonnet or Klingon opera piece.

In their rush to attend their leader, the soldiers had pushed Kojo out of the way. She slid away from them, expertly swiping an exciser pistol from the holster of one of the warriors bent over their gurgling leader. Kojo dashed for the nearest exit. A dozen of her crew had been captured and brought here, wherever this place was. Kojo decided to find them, and together they would fight their way to a ship and freedom.

Though the ghosts of her failures were on her back, Kojo hadn't felt so shamefully alive since the end of the war with the Dominion.

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### **Unnamed Planetoid Somewhere in Sector 443...**

By the time Sutahr R'Vott had arrived, Nadfar Tarwez was dead. His paladins held him aloft, uttering soft, mournful growls for their fallen commander.

R'Vott was less sanguine. "Dispose of that immediately," she said. She looked around the room. "Where is the prisoner?" The paladins looked at each other, then almost in unison at R'Vott, before they began their own search of the room. The cloud of grief quickly turned into one of anger. At least the paladins were well trained enough not to resort to recriminations.

"We don't know," a sandy-furred Alshain, already blooded with Tarwez's blood in four stripes across his face, stepped forward. "We weren't aware that she had escaped."

R'Vott almost laughed at the cosmic stupidity of it all. "I thought the Paladins were the elite, the best of our kind."

"We are," Tarwez's successor said without a hint of arrogance. To him, and all of them, it was a matter of fact.

"Yet, you've allowed a Kriosian, a woman to not only best four of your warriors," she had paused to count the heavy bodies on the floor, "but to dupe all of you as well."

The successor's muzzle twitched with displeasure, and consternation flashed in his equally sandy eyes. R'Vott couldn't help but smile. She had faced the patriarchal attitudes among the males of her species all of her life. It had been Jedalla's reforms that had opened up the military and the ranks of the lower-nobility to females and non-titled people to gain a stake in the Greater Alshain he was rebuilding. R'Vott felt she owed him her life, and she would not mar his arrival with a very dangerous prisoner running loose. What would that say about her, or the trust he had placed in her and all of Alshain females?

"We will correct this," the successor promised. He bade his men to leave Tarwez's body by the others.

"Proceed," R'Vott ordered. "We don't have long before the Exarch arrives."

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### ***USS Meharry***

#### **(Main Corridor leading to the Bridge...)**

Syot Graf D'Grekker quivered with anticipation. He could literally taste the fear emanating on the wounded starship's bridge. "Hurry," he barked at the warrior holding the blowtorch. The torch's plasma flame blossomed even more fiercely as it sliced into the main bridge's doors.

Though the Sutahr had ordered him to destroy any Federation ship that responded to the missing convoy, to ensure the Exarch safe passage to their hidden base, D'Grekker had a moment of inspiration. After scuttling the convoy ship and escape pod used as bait, the *Yokkai* had carved into the Federation ship, leaving it listing and dead in space within a matter of minutes with a dissatisfying ease. Seeing the defenseless, globular-hulled ship before them, laden with weapons, medical supplies and other bounty that might be of use to them, Graf had ordered that the ship be boarded.

No one had reminded him of the Syot's orders, all of the warriors were eager to dig their claws and sink their teeth into the enemy that had recently spat upon all Alshain. He was certain that when he returned with the plunder that the Sutahr, and more importantly the Exarch, would reward his initiative.

He had sent teams to Engineering and Sickbay. He had led the team on the strike against the bridge. Though he could've beamed onto the bridge, D'Grekker forced himself to exercise some restraint. In his eagerness he might've transported into the middle of barrage of phaser bolts. This way, he could use the corridor and the doors leading to the bridge for cover of some kind.

As soon as the doors parted slightly, D'Grekker pushed the man out of the way. He ordered two of his soldiers to grab the jagged, molten ends of the doors and wrest them apart. The two did so without complaint. Graf ignored the smell of their roasting flesh, or of the streaks of blood running down the doors caused by the jutting, hot metal.

Once the doors were sufficiently opened, D'Grekker ordered his warriors to fire into the opening. After almost a minute of fire, he stopped them. There had been no response. That was odd, but the quiet did nothing to dispel D'Grekker's ardor. "Starfleet warriors, if you surrender now I promise no harm will come to you!" He repeated the offer several seconds later. No one replied to either offer. "Starfleet warriors," D'Grekker said again, letting

his ire fill his words, "Surrender immediately or I will lay waste to the brig and then your entire ship."

"That'll be the day," one of the Starfleeters said. It was followed by a harsh rebuke from a feminine voice.

"Sorry captain," the other replied sheepishly, before the bridge quieted again. D'Grekker grinned while he stroked the tuft of fur hanging from his chin. So, the captain was still alive. Presenting a live Starfleet captain could move his Sept into the high nobility. Exarch Jedalla might even make him a Peer.

"Commander of this vessel, for the sake of your crew, I order you to surrender now!" He motioned for his warriors to take position around the opening.

"Come and get us you bastards!" It was the first voice again.

"Ensign you're on report!" Now the captain spoke again, frustration evident in her voice. D'Grekker wasn't sure how many of the bridge crew had survived their assault, or what truly awaited him, but he was confident he was prepared for it.

"Storm the opening," he rasped softly to his warriors. "Good hunting." Despite their lanky, muscled bodies, the Alshain moved swiftly through the opening, each firing into the void as they tumbled into a defensive shield protecting D'Grekker who went in last.

He wasn't prepared after all for what awaited him. Nothing. No one was on the bridge. "Where are they?" He snapped to his second, Kveld Jast. Jast pulled out a sensor device. He swept it around the smoky, ruined bridge.

"There," he said after a few seconds, pointing up at a vent in one of the bulkheads. "Seven lifeforms are up there." D'Grekker laughed. He at least had to give the captain credit for not merely waiting to be captured. The momentary delay, however, would enliven her torturing sessions. He felt it was only right to repay the extra effort he would have to expend pulling her out of the bulkhead, with an extra effort of his own.

He walked jauntily to the wall where the vent was located. Looking up, he ran one of his claws against the wall, the screeching sound even annoying him. "A valiant effort Captain, but it's time for this game to end. I give you one more chance to surrender."

A loud sigh issued from the overhead vent. It was the sound of defeat. "Okay," the woman said, her voice wearied, "If I surrender, do you promise that my crew will not be hurt?"

"You have my word as a warrior," D'Grekker puffed out his chest with false pride.

"What will become of them, or my ship?"

"Once we have appropriated some of your supplies, you and your crew can go about your way."

"Who are you?" the woman asked. Jast nodded vociferously against revealing their identity. D'Grekker shrugged. What did it matter? The captain and would be a gift to the Exarch, the supplies a gift for the Sutahr, and the rest of the ship's crew could provide entertainment for the warriors.

"I am Syot D'Grekker, of the Alshain Starforce." Graf was pleased at the captain's sharp inhalation.

"Alshain?" she asked, incredulous. "What are the Alshain doing here? And why would you attack a Federation vessel?"

"Knowing it could lead to war?" It was the second voice again. "Especially after we dusted you guys the last time."

"Ensign!" the captain hissed. "That's enough from you!" Several of his strike team roared with anger at the insult. D'Grekker's stomach roiled with the bile of the comment too.

"Who is that?" He bellowed, pounding against the wall. "He will be the death of you all!"

"My apologies...Syot D'Grekker," the captain said smoothly. "I am Captain M'Bira of the Federation Starship *Meharry*. Despite the impertinence of my subordinates comment, if you are truly a member of the Alshain Starforce, you must agree that this action you've undertaken is an act of war against the United Federation of Planets."

"I'm through with talking," D'Grekker roared. "Come down now, or we will climb up there and rip you from that crawlspace."

"As you wish," the captain's voice was tinny. D'Grekker smiled again, feeling his control of the situation return. The vent's panel opened, and he saw a furry hand, not too dissimilar from his own, though far more dainty. She held some type of sash in her hand. She released it and it clanged on the floor. He quickly bent down to pick it up. It was heavier than it should've been, and lumpy. Turning it over, he saw twelve silvery blue grenades, their tops flashing red. He hurled the grenades away from him, and bounded to the opening.

"They're grenades!" He yelled behind him to his bewildered warriors. "They're gren..." The concussive wave stole his voice as it slammed him against a wall.

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### ***USS Meharry*** **(Sickbay)**

Commander Marc Bolden's head felt like a herd of Takaran wildebeests had just trampled through it. "Wha-where?" he asked groggily, reaching for his throbbing temples.

"No time to explain sir," Lt. Commander Carrick said, shoving a scalpel into his hands. "They're coming in now!" She whispered through clenched



teeth as the doors parted. Horrible wails rattled against the walls as large, dark shapes moved through the dim room.

The baying sheared the fog from Bolden's mind. The Alshain, he realized. They're here, he knew, his memory flooding back to him. Bolden charged toward the loping dark shapes, activating the scalpel.

He knew he would have to get in close to do real damage, but he also knew it would place him within striking distance of the Alshains' razor sharp claws and teeth, not to mention their parahuman strength. But he had to protect the other people in Sickbay as long as he could. If he could buy a few extra seconds until help hopefully arrived soon, Bolden was willing to pay that price.

Before he knew it, one of the Alshain was upon him, battering him to the floor. The beast was on top of him, his heavy body crushing the air out of Bolden's lungs, the thick saliva from its mouth coating Marc's face. Bolden twisted his head frantically trying to avoid the canid's fangs. He knew the creature was toying with him, and the commander planned to make the arrogant Alshain pay for taking him lightly.

He had thankfully held on to the laser scalpel. He held it up to the Alshain's ear and activated. The beam sliced through the passage, melting the creature's brain within seconds. The warrior died without a whimper. Before Bolden threw the body off him, he checked it for weapons. He yanked a large disruptor pistol from the holster hanging from the dead Alshain's belt. He flipped the corpse off him, but stayed on all fours. He wanted to see what he was up against before he engaged. That was until he saw one of Lt. Commander Carrick struggling against one of the Alshain, his teeth clamped firmly around her arm. Carrick was protecting a screaming nurse. A half-second of recall brought her name back to Marc: Nurse Rema. Without hesitation, he aimed and fired, the beam punching into the lupanoid's head. The warrior yelped, pitching its head back before falling to the ground, taking Carrick along for the ride.

He ran to her. She was already prying her ruined arms from the canid's jaws. "Save the others sir," she said, her voice coated with steel. Bolden looked at Nurse Rema.

"Please take care of her," he asked the Ktarian. She nodded maniacally. With two down, Bolden quickly counted four more. And two of them were coming his way, weapons drawn. Bolden fired in a wild arc, unwilling to think about any innocent bystanders that might get hit. His primary objective was to remove the main threat. He caught one, blowing a nice chunk out of its side. But the other Alshain was far more agile. He sidestepped the blast, drawing something from his belt. Bolden felt a searing pain in his shoulder seconds later. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the glinting hilt of a dagger

imbedded inches away from his neck. Before he could pull it out, the Alshain swiped at him, goring his chest with its claws.

Bolden tried to shoot the canid, but the creature was too close. It swiped the disruptor out of his hands, and drove him back to the floor. *Damn, I wish I hadn't gotten rid of the scalpel*, the commander futilely thought as he gazed up into the fetid maw of sharp-rowed teeth bearing down on him.

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### ***USS Meharry*** **(Engineering-Computer Access Room)**

The assault had ended almost ten minutes ago. Jasmine had felt each rattle of the deck plates, the sloshing of the plasma coolant inside the tanks flanking the warp core loud without the sound of working terminals to drown it out.

The Chief Engineer flinched each time the liquid splashed, but she continued trying to restore power to the engines. She knew that her primary mission was to give the crew a fighting chance against whatever hostiles they had encountered, and the lightly-armed med ship wouldn't stand a chance without propulsion.

Lt. McCall had been able to restore the generators, giving them, and hopefully the entire ship at least dim lighting. Jasmine had then set the entire Engineering department to the task of restarting the warp core. She had taken it upon herself to restore to inspect the main computer core for damage.

Glover knew restoring control to Captain M'Bira was as important as getting the engines running again. And she didn't know her crew well enough to trust them with the job. Having them work together on bringing the warp core back on line would allow for them to check each others' work. She also had to admit to herself that she wasn't prepared to look into the glassy eyes of the two crewmen that had died in the assault. The stench of death permeated the engineering room, giving the room a sepulchral feel. With the isolation doors sealing off main engineering from the rest of the ship, Jasmine felt even more entombed.

Jasmine had scaled the ladder leading to the ship's computer access room with ease, her mechanical arm and leg easing her ascent. Glover was pleased to discover minor damage to the computer core. There were some damaged circuits. She moved quickly to replace them, her artificial arm again proving valuable in removing and replacing the burnt isolinear chips.

For most of the two years since her accident, Jasmine had acted like she had never lost her flesh and blood limbs, and she hated being reminded of the truth. She felt scarred and hideous, even more so when Terrence said otherwise. But time, especially time away from Terrence, had helped give

Jasmine some perspective. She was starting to slowly accept her artificial limbs and to use their 'gifts' when the need arose.

Finishing her task quickly, Glover smiled at herself when the main core sparked back to life. She tried out her combadge. "Glover to Bridge," she frowned when she got no response. She then tried Sickbay. "Glover to Sickbay."

"Jasmine," though the voice was strained, Glover recognized the speaker.

"Doctor Paskor," she began.

"Now's not really a good time...the Alshain..." the chief medic said before the line crackled and then went dead. Jasmine's heart fluttered in her chest. My God, she thought, when will all the violence end? She had hoped the incident in the Briar Patch had taught the Alshain the error of their aggressive ways.

Glover quickly checked the central computer for bio-signals. She registered a total of eighteen Alshain signatures. Where they really so arrogant to think they could even take a Starfleet medical ship with so few soldiers. When she tasked the computer to track the signatures, she noticed several terminations. Jasmine felt terrible about the joy she felt. But the momentary joy turned to dread when she saw that six of the Alshain bio-signs were outside Main Engineering's isolation doors. It appeared teams of six were on the Main Bridge and in Sickbay.

Fighting her panic, Jasmine quickly shifted the ship's command control to the main computer core to prevent the Alshain from gaining access to the ship's control systems. She then inquired about countermeasures for boarding parties. Finding a solution she liked, Glover ordered the computer to proceed. Jasmine couldn't help but wonder if Terrence would've done the same thing, or if he would be proud of her now as the anesthizine gas began to seep throughout the ship.

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### ***SFS Yokkai***

#### ***Alshain Slayer-Class Destroyer***

Oyan Prikol M'Paiduk was jealous. He wished more than anything to have been chosen to join the Syot's raid on the Starfleet vessel. But he was a Science Officer, more familiar with the halls of the Exarchal Observatory than battlefields.

Being the third highest ranking officer after Kveld Jast, Prikol understood the logic of D'Grekker's decision, but he still didn't agree with it. M'Paiduk had never been aboard a Federation vessel. He was sure his powers of observation could've netted some valuable intelligence about the ship,

perhaps something of greater worth than the lode the Syot was certain to acquire.

He sighed, contenting himself with gazing at the ship on the main viewer. After the interferometric beam had countered the starship's shields, the *Yokkai's* weapons banks had ripped into the ship, gouging dark, jagged lines across the hull. Atmosphere was still venting out into space in certain areas struck by the exciser cannons.

M'Paiduk was anxious for the commander to return. He was eager to at least hear of the ship from second hand accounts. He was tempted to contact the Syot, but feared to disobey D'Grekker's orders for radio silence.

"Oyan!" The warriors at the sensors terminal yelped excitedly, "the Federation ship is turning." M'Paiduk blinked, coming down from his perch of daydreams.

"What?" He asked, incredulous. But he couldn't deny the image on the screen. The darkened, scored ship was turning. Its globe-shaped hull was turning to face them.

"Contact Syot D'Grekker," M'Paiduk ordered the communications officer. "Perhaps the Syot is merely greeting us." Prikol was glad the officer didn't bring up the Syot's previous command.

"I-I can't raise the Syot," the comm. officer said seconds later, her voice fraught with worry. "None of the teams are responding."

"None?" M'Paiduk couldn't believe that. He left the center chair and padded over to the comm. officer's terminal. Looking down, he blinked several times in surprise.

"That's very unusual," he replied. "Perhaps the Syot has encountered some problems, and it is not one of ours in control of that vessel."

"Shall I raise shields Oyan?" The tactical officer did a poor job hiding his impatience.

"Of course," M'Paiduk said, "Of course." He glanced at the screen, and saw a wave of blue-white energy racing towards them. He realized too late that the wave would hit them before the shields could be activated.

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### ***USS Meharry*** **Security Detention Center** **(Three hours after the wave...)**

Dr. Elian Paskor frowned. "Captain, I insist that you allow me to treat these soldiers." The ship's small cells were packed with members of the Alshain boarding party, and also some of the warriors taken captive on the *Yokkai*. The other warriors from the *Yokkai* were being held in the ship's

Shuttle Bay, with chilling standing orders to open the bay if the warriors attempted to escape.

"Doctor Paskor," Captain M'Bira had never looked or sounded so tired to him. He had known the woman since she was a bright, eager medical intern far too many years ago. "Elian," the Caitian said more quietly. "You know how I feel about the ethical treatment of prisoners or anyone in pain...but I can't. I would be afraid to let you go in there even with an armed security detail."

"And you should be," Syot D'Grekker's rage was clotted by grogginess, but filled with enough venom to resonate with the chief medic. The big, bruising Alshain reminded Elian of his uncle and that wasn't a good thing. "I'm going to strip the flesh from each of your bones." Despite the threat, D'Grekker made no move to storm the forcefield. Elian noticed that other captured Alshain were starting to stir. Perhaps if they did so in mass they might override the security system. The force barrier was designed to give a painful jolt, not to kill. It was likely that with enough consistent pressure on the field, the computer would shut it off to prevent a fatality. Paskor hoped that D'Grekker wasn't foolish enough or enraged enough to try it. Right now, the human-Orion hybrid didn't hold out much hope.

"We've got our own wounded to take care of Doc," Commander Anchal Sidhani replied shakily. The woman was still coping with her ordeal, though she made a valiant effort to conceal her near breakdown. Paskor had also known Anchal for quite some time, both of them shared unsavory pasts, and he knew how terrible the last couple hours must have been for her. He couldn't wait until a semblance of normalcy returned to the ship so he could talk to her about it. Sidhani had made so much progress he would hate to see her fall apart now.

"I'm well aware of that," he glanced at the Alshain and shrugged. "I guess you guys are on your own."

"Alshain can take care of themselves," D'Grekker said haughtily. "We've always been alone in the universe. We know we only have each other. And that means other ships will come in search of my vessel. Surrender now and I'll show mercy."

"Get a load of this guy," Commander Marc Bolden, still favoring his tender shoulder, said. "If this were the *Valour* you'd be sucking space right now." A heavily bandaged Boslic female in civilian dress leaned against the dark-skinned human.

"Damn right," Lt. Commander Kirce Carrick, her arm wrapped in bloodstained sling, replied; her voice as cold as space. "You monsters are going to pay for what you did to our ship!"

"And the convoy," Bolden added. Paskor noticed that the man's voice caught and he glanced down at the woman leaning against him. The medic knew that only six of the twelve people still alive on the transport they had

found were beamed aboard before the ship was rendered inoperable by the Alshain. Both the cargo ship, the escape pod circling it had been destroyed by the *Yokkai*. It was a good bet that the Alshain had also destroyed the rest of the convoy.

D'Grekker snorted. "Mere collateral."

"You son of a bitch," Carrick snapped. The *Valour* crew and the Boslic advanced on the cell.

"Stop it!" Captain M'Bira commanded. She had to do so a second time before the *Valour* officers and Boslic complied.

"It's obvious that everyone's too emotional right now to be productive," the Caitian replied. "So, perhaps we should let Mr. D'Grekker do some thinking while we proceed back to Yashk'lin IV."

"Yashk'lin IV?" The Alshain commander asked, a note of concern in his voice. "What about my ship?"

Paskor was a little impressed and frightened when M'Bira smiled evilly. "Mere collateral," she said before turning her back on the flustered D'Grekker and exiting the detention center.

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## ***SFS Yokkai***

### **Alshain Slayer-Class Destroyer**

Lt. Jasmine Glover didn't like acclaim. It was odd that she would marry a man who seemed to luxuriate in it, but Jasmine's style was more low-key. Of course her desire for near anonymity was ruined perhaps forever now that she was the "Savior of the Ship."

"Good work Lieutenant," Tactical Officer Ra-Goran said, with a noticeable strain of envy in his voice. "Without your quick thinking the Alshain might've gotten away with their crimes."

Jasmine half-smiled, "I didn't do anything special," she said, trying to pull away from the conversation so she could continue downloading the information from the *Yokkai's* ornate central database. Ra-Goran was the umpteenth person that had congratulated her for flooding the ship with anethizine gas and converting the deflector array into a makeshift weapon's platform.

Though the *Meharry's* deflector was totally shot, Jasmine's plan had caught the Alshain off guard and knocked the warship's propulsion systems offline. Jasmine had also led the engineering team to Sickbay and then the Bridge where they awakened Captain M'Bira. Jasmine couldn't help thinking that Terrence would be so proud of her when he found out. In her mind's eye she saw the big grin on his handsome face, and she imagined his strong arms enfolding her. Glover shook her head, dispelling the fantasy. Ever since she

had told Terrence she wanted a divorce, she couldn't stop thinking about the man. She didn't know what was wrong with her. But she resolved to find out after getting the *Meharry* back to safety.

The captain had ordered that the Alshain on the *Yokkai* be transported to holding areas aboard *Meharry*. With the lupanoids out of the way, M'Bira had ordered Jasmine and Lt. Ra-Goran to lead an away team to the *Yokkai*. Jasmine was as curious as the captain to learn what information was nestled in the ship's database. It could be information about various rogue Alshain marauders that Starfleet, the Yashk'ani, or others could use in its interdiction efforts. Glover suspected that the database might yield something far more sinister. Spending time on both Earth in the late stages of the war and on the *Aegis*, Jasmine had gained a new appreciation for the intrigue often hiding behind seemingly random or isolated events. Something in her gut told her that the so-called unauthorized Alshain attacks on civilian shipping were actually state-sponsored.

As soon as her tricorder decoded the Alshain cuneiform script the engineer would have her answer. And she already knew it was one that could only lead to another war.

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***USS Enterprise-E***  
**Hazar-Shual System**  
**(Alshain Origin Sector)**  
**Beta Quadrant**

"My life just keeps getting better," Lt. Commander Seb N'Saba mumbled as he swept onto the *Enterprise-E's* bridge. The large, almost wraparound viewscreen was filled by a face he hoped never to see again.

It took every effort against his mountainous pride to bow in courtesy. "Sutahr Hui B'Har...it has been far too long," he said to the golden-pelted vulpine captain.

"Not long enough," B'Har's violet eyes flashed with disgust. She noticeably turned from N'Saba to glare at Captain Picard. Picard stood in front of his command seat, Commander Riker to his side. N'Saba slowly ambled to the other. "I didn't believe you Picard. I didn't think you would have the temerity to use this gark's dung twice against us."

Picard's lips had formed a tight slash across his face. He began slowly, "Sutahr B'Har I assure you that we have not entered Alshain space with hostile intent. We have been assigned to evacuate non-essential personnel from the Federation Embassy on Alshain Proper. Once we have done so, we will vacate the Origin Sector immediately."

B'Har threw an arm leisurely against the headrest of her throne-like command seat. "So you say...but there's just one flaw in that plan Picard. You

will venture no further into Alshain space. The bloodstains of my people are still fresh on your hands, and the deeper you venture into our sacred space, the more you insult the gods. Of course if that *gark* had any respect for our traditions he would've told you about your defilement."

"I assure you I had no desire to come back here," N'Saba said, shushing after a sharp look from Commander Riker.

"I'm sure you didn't," B'Har leaned forward. "Just like before...until your disfigurement, and then...."

"I was...unworthy," N'Saba looked away, painful memories briefly engulfing him.

B'Har laughed softly. "Yes...and you still are." Without another word, the sutahr cut off the communication link. The picture reverted back to the forward hull of the catamaran ship, its battery of gun ports open and glowing with an infernal power. A phalanx of eight similar warships flanked it, forming an arrowhead with B'Har's ship as the tip.

Picard glanced at the Betazoid officer Deanna Troi. The dark-haired woman returned his confused look with one of her own. Alshain emotions weren't easily deciphered. But the empath was perceptive enough to know that N'Saba was experiencing a great amount of distress, which really wasn't all that empathic since the turmoil raging through him was so obvious. The *Enterprise* captain then turned to N'Saba. "Mr. N'Saba," he said with surprising gentleness, "I need to speak to you in my ready room." He moved toward the inset doors just to the left of the Operations console. But N'Saba remained rooted.

"It's all right captain," he said, his voice thick with embarrassment. "I'm sure everyone is dying to know what that was all about, and since we're one big happy fleet I'll tell you...Sutahr Hui B'Har..." he paused, coaxing his throat muscles to finally spit out the words, "is my wife."

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### **Unnamed Planetoid Somewhere in Sector 443...**

Captain Nandali Kojo had used the element of surprise to her advantage. She had raced to the detention cell first, intent of freeing her crewmates no matter how many Alshain she had to take on. When the Alshain had removed her from the cell to participate in their little gladiatorial games, Kojo had memorized the route they had taken. She used her recall now to guide her.

Thankfully she encountered no resistance. It was apparent that the base was half occupied. Kojo didn't know when the other ship or vessels might return, nor did she know how much time she would have before the Alshain realized she had excused herself from their mourning.



She worked her finger around the trigger of the bulky exciser, made for a paw three times her hand size. But Kojo prided herself on her ability to master any weapon. Even Fight Master Strond had been in awe of her adaptability. That was why she was one of the few Sovereign Guard chosen for advanced studies on Qo'noS. There she met Kojo, the love of her life. She wished he were here now. The two of them, naked, bloody, running through the frigid, rocky corridor, prepared to deal death to all who deserved it. The more she thought about it, the more Nandali came to realize that Kojo was with her after all. She grinned at the idea, imagining Kojo's shade at her side, fighting the demons of her failure at her back while she pressed on towards redemption.

Kojo barreled into the detention area, firing in a wild sweep, but careful to avoid the jail cell packed with what remained of her crew. The two Alshain on duty at a makeshift desk died quickly. Nandali couldn't help but be a little disappointed. She thrived on challenges. Her mate once said she was more Klingon than real Klingons.

Assistant Chief Engineer Sara Chang's smile was cut short when Nandali pointed at the dead Alshain guards. Wisps of smoke were still circling their corpses. "Get their weapons," she ordered. Chang and a very battered Meleek-Zar did as she commanded.

The crew gathered around Kojo, a mélange of fear and determination written across their faces and evident in their body language. The captain decided to cut right to the point, before the fear overwhelmed the determination. "The *Valour* is here and we're going to retake it."

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### **Unnamed Planetoid Somewhere in Sector 443...**

"How could she, could they, move so fast?" Syot Visla R'Vott asked, impressed with her counterpart.

"I am uncertain," Kveld Tiung said, futilely sweeping a sensor device over the empty cell. R'Vott regretted that she hadn't installed a sensor net for the entire planetoid. Tracking non-Alshain bio-signatures would've been easy as breathing. Of course she hadn't anticipated any prison breaks, and there wouldn't have been if the Paladins had been able to restrain their blood lust. A bloodlust she had enabled.

She wondered if her people had truly abandoned the decadent ways that had reduced their empire to a laughingstock. Exarch Jedalla had assured them that the old ways were gone, as dead as the Son'a would be. However, many Son's still drew breath, the Alshain war machine had been easily turned back by a handful of Starfleet ships, and the Paladins-the paragons of the Exarchate's military prowess-concerned themselves more with games than

rebounding from their recent defeat. Redemption drove R'Vott's every actions, it was her entertainment, her sex, even her food.

She had invested everything in Jedalla's dream. But in moments of despair, tiny fissures of doubt had been to bore holes into her faith. What if Jedalla was wrong? What if the Alshain were not destined to rule the Beta and Alpha Quadrants? What if Greater Alshain hadn't been as vast as some offworld scholars claimed?

R'Vott was ashamed to say that she didn't know the answers to those questions. But what she did know was that Captain Kojo and her crew would be captured or dead by the time Exarch Jedalla arrived.

"There can only be one place she's going to," R'Vott said, after a half-minute's thought. "She's going to her ship." She turned to the kveld. "Inform the Paladins to meet us in the launch bay."

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### **Peerage Leadership Academy Alshain Proper**

Dauphin Jang O'Jinn's eyes were glued to the monitor. His heart swelled with pride at the image of his foremother, now atop a tank, her frail fist pumping in the air as she urged the crowd to storm the gates of the Governance Arcology.

He longed to be with her, among his people, preparing for his father's return. But he remained in his living module at the Academy, guarded by warriors sent by the traitor C'Oemnm. What Jang wouldn't give to slice the old *rakuun's* throat. Hopefully he would have his chance soon enough, if Managa didn't get to him first. The image of the stately Dowager laying into C'Oemnm made Jang chuckle.

"There is nothing to laugh about," Y'era Sharri N'Soto said. The appealing warrior was only a few turns older than Jang. He perked up whenever she came on duty. And he was certain the feeling wasn't mutual. Jang had finally figured out how to use that to his advantage. "A lot of our people could die today," the young woman replied, trying to add gravity to her voice.

"Yes, hopefully all of the traitors will perish and order can be restored," Jang spoke freely, without fear of reprisal. The foolish C'Oemnm had ordered the warriors not to harm him. However, he was certain that might change when his father arrived. But he planned to be free by then, at Sharri's doing. "But you know I won't see that glorious day," he piled on the regret.

"Why would you say such a thing?" N'Soto asked, a troubled look on her face. "Not that I want the 'traitors' removed." She added quickly, nervously looking around for recording devices. Once again, the inept C'Oemnm had ordered the Unguis not to plant any. However, Jang had checked his module

thoroughly anyway. Even under his father, the Unguis could barely be restrained. With a weakling like C'Oemnm in charge of the Exarchate, the Unguis had free reign.

He gazed deeply into Sharrl's amber colored eyes. He swallowed hard, trying to remove the small lump that had formed whenever he recalled how beautiful her eyes were. Jang chided himself for losing focus and pressed ahead. "Be honest with me Sharrl N'Soto," he said. "Your captain has orders to kill me if my father returns."

"No," the Y'era shook her head strongly. "No. Of course not. Chairman C'Oemnm was very explicit in his orders. You are not to be harmed."

"Of course," Jang replied, his tone disbelieving. He turned from the guard and walked to the large floor-to-length window in the room. He gazed down at the lush garden below. The tranquil scene was so at odds with the turmoil sweeping through the capital city that it reminded him how disconnected the Peerage was from the common people. Even his father's reforms had done little to tie all Alshain together.

Though Jang was dauphin, eldest son of the Exarch, he was not guaranteed succession to the throne. Only the most qualified or visionary candidate was chosen by the reigning Exarch to sit upon the Crimson Throne. Jang intended for that person to be him. His escape would go a long way towards proving his resourcefulness to his father. He placed his head against the cool plastiglass, as if overburdened.

"I know C'Oemnm's order," he said. "But how can you be sure that C'Oemnm will remain in power much longer? With each hour, the failure of his coup becomes more apparent. The Committee is filled with ambitious *pirafins*. Do you even know if C'Oemnm still holds power?" He paused, glancing back at Sharrl. The Y'era was fidgeting.

"You don't," he said, placing his forehead back against the wall. "Or even if he does, he might change his mind. What might pacify or scare the crowd than the blood of the dauphin? The most logical choice to succeed the Exarch? It could be a powerful statement to show the people who the real power was in the Exarchate. If a father can't prevent the death of his children many would not see him worthy to sit on the throne."

"No," Sharrl said more softly, "No. The Committee wouldn't do that. They couldn't."

He turned to gaze at her again, sadness in his eyes. "Who ever would've thought that a coup could've happened...until it did? Or that a cabal of usurpers would remove both the Exarch and the Peerage from their traditional leadership roles?"

Y'era N'Soto pondered that. "No...I guess not."

"No one could," Jang said sympathetically. "But the rules, the traditions that have bound all Alshain for centuries no longer apply. Anything is possible now because of what C'Oemnm has done. None of us are safe."

"You mustn't be so bleak Dauphin," Sharrl protested.

"What choice do I have?" He asked. Jang walked to the woman and grasp her by the arms. She didn't protest. "I have none. I'm to sit here and wait until I am executed." He paused, smiling. "But don't think I don't appreciate the company."

"The captain won't let that happen," N'Soto protested.

"He is just one warrior," Jang said.

"I won't let that happen." Sharrl declared. Determination flared like a furnace from the woman's gaze. Jang's resistance melted from the heat, and he felt a pang of guilt for his machinations.

"There is something you can do to prevent it," Jang said.

"What?" N'Soto asked suspiciously.

"Turn around," he commanded.

"No," N'Soto pulled away from him. Her hand went to the stun baton on her hip. "I have my orders."

"I know about Sept N'Saba," Jang remarked. "Following orders is not your kin's strong suit. Your elder cousin Seb is the most recent embarrassment to our species. I also knew you wanted to pursue a career in art at the Lyceum, but your clan's loss in standing as a result forced you to turn to the Guard to rebuild your families' cachet."

"How do you know that?" Sharrl's voice was a mix of wonderment and suspicion.

"I make it my business to know things...about people I care about."

Sharrl laughed. "I almost believed you...until you said that." N'Soto pulled her baton. Jang took an unconscious step back. "Why would the scion of Sept O'Jinn care about the extended clan of lowly Sept N'Saba...unless there was something in it for you?"

"You're right," Jang said. "I learned everything I could about you and all of the guards. There is something in it for me. But there's also something in it for you, or could be."

"What do you mean?" N'Soto asked.

"I can restore Sept N'Saba's glory, and by extension Sept N'Soto's." Jang declared.

Y'era N'Soto couldn't hold back a louder peal of laughter. "And how in the heavens could you do that? You might be dauphin, but you're still Unblooded."

"That is only a matter of time," Jang pushed back his shame. "And you know that my word, my reputation counts more than that of your entire clan."

N'Soto said nothing in response. The dauphin knew she couldn't. "What do you want me to do?" She finally asked. Jang smiled.

"Now you're thinking," he said. "This coup was doomed from the start. Once my father returns, I'll insure that the fortunes of your clan rise back to their once lofty heights. You have my word."

N'Soto looked at him, a regrettable hardness seeping into her eyes. "So, that was what all this was about?"

"What else could it be about?" Jang asked, hating himself for asking the question. He wanted more, but there were more pressing concerns. Plus, her disgraced clan was far beneath his.

"I see," N'Soto said. She handed him the baton and turned around. Jang hefted the lightweight weapon. He was more impressed with Sharri than he had ever been. She knew exactly what to do, and had already figured out his plan and an excuse for herself. He was going to suggest that she let him stun her so she could claim he overpowered her. The dauphin activated the baton, its phased energy crackling in his ears. He held it aloft. But hesitated when N'Soto's slender shoulders slumped. The woman seemed to crumble before his eyes, and there was something about her capitulation that stoked a deep outrage in him.

He turned off the baton. N'Soto turned around, her face a hive of confusion. "What's wrong?" She asked.

"Nothing," he said, handing her back the baton. "You're coming with me."

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **Sector 443**

"Captain, we're picking up something on long range sensors," Lt. Olivia Juneau reported. "It's a Starfleet message buoy. Registered to the *USS Meharry*."

"Message buoy?" Captain Sandhurst asked, concern etched on his features. "Let's hear it."

Seconds later, the image of a harried Caitian female appeared on the main viewer. "I am Captain M'Bira of the Starfleet medical ship *Meharry*. The *Meharry* has taken heavy fire from a cloaked Alshain warship, though we were able to destroy the enemy vessel and beam over two dozen prisoners onboard. Our subspace communications net is just one of the many systems currently inoperable. We are heading back to Yashkl'in IV where we can attend to our wounded and attempt to re-contact Starfleet Command. In the event that we don't make it, I've left this buoy. Please insure that Starfleet Command learns of the Alshain's aggression. And of that more of their vessels

might be equipped with cloaking technology.” The message repeated. After watching it a second time, Donald ordered Juneau to turn it off.

“Impressive,” Lt. Pava Lar’ragos said. “I can’t wait to meet this Captain M’Bira. For a med ship to have taken on and defeated an Alshain warship, with a cloak, is pretty damn impressive.”

“Yes it is,” Donald agreed. He had served on the medical ship *Imhotep* early in his career and he knew how comparatively lighter armed med ships were than standard exploration vessels. “But let’s make sure the lady lives so we all can both hear the tale.”

“Another cloaked Alshain ship,” Lt. Commander Pell Ojana pondered aloud, her concern matching Donald’s. “I thought we captured the only one they had.”

“You thought wrong,” Commander Ramirez replied, adding quickly. “We all did.” The addition didn’t spare Liana a frosty glare from the Bajoran.

“Perhaps the Alshain had more Klingon allies that we smoked out,” Lt. Pava Lar’ragos offered. “Or they could have new allies.”

“Like the Romulans,” Sandhurst said. “They’re still claiming that Starfleet manipulated the recent Benzite referendum that kept Benzar in the Federation.”

“Sounds like hogwash to me,” Lightner replied. After Sandhurst loudly cleared his throat, the young man apologized.

“Ensign you’d be surprised to learn that maybe the Romulans have a point,” Lar’ragos said. “We’re not angels.”

“True,” Sandhurst replied. “But we’re not as devilish as the Romulans.”

“Speak for yourself,” Lar’ragos quipped, though Sandhurst couldn’t laugh after witnessing some of Pava’s recent actions. He merely nodded.

“So noted,” the captain said. “Helm, best speed to Yashk’lin IV.”

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### **Ministry of State, Central Ministries Complex Arcology Alshain Proper**

“Why wasn’t I informed of this sooner?” Chairman Orthlin C’Oemnm shivered with a cold rage.

“W-Why s-sir?” The nervous messenger’s voice stuttered so violently that he had could barely speak. “The-there was n-no one...lef-left to is-issue the a-alert.”

“So, you’re saying that the dauphin merely walked out of his confined quarters and the security detachment assigned to him let him?” Nez G’Nesh asked calmly, clearly trying to reassure the frightened young man.

"I-I-I am s-say-saying that th-the detachment lef-left with h-him," the man finally got out. The young officer bounded out of the committee chamber's after C'Oemnm dismissed him.

"This is perfect," T'Riav threw up his hands. "Absolutely splendid! Not only is that old crone now leading the mob outside our gates, the dauphin has escaped custody with his jailers accompanying him."

"This is the will of the gods," Canonarch Tropar, head of the Alshain ecclesiastical Synod intoned with grave solemnity. C'Oemnm had the wizened, balding priest teleported into the arcology to seek his council and urge him to convince the mob to disperse. So far Tropar had been long on advice, but short on the defusing action that C'Oemnm needed most. "The gods seek order in all things."

"So even the gods are against us now?" T'Riav's tone was half-mocking. "Well, they've got a long line ahead of them."

"You're not helping Rulf," G'Nesh admonished.

"He's merely speaking the truth," Boree L'Bek said. "C'Oemnm, this gambit is at an end."

"What do you mean?" Phalin K'Phrey asked.

"Yes Boree," Orthlin was both shocked and thrilled by the dangerous edge in his voice. "What do you mean?"

The portly woman stood up, crossing her arms over her plump bosom. "If you don't act to stop this madness now, Sept L'Bek will no longer support this committee."

"Where will you go," C'Oemnm asked, flicking a hand at the monitors. "To them? You're a traitor to those people remember? They'll never accept you. We're all in this together."

"With the proper amount of bribes and promotions they'll accept me again soon enough," L'Bek said.

C'Oemnm sighed. "What kind of action do you propose?"

"Isn't it obvious?" T'Riav gasped. "Order the guards to fire on the rabble!"

"No you fool," L'Bek sneered. "I have something else in mind."

"And that would be?" C'Oemnm asked, his patience already gone.

"Who does that mob hate worse than us?" L'Bek asked.

C'Oemnm shrugged. "That I would like to know."

"The Federation," K'Phrey said excitedly. L'Bek nodded with approval.

"Yes," she nodded.

"So?" C'Oemnm asked. "They think we're Federation tools."

"Perhaps it's time we changed that perception," L'Bek said.

"And how would we do that?" C'Oemnm challenged.

"We destroy the Federation Embassy," L'Bek answered. K'Phrey instantly nodded in agreement, and T'Riav pounded the table, a joyous howl ripping from his lips.

C'Oemnm was appalled. "We usurped Jedalla to prevent a war with the Federation. What you're proposing will put us right back on that course."

"No, it won't," L'Bek promised. "The Federation is weak. The only reason they defeated us was because of their slightly advanced technology and our weakened hearts. I tell you that too many problems beset the Federation for them to go to war over the loss of one embassy."

"You don't know the humans as well as you think you do," C'Oemnm warned. "It was I that worked closely with them during the Dominion War. They have far more resolve and tenacity than you give them credit for. And they also have a terrific bloodlust, though they try to hide it."

"More proof of their unworthiness," K'Phrey sniffed.

"Or perhaps it's proof of their cunning," C'Oemnm countered. "Think about it. How did the humans become the dominant group in the Federation despite the fact that the Vulcans, Andorians, Tellarites, and many other Federation members were space worthy species decades or centuries before them? Also, how did the humans hold their own against the Xindi, Romulans, Klingons, and the Borg? Even we fell before the Klingons," he said with disgust. "These humans aren't to be trifled with lightly."

"Of course they aren't," L'Bek said. "That's why we can manufacture evidence that the mob or some rogue elements loyal to Jedalla destroyed the embassy."

"Plus its destruction might distract the mob long enough to allow us to get some ships aloft to douse them with *axonol*," K'Phrey offered. "When they awaken, at least one of their objects of hate will be removed."

"Which means they can focus on us exclusively," C'Oemnm said.

"No, they'll know it was us," L'Bek said. "However the Federation won't."

"We can't keep information like that on planet bound," C'Oemnm protested.

"We can if you declare martial law," T'Riav said, his eyes gleaming.

"No," Orthlin shook his head, reality spiraling out of control, "Martial law hasn't been declared in decades. Not since Pula the Regrettable."

"Spare us the history lesson," L'Bek remarked. "We'll tell the people that Jedalla was in collusion with the Federation and that we've excised both cancers from our midst. By declaring martial law we can force the military to decide. Many of them are defecting now merely because Jedalla is acting while we're standing still. Once we act, once you act Orthlin, many of them will return."



"And what of the Federation?" He had never sounded so weak in his life. "How can you convince them that it wasn't us that destroyed their Embassy?"

L'Bek smiled, "They'll have to believe us, because the Federation won't act without conclusive proof, which we will provide tying them to Jedalla. With Starfleet hunting for Jedalla, he'll have no time to stage a coup. And by the time he does, or even if he does, we'll be ready for him."

"The *Enterprise* is on its way here," G'Nesh said. C'Oemnm was thankful at least one of the committee members saw how threadbare L'Bek's plan was. "Will this 'evidence' be ready for them by then?"

"The *Enterprise* will never make it here," L'Bek said confidently.

"Do you mean to destroy it as well?" C'Oemnm asked incredulously. "We tried that already, and you see where it got us."

"Yes," T'Riav nodded with glee. "It got us control of the Exarchate."

"The *Enterprise* will never make it to Alshain Proper because it has been detained," L'Bek answered, ignoring T'Riav's gloating. "Even if it decided to fight its way through the Origin Sector Fleet there would be no Federation citizens left for them to evacuate."

"Has been detained?" Orthlin asked, his hackles rising. "Boree what have you done?"

"I've merely instructed Fleet Control to deny any Federation Starship into the origin sector without express authorization from the entire committee."

"You can't do that!" C'Oemnm thundered. "Who gave you the right to countermand my orders?"

"I had every right!" L'Bek hissed. "This is a committee, where the majority rules. Both K'Phrey and T'Riav supported my plan. G'Nesh abstained."

"So, you all knew of this plan and discussed it without me?" C'Oemnm asked, more hurt than he should've been. "Even you Nez didn't think you could trust me with this information?" G'Nesh wouldn't meet his gaze.

Searching for a lifeline, Orthlin looked to the strangely quiet Canonarch. "What say you Tropar of L'Bek's perfidious plan?" The ancient priest clutched his staff and slowly pulled himself out of his chair. He closed his eyes and raised his head, whispering unintelligible words as if he were conversing with the gods themselves. He shivered, his heavy, simple gray robe flapping loosely on his frail body. When he opened his eyes again, his sonorous voice had dropped an octave.

"The gods find much value in Lady L'Bek's plan," the old man replied. "The Synod will support it."

"This is madness," C'Oemnm replied.

“This is the will of the gods,” Tropar admonished. “You would be wise not to defy them.”

“Or us,” T’Riav warned.

C’Oemnm sank back down into his seat, wishing there was someone worthy enough to abdicate these burdens too, but he realized he didn’t hate anyone that much...even T’Riav. “Fine! Let it be done.”

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## Part Three: The Great Unraveling

### ***USS Enterprise-E* Hazar-Shual System (Alshain Origin Sector)**

"We're receiving a long-range hail," Lt. Commander Data said, "Starfleet transponder signal."

"Who is it?" Riker asked, leaning forward in the captain's chair. The Executive Officer had relieved Captain Picard after his formidable commander had been ordered to rest by the equally formidable Doctor Crusher. Riker's own fatigue vanished with Data's revelation.

"It's the *USS Independence* sir," Data replied.

"*Independence*," Riker rubbed his bearded chin. "I'm not too familiar with her. That's one of the *Interceptor*-class ships correct Mr. Data?"

Data looked back at him, his golden eyes gleaming as the android processed information. "Yes, the *Independence* is one of two *Interceptor* class ships currently in service. The *Interceptor* is a variant of the *Defiant* class. The pathfinder ship, *USS Interceptor*, NCC-79421 was commissioned in 2375. The *Independence*, NCC-76950 also was commissioned in..."

"That's enough Data," Riker said, annoyance creeping into his voice. "Just answer the hail." Deanna's light snickering prompted a reproachful look and a weary smile from Riker. "Our luck might turn after all."

For interminable hours the *Enterprise* had been encircled by a squadron of Alshain warships, which prevented them from venturing to Alshain Proper and completing their mission to evacuate the Federation Embassy in the midst of the unrest sweeping over the planet. In response, the captain had Riker add an additional duty shift, and ordered that the bridge be manned by at least one senior staff officer at all times. Since Data didn't sleep, he had chosen to remain on the bridge for all shifts in addition to his scheduled time in the center seat.

When Captain Picard wasn't on the bridge, he had been in his ready room, updating Starfleet Command of the stand off and requesting new orders. So far, Command had told the *Enterprise* to stay put. The situation on Alshain Proper was volatile and delicate Picard had paraphrased Command's response. The captain had been ordered to merely maintain position and await new orders. That commandment hadn't set right with the captain or any of the crew.

The thought of sitting around while a Federation Embassy might be threatened or attacked galled Riker, but they had their orders. The arrival of the *Independence* was a definite, welcome wrinkle.

Data replied, "*Independence* captain requesting onscreen communication."

"Of course," Riker said, before tapping his compin. "Riker to Captain Picard." Riker winced at the tired sound of the captain's voice. He knew Picard was exhausted and hated waking him up, but he knew Picard would want to be on the bridge to receive the *Independence's* message.

"Mr. Riker, contact Lt. Commander N'Saba as well." Riker frowned at the captain's request. The testy, snobbish Alshain wasn't Riker's cup of tea. When he wasn't arguing with someone, he was looking down on them. The commander wondered how Alshain even got into Starfleet and actually was promoted along the way. He didn't see how anyone could work with the lupanoid. Riker squared his shoulders.

"Aye sir," he told Picard. After the captain reiterated he was on his way, Riker contacted N'Saba. Standing up from his seat, the commander turned his attention back to Data. "Mr. Data, patch the *Independence* through."

Seconds later, an attractive, dark haired woman appeared on the viewer. She smirked. "Commander Riker, how the hell are you? It's been too long." Riker felt a curious mental tug from Troi, and noticed an equally curious glance from Data, but he ignored them both.

Riker awkwardly grinned. He had spent his last night on the *Hood* with Aurelia. At the time the young woman had been the ship's Helm Officer. He hadn't spoken to her since. He had meant to, but first the Farpoint mission, then reuniting with Deanna, and so many other things had gotten in the way that the days had quickly turned into years. Seeing her again, it reminded him of how callous his actions might have seemed to her. "I heard you had made captain, but I thought you were skipper on the *Midas*?" It also didn't lessen his awkwardness that Sintina, a woman he had mentored, was now a superior officer.

The *Independence* captain smiled, flicking a dismissive hand at the screen. "Long story. Perhaps we can catch up later. I'm longing to hear about all those wonderful missions on the *Big E*." She said huskily, winking. Riker tugged at his collar, his face breaking out in splotches of red. Behind him Troi snickered.

"Later...later is good," the commander said weakly. He had never been more thankful when he heard the whoosh of the turbolift doors. Riker looked toward them, and tersely nodded at his lifeline.

Captain Picard strode through the turbolift doors and down into the command well. Lt. Commander N'Saba followed him. "Captain Aurelia," he smiled tightly, nodding in respect. She nodded in return.

"Captain Picard, we heard you were in a bit of a bind out here and we came to even the odds."

"Captain Aurelia," Picard replied. "Your assistance is welcomed; however this is a very delicate situation." The smile slowly left the young woman's face.

"What are you implying Captain?" Aurelia's voice was tinged with suspicion.

"Nothing," he replied. "I only wanted to make you aware of how precarious this situation is. We must do everything in our power not to prevent this tense situation from escalating into something far worse."

"I take it you don't approve of some of my recent actions?" Aurelia remarked, her dark eyes flashing with anger. Riker glanced back at Deanna. The empathic counselor had a troubled look on her face.

"I'll have you know Captain," Aurelia's voice had risen slightly, "that *Independence* had been assigned to protect the Embassy during your jaunt into the Briar Patch. The fact that the planet's still habitable is a good indicator that I'm not as loose a cannon as some might believe."

"I am not one of those people," Picard said, a twinge of exasperation in his normally assured voice. Riker empathized with the man. Between N'Saba, the Alshain blockade, and Captain Aurelia, this mission was getting more head ache inducing by the second.

"If a war starts here today, you can be assured that I won't be the one starting it," Aurelia replied. "And I don't think the Alshain will try us with the firepower this ship's packing. They're not as dumb as they look." The woman paused, her eyes narrowing as she regarded Lt. Commander N'Saba. "Present company accepted," the woman added.

N'Saba bowed, "Captain, I like you," he said. *Of course he would*, Riker frowned. Both of them didn't know when to keep their mouths shut.

"Captain, we're getting another hail. This one from Sutahr B'Har."

"Split the screen Mr. Data," Picard ordered. The main viewer split with Captain Aurelia on the right and a fuming Sutahr B'Har on the left.

"How dare you challenge my orders, or Alshain sovereignty," the sutahr snapped. "I will not let this provocation go unpunished." Before the *Enterprise* captain could reply, B'Har severed the link. The captain glanced at N'Saba. The larger Alshain shrugged.

"Now, you can understand why I left her," he said.

"Captain, four Alshain warships are leaving the blockade. They are on an intercept course for the *Independence*."

"I told you I wouldn't pick a fight Captain," Aurelia said, "but I will finish one." She turned off her screen. Riker restrained himself from breaking his hand on the nearest bulkhead. Things were escalating despite their best efforts to accommodate the Alshain and walk the tightrope required more of the Federation flagship than any Starfleet vessel. But at the moment, he wished he was on the *Independence*. At least they were taking action.

"Onscreen," Picard sounded aggravated as well, but Riker knew for different reasons, "Magnify." The dagger like *Independence* had already activated shields and began evasive maneuvers. Three *Huntress* light assault cruisers and one *Hunter*-class heavy assault ship sped away from the circle around the *Enterprise-E* to engage the other Federation vessel.

"We have to do something sir," Riker said.

"I know," the captain replied. "I won't allow another Starfleet vessel to come under fire. Issue a cease and desist warning to both Sutahr B'Har and those warships."

N'Saba harrumphed. Folding his arms over his broad chest, the lupine Science Officer said, "It's too late for that captain. Both my people and it appears some of yours as well want war and nothing will stop them from pursuing it. Why not just sit back and enjoy the show?"

"To do nothing and allow a war to ignite here is anathema to everything I believe in," Picard replied. Picard took his seat, tugging on his black and gray uniform. "Mr. Daniels," he informed the Tactical Officer, "charge our phaser banks, and ready the photon torpedoes."

"Shouldn't we go to red alert?" Riker asked. "Or raise shields."

"That would be too much of a tip-off," Picard replied. "B'Har is itching for a fight, but she wants us to make the first move so that we can be the aggressor. Those ships rushing to the *Independence* are a feint, nothing more than provocateurs."

"Captain Picard, I'm impressed," N'Saba said, his tone actually genuine. "You've figured my beloved's plan out rather quickly."

Picard frowned. "Captain Aurelia's exuberance is going to play right into their hands unless I do something to prevent it." The captain turned slightly in his chair to address Data. "Mr. Data, relay the *Independence's* prefix code to my terminal."

"Aye sir," Data's fingers flew across his console. "Done." He said half-a-second later. Picard couldn't help but smile again at the android's amazing abilities.

"Time to take the wind out of Captain Aurelia's sails," he grimly remarked.

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### ***USS Independence*** **(Main Bridge)**

"What the hell just happened?" Captain Sintina Aurelia asked, pounding her fists against her armrests.

"We've lost shields, weapons, even propulsion," Lt. Commander Ethan Winslow replied, with an unc customary strain in his voice.

"It appears that the *Enterprise* has used our prefix code to gain possession of the ship," Science Officer Tang Zian said without looking up from his console. The captain ordered the man to find a way to regain control of the ship before glancing back at the hologrid screen that had replaced the main viewer. The Alshain ships were still coming.

"How long until they are in firing range?" the captain asked.

"Thirty seconds," grated Lt. Commander Karim Bin Nadal at the Tactical console. The man looked as frustrated as Aurelia felt.

"Get Picard back on the line," she snapped. The *Enterprise* captain appeared seconds later.

"I apologize..." the cultured man began, but Sintina cut him off.

"What the hell are you doing Picard? Are you trying to make it easy for them to kill us? Would you sacrifice fellow Starfleet officers just to secure a shaky peace with these bastards?"

"That is not my..." Picard began again, but Aurelia would have none of it.

"Return full control of my ship to me now!" She demanded.

"Ten seconds," Bin Nadal intoned. The Alshain warships continued charging forward. The captain was certain that she could start to see the forward gun ports on them. Commander Windslow sat up in his seat, preparing to face the assault as stoic and dignified as possible. Sintina wasn't so dignified.

"Come and get it you bastards!" She yelled at the screen.

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### ***USS Enterprise*** **(Main Bridge)**

"Well, that was the easy part Number One," Picard remarked with a sigh and wry smile.

"You call that easy?" Riker replied with a lopsided grin.

"Comparatively to what I have to do next...yes, that was fairly easy." The captain said, glancing at the screen. The Alshain ships continued advancing on the defenseless *Independence* like a rabid pack. They had to be aware by now that the ship was defenseless but that didn't slow them down one second. It didn't make them reassess what potential trick the *Independence* had up their sleeves. The Alshain Starforce seemed so determined to remedy grievances that they put reason on the shelf. It didn't augur well for the fate of the recent ceasefire between the Federation and the Exarchate.

"What do you plan to do sir?" Riker asked.

Picard leaned back in his seat, and tugged his uniform's tunic. "Mr. Daniels, full phaser sweep, with our aft launchers. Target those ships advancing on the *Independence*, engines and weapons only."

"What about B'Har, do you think she'll stand for that?" N'Saba carped.

"You tell us," Riker couldn't constrain his annoyance any longer. "You're the Alshain authority after all....and her husband." The Science Officer snarled in response.

"That's enough Number One," Picard said. "And to answer your question, I don't know Mr. N'Saba. But I couldn't sit idly by and allow a fellow vessel to be destroyed, especially one that I took away its ability to fight or run away from. Perhaps, B'Har will see some honor in my decision to defend my comrades no matter the cost."

"Hmmm," N'Saba said. "Maybe. Hui was always one for dramatic gestures. The sutahr believes in moldy old concepts like 'honor', 'duty', and some of that other social control blather. Can you believe she actually liked Klingon opera and even attempted to drag me to see one or two of them?" N'Saba smiled wistfully. "If this works, then I'll be doubly impressed by you captain."

"I couldn't ask for a better reward," Picard dryly remarked.

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### ***SFS Tchono***

#### ***Alshain Predator-class destroyer***

Sutahr Hui B'Har was stunned. She hadn't believed that Picard was bold enough to attempt such a stroke, but the evidence before her eyes, confirmed by her officers' readouts reinforced it.

The four Alshain warships she had sent to engage the *Independence* were now drifting towards it, their propulsion systems knocked off line by surgical shooting from the *Enterprise*.

"They've fired on our vessels," Syot Waya U'Wais stated the obvious. "They've abrogated the ceasefire," the young woman added with glee. "Shall I order their destruction now sutahr?"

"Inform the blockade to power its weapons," Hui said absently. Picard's actions were foolhardy, but noble in a sense. She hated destroying his vessel after such a display of knowing self-sacrifice. But she had the excuse for war that she needed and her superiors demanded. "For mercies sake, we will make it quick."

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### ***USS Enterprise-E***

#### ***(Main Bridge)***



"Captain, the Alshain ships are powering their weapons arrays," Lt. Daniels at Tactical remarked. Data turned around his seat a half-second later, nodding in confirmation.

"I guess my wife isn't feeling too sentimental today," N'Saba quipped.

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***USS Independence***  
**(Main Bridge)**

"We'll I'll be," Captain Aurelia gasped in relief at the site of the Alshain ships hanging in front of them, now as impotent as her ship courtesy of Captain Picard. "Picard's got a pair after all," she said aloud, to no one in particular. "Get him back on the horn."

"Captain, the remaining Alshain warships are powering their weapons. At such close range, the *Enterprise* won't stand a chance with such directed firepower aimed at them," Lt. Commander Bin Nadal remarked.

"Is there something, anything we can do?" Aurelia asked.

"Not until *Enterprise* releases control of our ship," Lt. Commander Windslow grated.

"Damn," Sintina softly cursed. More loudly, she said, "Karim, hail *Enterprise*."

"Captain, I think our luck has just changed," Lt. Tang turned around in his seat, a huge grin on his face. "Our prefix code has been released."

"We're back in business then?" Aurelia asked.

"Yes ma'am," Tang replied.

"Excellent," the captain said. "Let's do what we came here for then."

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***SFS Tchono***  
**(Main Bridge)**

"Sutahr!" The sensors officer growled. "Sutahr, the *Independence* is operational again and it's headed toward us, full impulse!"

"So, they were playing some type of game all along eh?" B'Har hissed. "Perhaps one of N'Saba's feints? He knows how I value honor and sacrifice, so the gark devised a little scenario to arouse my sentimentality. He'll pay for that. They all will!"

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***USS Independence***  
**(Main Bridge)**

"Which ship do I target first captain?" Bin Nadal asked.

"The big one," Aurelia said casually, feeling more at home in the heat of battle than she had a right to be, especially after the last several months. "The command vessel."

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***SFS Tchono***  
**(Main Bridge)**

"Incoming," the sensors officer crowed. "Incoming!"

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***USS Independence***  
**(Main Bridge)**

The starship's forward phasers slammed into the *Predator*-class ship, aimed at its weapons array. The shields around the large vessel crackled as it absorbed *Indy's* first volley.

"Pour it on!" Aurelia encouraged. "Let's give the *Enterprise* a fighting chance!"

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***USS Enterprise***  
**(Main Bridge)**

"Perhaps there's something to be said for youth and exuberance after all Number One," Picard said, impressed with the *Independence's* quick reaction time. "Red alert, evasive maneuvers!"

The sleek-*Sovereign* class ship powered to life, jetting forward, clipping the Alshain ship immediately in front of it. The *Enterprise* counted on its superior shields to withstand the contact. They did. The Alshain ship's shields buckled as the *E* left a large cleft in the *Hunter*-class destroyer's hull. Before the ship could restore its shields, the *Enterprise* took advantage, disabling the ship's weapons and propulsion.

The Starfleet vessel swung around to face the remaining ships. The *Predator*, the most powerful ship in the blockade was engaging the *Independence*. Despite the *Independence's* small size, it boasted some of the most advanced weapons and defensive systems in the Fleet. That left two operational Alshain warships. Unfortunately, the commanders of those vessels had overcome their initial shock and were bearing down on the *E*.

"Helm, employ the Glover Loop," Picard commanded.

"Aye sir," Lt. Kell Perim promptly replied, turning back briefly to smirk at the captain. The *Enterprise* dove under the incoming fusillade, over, and emerging behind the three Alshain vessels. Picard clutched his armrests, but

maintained his composure. The structural integrity field stuttered under the strain, and he could hear the ship creaking as the SIF kept it from flying apart. The Glover Loop required speed to overcome the immense pressures placed on any ship's hull and SIF that attempted it. During her time onboard, Kell had exhibited the piloting skills necessary to pull it off. However, it felt like it was an eternity before the *Enterprise* arrived back in almost the same spot it had left. The Alshain ships had already flown past them. "Mr. Daniels, fire aft torpedoes, full spread."

The weathered Daniels smiled. "Aye sir," he said with a glint of awe. All of the torpedoes connected, spinning the Alshain vessels through space. "Direct hits on both warships."

"Good work Lt. Perim, and everyone else as well," Picard said proudly. Perim blushed.

"The Alshain won't be bothering us for a few minutes at least," Riker observed as he continued watching the spinning ships.

"Hopefully that'll give us the time we need to get Sutahr B'Har to see reason," Picard replied.

"Don't count on it," N'Saba riposted.

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### ***USS Independence*** **(Main Bridge)**

"You just couldn't say no to Admiral Khamba could you?" Lt. Commander Bin Nadal remarked as he ducked a swinging, sparking cable that had been unloosed from the ceiling by another barrage from the Alshain battle cruiser's exciser cannons.

"You know me, the perennial suck up," Aurelia quipped.

"I don't think this is the appropriate time to be bantering," Lt. Commander Windslow griped. "That *Predator* is ripping into us!" The *Indy's* maneuverability, superior shielding, and heavy armament had kept the ship from being destroyed thus far, but each hit by the Alshain slowed the ship. Eventually, the constant barrage from the battle cruiser's heavy weapons would punch a hole through, and then the *Independence* would be at their mercy. Sintina understood Windslow's desire for a quick knockout, but she also knew it wasn't going to be easy. In addition to facing a relatively superior-armed ship, the cruiser's commander was wilier than the other Alshain they had bested a few minutes ago. At the moment, she wasn't giving *Indy* much of a chance to get under her defenses to inflict damage.

Aurelia nodded. "Then can you think of a better time for gallows humor than when we might face the gallows?" Windslow shook his head in frustration before returning his attention back to his console.

The dance between the *Indy* and the battle cruiser continued for several more tense minutes, neither landing a decisive blow. "Captain, the *Enterprise* is hailing us!" Lt. Tang called out.

"Onscreen," she ordered. Captain Picard gazed at her with a weary half-smile.

"Need some assistance Captain Aurelia?"

"Not really, but be my guest." The man nodded before disabling the link. The viewscreen switched to an image of the *Enterprise* attacking the *Predator* from the rear. Sintina ordered the *Indy* to lay it on from the front. Sandwiched between the two ships, the intense energy volleys set off a kaleidoscopic array of colors as the cruisers shields finally folded.

Aurelia forced herself not to pump her fist in the air. She did have to maintain some decorum after all. She was the captain.

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### ***SFS Tchono*** **(Main Bridge)**

Her pride hurt worse than the gash running down her leg. Sutahr Hui B'Har would've rather destroyed her ship than answer Picard's summons. However, the combined assault by the Starfleet vessels had disabled her auto-destruct mechanism.

"Picard I'm in no mood to talk, just destroy us and get it over with," B'Har replied, masking her trepidation with a bored tone.

"I don't want to destroy your ship Sutahr B'Har," the human replied.

"Then you wish to discuss the terms of capitulation," B'Har snarled. "I'll never surrender to you!"

"Believe me, I've told him so," Lt. Commander N'Saba said. He was standing beside Picard, his unnatural blue eyes glaring spookily across the void at her. "This is about your survival."

"Survival means nothing if it's under someone's heel," B'Har replied.

"Well, that's your decision to make," she heard a female voice issue from the viewer's built-in translator. The screen split between Picard and Captain Aurelia of the *Independence*. For a brief second, B'Har noticed the flash of annoyance on the older captain's face. She smiled.

The female captain misunderstood her gesture, "Nice to meet you too...Captain Aurelia, *Starship Ind...*"

"I know who you are," B'Har interrupted. "Your ship previously defiled our Origin Sector, sent by Starfleet as a show of force," the vulpine snorted. "And it appears Starfleet Command has unsheathed you again."

"Something like that," Aurelia offered.

"Sutahr all we wish to do is complete our mission," Picard said. "If we truly had malicious intent we wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

"Yeah, you'd be scrap metal," Aurelia added. Picard's frown grew more pronounced. But the man smartly did nothing to correct his younger counterpart, which would've shown division among them, a telling indication of something B'Har could perhaps exploit.

"We have our orders," Picard said. "And I intend to carry them out. Lives might be at stake."

"I also have my orders," B'Har replied. "I know lives are at stake."

"Perhaps both sides could dial back a moment," N'Saba uncharacteristically offered. "Maybe we should recheck with our respective governments to see if any new orders have been issued."

"If so, Starfleet Command would've informed us," Picard said, a curious expression on his face. "I don't see how...."

"Excuse me captain," N'Saba interrupted, "but the Alshain don't employ the same communication protocols. How about you give Sutahr B'Har time to consult with her superiors?"

Picard failed to mask his anger completely. "That sounds... feasible. One hour," he said, staring hard into the screen. "And then we're venturing to Alshain Proper regardless."

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### ***USS Enterprise-E*** **(Main Bridge)**

Captain Aurelia now occupied the viewer alone. Captain Picard turned to the Alshain Science Officer. "Mr. N'Saba your rank insubordination is unacceptable!"

"Captain," the lupine said smoothly. "I assure you that this time no disrespect was intended. Sutahr B'Har needs to save face. I knew she would need time to figure out a way to accept the inevitable with a modicum of her dignity intact. To lose face is the greatest fear of any member of the Alshain nobility."

"Or you could've just given her and the rest of the Alshain squadron another hour to regroup and take us on again," Aurelia challenged. Picard turned to the *Independence* captain.

"You and I will talk later Captain Aurelia; I wanted you to remain online so that I could tell you so without Sutahr B'Har hearing it."

"We can talk now," Aurelia rejoined. But Picard nodded.

"Later," he said again, his voice hardening.

"Fine," Aurelia shrugged. "In the meantime, we'll be repairing our vessel and keeping an eye on the rest of the Alshain squadron."

After Aurelia had signed off, the captain refocused on N'Saba. "Mr. N'Saba I brought you along for your insight. I hope I didn't make a mistake."

"So do I captain," N'Saba remarked. "So do I."

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## **Unnamed Planetoid Somewhere in Sector 443...**

The network of air vents carved into the rock of the planetoid only went so far, forcing the *Valour* crew to exit them before they reached the spaceport. Captain Nandali Kojo dropped first into the darkened storage room, Security Guard Westin following. Together they helped pulled down Lt. Meleek-Zar. The Skorr had incurred the most injuries among them. His wings were hanging onto his back by mere tendons, his uniform matted with blood from their near severing. Kojo was impressed that she heard nary a whisper of protest from the avian officer though.

The Kriosian captain paused from their mission to ramble through the storage room for some type of medicine. After a few minutes Lt. Chang found a few ampoules of painkillers, and Westin found a hypo. Kojo applied the hypo to Meleek-Zar's neck. He sighed with relief.

"What do we do now?" Chang whispered. Unfortunately the Alshain didn't have a terminal in the room that they could access to give them a layout of the half-constructed base. Kojo had been going off of memory and instinct.

"We take the *Valour*," Kojo said confidently.

"Captain...I am certain that you don't know the present location of the *Valour*," Stell, a Vulcan Petty Officer replied. "The chances of our recapture increase significantly if we amble about attempting to find the ship. I am certain that Alshain search parties are currently pursuing us now." Kojo frowned at the Vulcan, but held her tongue.

"Stell does have a point," Chang said more gently. "We're bound to run into a search party sooner or later. Our luck has been too good thus far."

Nandali noted. "You're right," she admitted. "That's why I will go alone and find the launch area. You will remain here, and wait until I return for you."

"With all due respect," Westin replied. "Captain, I don't think it's wise for you to go out there alone." The muscular young man was one of the *Valour's* newest additions. He had just missed serving in the war by a hair and he was chomping at the bit for action.

"It worked pretty well the first time," Kojo huffed, reigning in her anger. She had dismissed Commander Bolden's suggestions and look where it had gotten them. Though she was infinitely confident in her own abilities, she was still wise enough to know she wasn't infallible. "All right...", she said

slowly, unused to reversing course. "Westin you're with me. Chang you're in charge until I-we-get back."

Westin grinned. "Captain, you won't regret this."

"For your sake Mr. Westin, I better not."

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**Unnamed Planetoid 443**  
**(Launch Bay)**  
**Somewhere in Sector 443...**

"That's not my concern," Nardin sin Phalzan regretted the decisions of his superiors with each passing day. "I will not alter my schedule. My betters expect the *Valour* to be delivered to her in a week. They are not persons one wisely keeps waiting." He met Sutahr R'Vott at eye level, something he couldn't do with a male Alshain. She had pulled him from his final diagnostic check on the *Defiant*-class ship's systems to pester him about the escape of the ship's former crew. The two had been arguing for nearly thirty minutes, the ring of Alshain warriors that had accompanied R'Vott whipping their heads between them and the launch bay's entrance. Nardin had ordered his engineering team to remain onboard the ship and finish their inspection.

The sutahr's lips curled back, revealing sharpened incisors. But Nardin was not afraid. He knew that the rebel Alshain didn't stand a chance unless they could rebuild their forces in the haven the Domain was providing for them. "I have issued a security lockdown for the entire base. Until the prisoners are captured, no one leaves or enters this base." R'Vott's tone was as unyielding as duranium.

"I repeat, that has very little to do with us." Nardin laughed. "It's not like they could gain access to the *Valour*. First of all they would have to get through your capable soldiers, and then they would have to contend with my engineering crew presently onboard the starship. Granted, they are not warriors, but they are Phalkerians."

Now it was R'Vott's turn to laugh. "It's obvious you've never dealt with a warrior like this Kojo before. Even I don't know what to expect from her."

"Why don't you continue pondering her next move while I get back to work," Nardin offered. "The sooner we leave this accursed rock, the sooner it will cut off one avenue of escape for the brigands."

R'Vott pondered that, scratching her muzzle in thought. "I must admit...I hadn't thought of that before."

Nardin bowed. "I aim to serve."

"Fine," R'Vott said. "Finish your inspections and leave immediately."

"I'm glad you see reason Sutahr, it was a pleasure doing business with you." But R'Vott had already turned from the man, leading her soldiers out of

the launch bay. *Good riddance*, Nardin sniffed before he stepped back through the *Valour's* open hatch.

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### **Unnamed Planetoid Somewhere in Sector 443...**

Nadfar Rog smelled his prey before he saw them. He loped along the rocky floor, on all fours, his paladins behind him. They had all succumbed to the rage and grief of Tarwez's loss. Rending the flesh of Kojo and her crew would sate that despair and also cement him as their new leader. So, instead of ordering his troops to slow down so he could assess the situation and prepare a proper trap, Rog rushed ahead, convinced that ferocity and strength were all that were required.

He took the corner, the smell of blood and flesh strong in his nostrils. Rog came up quickly, one of his men plowing into him. They fell in a tangle onto the floor. A tattered uniform and a bloodied loin cloth lay on the ground in front of him.

Rog pushed the man off, grabbing the clothing. The Kriosian had duped him again. He bellowed with rage before driving his snout into the clothing, their odor implanted on his olfactory senses now. He promised Garrm himself Kojo wouldn't dupe him again.

They were close by; Rog not only could still smell them. He could feel them. Rog ordered his men to search the row of rooms along each corridor. "The time for subterfuge is almost over Captain! Soon we'll meet face to face!"

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### **Unnamed Planetoid Somewhere in Sector 443...**

"And I promised you that you wouldn't regret this," Westin smiled, "but the one with little regret right now is me," the man said, on Kojo's heels, her toned, bronze naked buttocks swishing in front of him.

"Mr. Westin, I assure you that I would be more than you could handle," Nandali glanced back, with a feral grin. "Perhaps after we secure the *Valour*..." Before joining Starfleet Kojo's primary experience had been serving aboard her husband's ship. Klingons weren't as prudish about sexual relationships with subordinates. Though Kojo found little time, and very few potential suitors that intrigued her, this most recent brush with death was stirring long-forgotten fires. Plus, the broad-shouldered, russet-haired Westin certainly looked durable enough and adequately appealing stripped to his under garments.



"Wow...hmm...", the young man stammered. "I expected a citation for that comment, not an invitation." Kojo glanced back again. The man's face was now as red as his hair. She laughed.

"I'm not your typical Starfleet captain," she replied.

"No ma'am, you're definitely not." Westin said, a jocular grin plastering over his awkwardness.

The flirtation ended after the Alshain's threat reverberated through the walls. "They found our little package sooner than I thought," Westin said.

Kojo shook her head. "I anticipated as much. The Alshain are natural predators, with enhanced olfactory and auditory senses, in addition to speed and strength. If you wish to continue living don't underestimate them again."

"I won't sir," Westin said tightly.

"Good," Kojo said, searching the dim halls in front of her for any potential surprises. Though her natural senses were far inferior, Nandali had a well honed sense of smell. And she smelled the creature coming from an access corridor to the left. She put up a hand, and Westin stopped. Kojo leaned against a wall, Westin behind her. She handed her disruptor to him. Kojo had made Chang keep the other exciser in case any Alshain attempted to enter the storage room. Nandali flexed her stiff fingers. She preferred working with her hands whenever possible.

The Alshain shuffled by them, so engrossed in the datapad he was carrying that he didn't catch their scent until it was too late. Kojo swept kicked the man's tree-like legs from beneath him, biting back a scream of pain as she jumped on top of him, her hands wrapping around the startled man's throat. Westin shoved the disruptor in his face.

"Answer only when spoken to or you die," Nandali hissed. "Do you understand?" The canid gurgled, his eyes glazing over. Kojo eased up slightly. She repeated her threat. He nodded slowly.

"Where is the launch bay?" Westin asked, overeager. Kojo scowled at him.

"I'll ask the questions Mr. Westin," she snapped. The young man quickly lowered his head.

"Sorry sir." Turning back to the frightened Alshain, Kojo asked. "Where is your control center?"

"Why do we need to know that?" Westin blurted, before being silenced by another withering gaze.

"You know you're talking yourself right out of a great experience," Kojo remarked before returning her attention to the Alshain. "Where is the control center?" After the man told her she cuffed him on the head, and searched his body for weapons. All she found was an ornate knife that appeared for more ceremonial than practical use. Kojo pocketed it anyway.

"Let's go," she told Westin.

"Sir, hopefully you won't be angered by this, but I don't understand your line of reasoning," the security guard ventured, scratching his head with the butt of the disruptor.

"You will," was all Kojo offered before she headed down the corridor.

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**Federation Embassy  
(Ambassador's Office)  
Alshain Proper**

Ambassador Depek sat in solitude, trying to make sense of the chaos surging around him. "It's happening all over again," he mumbled to himself. "Another world tearing itself apart just like Xindus." After alternating centuries of warfare and peace, his people were still divided, with the reptilians and insectoids choosing not to join the Federation. The aquatics, arboreals, and primates had accepted Federation membership and had benefited from it. They had chosen to trust the humans, something that the reptilians and insectoids had never been able to do. His estranged brethren currently struggled, eking out an existence in the former Delphic Expanse, surrounded by their more prosperous brothers. It pained him that wounded pride could chain millions of people, millions of his kind, in misery.

Depek had hoped he could use his talents on Alshain Proper to prevent a similar fate from befalling the Alshain. But the Coordinating Committee was too in love with power and intrigue, and the Alshain people were too desirous of a place in the sun, not knowing how scorching proximity to the sun could be. But they would soon find out.

Depek's door bell chimed. "Enter," he said after a few seconds. The door slid open to reveal Femi Gado, his able assistant. The sprightly ebon-skinned human poked her head in the door. "Ambassador, we have a priority one message coming in."

Depek smiled. "So, the *Enterprise* arrived here without incident? That's good news."

"No," the young woman frowned. "It's the *Starship Defiant*."

"*Defiant*?" Depek was already out of his chair. "What is the *Defiant* doing here?" He asked as he dashed around his desk and into the small communications center. A human female, with admiral's pips was on the main viewer.

"Ambassador," she nodded. "I'm Admiral Monica Covey, commander of Deep Space Nine."

"Ah..." Depek smiled. "Admiral Covey, I've heard a lot about you. It is a pleasure to meet you. But I am curious as to why I wasn't informed about this change in plan."

"Because there isn't a change in plan sir," Covey said. "I came of my own volition."

"What happened to the *Enterprise*?" Depek asked, troubled. Covey frowned.

"I'm not sure sir, though I do have a good guess."

"If I recall, you are something of the Alshain expert," Depek remarked. Covey nodded.

"You could say that I suppose. So, right now I need you listen to me and follow my instructions explicitly."

"We are at your disposal Admiral." Depek said.

The woman smiled, "Thank you for making this easy. Please lower transport nullifier." Depek nodded at the Dopterian technician at the security console. Seconds later, several beams of sparkling golden light appeared in the center of the room.

A dark-skinned man with facial scars and dreadlocks, a strapping Andorian, and two lesser ranked officers resolved from the transporter. The two officers carried long bags slung over their backs.

The charcoal-colored man quickly stepped toward Depek. "I'm Lt. Commander Tristan Curbeam," he said, a musical lilt to his voice. "You're to come with us immediately sir."

Depek instinctively reared back, and Gado stepped between him and the eager man. "Just a tad bit eager are you?" She admonished Curbeam. The man repeated his order.

"What the Commander is trying to say," the Andorian spoke up, "Is that you all are in grave danger the longer you stay here."

Depek took his eyes away from the fierce human to glance at the Andorian. "Young man what are you talking about? That mob outside screaming for our heads can't penetrate these walls. Believe me they've tried."

"That's not what the admiral is concerned about," a hard edge now crept into the Andorian's voice. He nodded at the other two officers. They immediately sat their bags down and pulled out long, pulsing rods. They placed the rods around the room.

"What are you doing?" Gado asked suspiciously.

"Transporter enhancers," the Andorian said. "They'll strengthen our transporter signals in the event the Alshain employ scramblers."

"The mob doesn't have the ability to that."

"Believe it or not, it's not the mob we're worried about." The Andorian said. Curbeam's compin chirped. He tapped it.

"Do you and Mr. Faltyne have everything in order?" Covey asked.

"Yes sir," Curbeam crisply replied, glancing at the Andorian, and nodding appreciatively.

"Excellent," Covey said. "Prepare to beam up on my mark."

"Wait!" Depek yelled. "There are four hundred people in the Embassy. You can't leave them!"

"And we won't," Covey promised. "But you're our first priority. Mr. Curbeam, proceed."

The transporter effect stole Depek's next words.

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### **Ministry of State, Central Ministries Complex Arcology Alshain Proper**

Chairman Orthlin C'Oemnm's laughter rattled the walls. "I told you not to underestimate the humans!" One of the monitors in the room had switched to wedge-shaped silver blue starship in orbit above Alshain Proper. "In your haste to block Picard, you sent our entire Fleet away, allowing Covey to waltz right in. Forgot that one Federation ship possessed a cloak eh?"

"Scramble the *Howlers*," spittle flew from T'Riav's mouth. "Raze the embassy and swat that starship out of the sky!"

C'Oemnm leaned back in his seat and decided to enjoy the show.

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### ***USS Defiant* Alshain Proper**

"Uh Admiral," Science Officer Okala Lahn squeaked. "We've got company."

"On screen," Admiral Monica Covey remarked, gripping her armrest as a swarm of interceptors rose from the lush planet's surface. "Damn, I knew this wasn't going to be easy."

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### **Ministry of State, Central Ministries Complex Arcology Alshain Proper**

"Activate the planetary defense grid," Boree L'Bek said, the coldness in her voice freezing Orthlin's joy. "This changes nothing. So, a few of them escaped. They'll still be none the wiser." She tapped several commands into her desk terminal.

"A second squadron of *Howlers* has been dispatched to the Embassy. Once they've flattened it, they will swoop around and neutralize the crowd."

"The day will still be ours," T'Riav crowed.

"We'll see," C'Oemnm glumly remarked. "We'll see."

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## ***USS Defiant*** **Alshain Proper**

"Ensign Hetis, evasive maneuvers," Covey commanded. She hadn't been in combat since the closing months of the Dominion War. Monica hoped she hadn't lost a step or two in the intervening months. The more agile *Howlers* matched the *Defiant* move for move, yet they hadn't begun firing.

Perhaps we can avoid bloodshed today after all, Covey thought.

"I'm getting a massive power reading from the surface," Lahn said, her voice choking. "It's the Federation Embassy admiral...it's gone."

"What?" Covey was disbelieving. "What do you mean gone?"

"It appears to have been destroyed," Lahn said. "The planetary defense shield now over the planet is blocking my ability to determine exactly how."

"Oh, I've got a few good ideas about that," Covey said through clenched teeth, "and I know who to go to for answers. Power up the weapons banks."

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## **Outside the Federation Embassy** **Alshain Proper**

The crowd that survived the blast didn't know whether to cheer, cry, or curse the screaming ships that blew past them. A large hologram of Chairman C'Oemnm rose to the heavens. Decked in white and gold-inlaid robes, he looked as regal as the Exarch himself, and the words he spoke were the first address he had made to the people since he had overthrow their revered leader.

The hologram said, clearly and boldly, "Today we take our destiny in our own hands! Today we remove forever the chains that have bound us. It was Jedalla that entered into an alliance with the Federation, and it was for this reason that had to be removed before he made us their vassals. With this blow, we declare before the entire Quadrant and the gods themselves that we choose our own destiny!" He roared, and many in the crowd followed suit.

Still atop the tank, Dowager Managa shook her head. "The fools," she spat. But what truly could she expect from the rabble? They were so easily swayed with their small minds. "How dare he blame my son for his failures!" But none of her once ardent followers were paying attention to her. They were looking at the smoking crater where the Federation Embassy used to be. They were savoring the war to come.

"Fools," Managa said again, before hopping off the tank. She was making her way through the crowd when she heard the *Howlers* circling back.

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## **Ministry of State, Central Ministries Complex Arcology**

### **Alshain Proper**

Chairman C'Oemnm stepped off the holopad. He had to admit that he enjoyed his rousing speech, and the feedback appeared surprisingly positive. His concern about the gullibility of his people was overmatched by his need for occasional adulation.

"That went better than expected," C'Oemnm said. "The crowd appears to be taking my message to heart. Do you think putting them to sleep is really necessary now?" He asked L'Bek.

The woman's plump fingers formed a pyramid on the desk, a sign that she was in deep contemplation. "Yes," she said softly, but firmly. "It must be done."

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### ***USS Defiant***

### **Alshain Proper**

"Time to earn your paycheck Ensign Hetis," Admiral Covey ducked a sparking cable that swung by her head.

"Uh sir," the Boslic helm officer replied, "The Federation is a moneyless economy now."

"I know that," Covey replied. "Just get us back to DS9 in one piece." Despite Hetis's best efforts, and Monica was impressed how well the young officer handled the starship, there were too many *Howler's*. Hetis could zig one, but not zag another one before it unleashed another volley against the *Defiant's* shields.

"What's our status?" Covey squinted, the acrid fumes of smoke encircling the bridge stinging her eyes.

"Not good," Lt. Commander Curbeam laconically replied.

"Care to elaborate?"

"Our shields are down to 45%, the warp engine is offline, cloaking device is too, but we do have impulse power and a half-functional weapons bank," Lt. Okala replied, her voice tinged with hysteria. Covey now regretted bringing the young woman along. She was still mourning the death of Lt. Easun, the *Defiant's* former Tactical Officer.

"Some rescue," Covey griped. "But we're not done yet. Ensign Hetis turn us around. If we're going to go out, it might as well be in a blaze of glory. When we're about, Mr. Curbeam unload every damn thing we've got!"

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### **Outside the Federation Embassy**

## Alshain Proper

The *Howlers* screamed overhead, the crowd below pumping their fists in exultation. Trapped among them, her high status all but forgotten, Dowager Managa felt a fine mist sprinkle on her pelt. It felt almost like rain.

Except it didn't evaporate, it started to slowly itch, then burn. The Dowager wiped at her arm, trying to remove whatever it was, but it was no use. She looked around, opening her mouth to ask for help, but she could no longer speak. Something was choking her. Managa realized she wasn't the only one. Other members in the throng were clutching their throats, digging into their skin, while more were pitching forward, convulsing on the ground. The crowd panicked, tossing, and running into and over one another, trying to escape from whatever it was that had befallen them.

Jostled, and knocked to the ground, Managa could only wheeze when a heavy boot crushed her hand. She looked up to see the assailant, but her eyesight wavered before going dark. Blind, battered, her breath coming in labored rasps, her body on fire, the Dowager realized with a morbid satisfaction that C'Oemnm was the cause of this. The man who the people had chosen Jedalla over had murdered them. *These fools get what they deserve*, she thought right before her lungs imploded.

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## Ministry of State, Central Ministries Complex Arcology Alshain Proper

"My gods!" C'Oemnm exclaimed, whipping around to glare at the rest of the Committee. "What have you done? That's not *axonol*!"

"No, it isn't," L'Bek said matter-of-factly. "It's Draxat-5."

"You used chemical weapons on our own people!" C'Oemnm lurched toward the hefty woman, rage encumbering his steps.

"No, *you* ordered the release of the Draxat-5." L'Bek said with a smile. "Or at least that is what everyone will think."

"How-how could you?" C'Oemnm spread his hands, flexing them as he approached L'Bek. He could already feel his hands choking the life from the fetid woman. She remained seated, her smile now a blithely arrogant smirk.

"Someone has to take the fall for this," L'Bek said. "Think of it. There won't be war if the Federation believes that you, driven by madness, acted alone. The tragedy today could also allow us to unify our people against Jedalla."

"No," C'Oemnm said. "How could you be so monstrous?" He stood over L'Bek, his hands flexing.

She casually looked up at him. "You don't have the guts to kill me. You lost the killer instinct long ago," she sneered.

"Watch me," C'Oemnm slashed the woman's throat with one claw, her blood spurting over his white and gold robes of state. He didn't have long to luxuriate in the feeling of revenge however. A pain flared up his spine, and Orthlin crumpled to the floor. He futilely reached for the dagger he knew was in his back, but strong hands batted his away. And then they turned him over, pressing his back hard into the floor, driving the knife through him. C'Oemnm looked down at the tip poking out of his abdomen. He didn't know where L'Bek's blood began and his ended.

"Thank you for taking care of L'Bek for me," T'Riav glared down at him, a manic grin on his face. K'Phrey stood beside him, another knife clutched in his paw. "Though I will miss her. We couldn't have done any of this without her. Her sacrifice at the hands of the Orthlin the Insane will not be forgotten."

C'Oemnm spit out blood. He glanced around wildly. "G'Nesh," he pleaded, "G'Nesh."

"I am here Orthlin," the woman whispered. She kneeled before him. He grasped her hands, holding them to his slowing heart.

"Don't let them win," he gasped.

"I'm sorry," she said, her tears splashing against his face. "But I must think of my Sept, and my entire clan now." She reached up and took the dagger from K'Phrey. "Please know that this will unify our people. It's the will of the gods however that you won't live to see it."

"G'Nesh," he wheezed before the woman plunged the knife into his heart.

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### ***USS Enterprise-E*** **(Main Bridge)**

Captain Picard was intrigued by the stunned look on his counterpart's face. "Captain Picard...", Sutahr B'Har said slowly, "I have been ordered to inform you that the Federation Embassy on Alshain Proper was destroyed in a terrorist action."

Picard stood up from his seat. "How many casualties?" He said, after a few seconds of trying to muffle his shock.

"Initial reports indicate that over three hundred lives were lost," B'Har replied. "However, it appears that Ambassador Depek and much of his staff were rescued by the *Starship Defiant*."

"*Defiant*?" Picard asked, almost stunned into silence. "What was the *Defiant* doing there?"



"As if you need to ask," B'Har smiled conspiratorially. "Well played Captain. The War Ministry has advised me to maintain the blockade until the *Defiant* reaches us. I'm sure you will receive more information at that time."

Picard nodded absently, his mind still trying to accept the three hundred deaths that might've been prevented if B'Har hadn't impeded his mission. After B'Har's image had been replaced by the scarred starboard side of her vessel, the captain handed off the conn to Commander Riker. He forced himself not to stumble towards his Ready Room. There, he contacted Starfleet Command to inform them of B'Har's news and to see what new information they might have for him. He was hoping against hope that B'Har's news was another feint. Fifteen minutes later, he dreadfully learned otherwise.

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### ***USS Defiant*** **Alshain Proper**

"This is some type of joke," Admiral Covey stood in front of her seat on the ruined bridge.

"I assure you there is very little levity here at this moment," Chairman Rulf T'Riav said, his voice thick with sadness. "There has been too much blood shed today. For the loss of your Embassy, we offer our deepest apologies and will provide reasonable restitution."

" 'Reasonable restitution'?" Ambassador Depek scoffed. "For almost four hundred lives?"

"We truly are sorry," T'Riav offered again.

"I don't buy it," Covey said. "Orthlin C'Oemnm was one of the most level-headed ministers I dealt with during the war, no offense. The idea of him going insane, ordering the destruction of a Federation Embassy, releasing chemical weapons on his own people, murdering a member of your committee; that just sounds preposterous."

T'Riav nodded, his expression empathetic. "The last few weeks have been very stressful. Orthlin carried tremendous burdens. Any person would eventually succumb."

"Umm hmm," Covey nodded her head, her disbelief apparent. "Well, Chairman if you don't mind I would like to send a team down to investigate the remains at the embassy...for my debriefing report of course."

"That's not necessary," T'Riav said. "Orthlin was the culprit. He is dead. If any new information arises, we will be sure to let you know."

"The Embassy grounds are considered Federation property," Ambassador Depek said.

"There is no Federation property on Alshain Proper!" T'Riav's eyes smoldered, but he took a more conciliatory tack seconds later. "The presence of Starfleet personnel so soon after this tragedy would not augur well for future relations between our nations. My people are scared, paranoid. They might blame you for the gassing."

The Admiral nodded. She couldn't deny that T'Riav made a point. "You might have a point there," she finally conceded.

He smiled. "Thank you Admiral. In happier times Orthlin spoke highly of you. Now I understand why. Just as I called back the ships he had sent to destroy you, I have informed the Origin Fleet to give you safe passage. You can rendezvous with the *Enterprise* at the edge of the Origin Sector."

Still not completely convinced, but unable to put all the pieces together, Covey forced herself to let it go. After the ship was underway, she said aloud to no one in particular, "I'm really getting tired of this intrigue crap. For once I would like to have an enemy I can hit. Where are the Jem'Hadar when you need them?"

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**Unnamed Planetoid  
(Launch Bay)  
Somewhere in Sector 443...**

Nardin sin Phalzan accustomed himself to the captain's chair. He was a trouble shooter of sorts for the Domain, and the experience of mastering a vessel was new to him. He intended to savor the trip back to Phalkeria, as he imagined himself at the head of the war fleet that would rid the galaxy of the Yashk'ani forever.

He closed his eyes, allowing his fantasies to take hold as the *Valour* gracefully lifted out of the launch bay. Seconds later, a soft thrumming pulled him from his daydream. Beams of light were materializing before him.

He reached for the pistol at his side, but stopped when a gleaming knife blade tickled his throat. He stared up into the wild eyes of a naked, humanoid female.

"Captain Kojo I presume," he said carefully. She removed the knife from his throat, but before he could react, she rammed her fist into one of his temples.

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***USS Valour*  
Somewhere in Sector 443...**

After she had pulled the deceptively heavy Phalkerian from her chair, Captain Nandali Kojo sat down. The leather seat felt sticky against her

backside. Her officers made short work of the other Phalkerians on the bridge. Kojo had rightly guessed that the base's control room would be sparsely occupied, with the majority of Alshain warriors spread throughout the planetoid searching for them. It had taken little effort to dispose of the scant group of technicians in the control room. From there, Kojo was able to gain control of the base's transporter network which she used to beam her crew back onto the *Valour*.

The captain led the bridge away team. Kojo had beamed a team led by Westin and Lt. Chang to Engineering. She checked with them now.

"All clear," Westin said. "Didn't know what hit 'em."

And you won't either, after we're done with this, Kojo thought. "Excellent work Mr. Westin. Are we warp capable Lt. Chang?"

"Yes sir," the assistant engineer replied. "The Phalkerians did a pretty good job of patching the old girl up."

"Thank you," Kojo said before cutting the link. She leaned forward in her seat. "Mr. Stell, plot a heading the hells away from here. Maximum warp."

"Sir, we should be able to go to warp as soon as we exit the planetoid's launch bay," the Vulcan replied.

"Normally I would concur," the Kriosian said. "But I think it's time to inflict a little payback."

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### **Unnamed Planetoid Somewhere in Sector 443...**

R'Vott's team and Rog's paladins reached the control room at the same time. "She did it to us again," Sutahr Visla R'Vott said, smashing her fist into a console, splintering its glossy plastic finish.

The paladins swept through the room, checking the supine technicians. "They're dead," Nadfar Rog said moments later.

"And so are we," R'Vott's eyes were glued to the room's ovoid viewer. She saw the thrusters of the *Valour* blast fire into the launch bay. "She's on that ship, and she's going to go to warp."

"How do you know?" Rog asked, disbelieving.

"Because it's what I would do," R'Vott replied.

"Then we have only minutes?" He asked.

"Seconds," she replied, already running her fingers across the console in front of her. "The *gark* has locked us out of our own computer." She snarled.

"Come," Rog ordered. His men had already rushed to the lockers adorning the small control room. They were frantically donning pressure suits. One of the warriors threw two to Rog. He handed one to R'Vott. "If we

can make it to my interceptors outside I can still make good my promise to the gods." The sandy-furred Alshain grimly replied.

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### ***USS Valour***

#### **Somewhere in Sector 443...**

"Mr. Stell," Captain Nandali Kojo said with relish, "Light the candle."

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### ***USS Enterprise-E***

#### **(Counselor's Office)**

"I guess I can kibosh the homecoming celebration," Lt. Commander Seb N'Saba dryly remarked. Commander Deanna Troi placed the cup of coffee and tray she had been holding on her table.

"And that troubles you?" She asked in all seriousness, her voice perfectly modulated.

"Wouldn't it trouble you to be considered lower than flotsam, with your own mate seeing your death as an opportunity for promotion?" N'Saba snapped. "Do you typically ask such asinine questions Counselor?"

The half-Betazoid was taken aback. Her olive skin blanched slightly. "Your anger is very palpable."

"That's a revelation," N'Saba drolly remarked.

"Perhaps not to you, but I have noticed that you often attempt to cover up your fears with acerbic comments or well-timed tantrums. After watching your interaction with the crew for the last several weeks, I've come to notice those particular defense mechanisms." She paused, gazing deeply at him with her penetrating dark eyes. "What are you so terrified of Commander N'Saba?"

He stood up, "I'm through with this! Picard ordered me to talk to you. I did, so at least I can't be punished for not following orders." The Alshain stood up.

"Sit down Mr. N'Saba," Troi said. The Science Officer headed toward the door. "Sit!" she yelled, stopping N'Saba in his tracks. "Need I remind you that I outrank you?" He turned around, a slow grin spreading across his face.

"People have been reminding me of that a lot lately. It's just another reason I can't wait for this mission to be over so Starfleet will no longer have any need of my services. I'm sure they'll be willing to release me then." He walked back to his seat but he didn't sit down. The counselor didn't force the issue. He knew she was just glad he was talking again.

"If you leave Starfleet what will you do? Where will you go?" Troi asked, with real concern in her voice. It briefly touched Seb, but he batted those feelings away.

"I don't know," he looked absently out of the window. "Perhaps the Nyberrite Alliance. They seem pretty accepting."

"Unlike the Alshain," Troi ventured. Here we go, N'Saba realized, with a sigh.

"I don't think you need me to see how tolerant the Alshain are, the proof is outside," he flicked a thumb toward one of the windows in Troi's office. A copper/red Alshain warship was hanging off the port amidships. "Maybe I'll return to the Daystrom Institute."

"I see," the counselor replied. "Well, at least you've got some ideas in mind." She stood up, "You're free to leave Mr. N'Saba."

"Hey, wait a nanosecond; aren't you supposed to be counseling me?" He replied.

"It's obvious that you don't need my help," Troi replied, "nor do you want it. It would be a waste of time."

"I thought your type lived for this confessional mumbo jumbo," N'Saba replied. "I thought your psychoanalysis was supposed to divine the meaning of my existence or something."

"Not quite," Troi said. "At best we try to get people accept the circumstances they face realistically, and to change them if they are not satisfied with the status quo. But since you've figured everything out..."

"Wait," N'Saba couldn't believe he was falling for this, but he couldn't help himself. "I haven't figured anything out. I said 'maybe' I'll go here or 'perhaps' I'll do that. There's nothing definitive."

"Oh I think there is Mr. N'Saba." Troi said. "Before this mission you wanted to return to your homeworld."

"That was before they were out to kill me," he replied. "You're not advocating that I traipse into a certain execution."

"No I would never do that," the counselor said. "However, can you be certain that every Alshain wants to kill you?"

"How could I be certain of such a thing? There are billions of us running around the galaxy."

"Then how can you be so certain of your outcome? Why are you so quick to write off your people?"

"You've forgotten the recent Briar Patch pogroms already? My people have this little thing about vengeance, punishing wrongdoers."

"And what exactly was your crime?"

N'Saba hesitated, pondering the question. Outside of abnegating his marriage to Hui what exactly had he done so wrong to elicit the ire of some many of his kin? Yes, he was disfigured, and that made him unworthy of

breeding. However, there were many nobles who also had unworthy scions in their Septs and they weren't as ostracized. Eventually the only answer he could come up with was the same he always did. "I...guess I aspired to be something else than what I was supposed to be."

Troi nodded. "And don't you think perhaps that your people might need a new direction right now?"

N'Saba shook his head in agreement. "I guess so," he skeptically answered. "I'm a scientist. Not a political leader."

"Perhaps it's just one of your many talents yet to be discovered," Troi smiled.

"Perhaps," N'Saba returned her smile.

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### ***USS Enterprise-E*** **(Main Bridge)**

Captain Jean-Luc Picard's stomach twisted with unease. Though he had discussed this with both Commander N'Saba and Deanna, and he had tried more than once to dissuade the quarrelsome Alshain, the man stood his ground. Picard had spoken to Starfleet Command on the science officer's behalf and his resignation had finally been accepted, with a catch. Starfleet Command wasn't done with N'Saba yet.

With an iron curtain of martial law now hanging over Alshain Proper, the Admiralty needed all the friends behind that veil that they could get. However, Picard was certain that the Alshain would anticipate the admirals' thinking, and interrogate Mr. N'Saba thoroughly. The captain pushed away painful memories of his own torture at the hands of the sadistic Gul Madred to focus on the task at hand.

"Perhaps the gods still favor me after all?" Sutahr Hui B'Har said. She glanced at Picard. "Captain, you have agreed to remand Commander N'Saba to my ship?"

"Remand implies that Mr. N'Saba has committed some crime," Picard said, "To my knowledge, and our databanks, he has not."

"There are more crimes than legal ones," B'Har retorted. "Still, I promise him safe passage...to Alshain Proper at least."

"Thank you Sutahr," N'Saba sounded more formal than Picard had ever heard him. "I look forward to seeing you again." The man was now dressed in a simple rustic brown tunic and pants, totally at odds with the usual baroque fashion of an Alshain nobleman.

"Don't make me regret my promise," the sutahr snapped before oddly smiling at Picard. Her glistening row of teeth made the human nearly flinch. "It's a pity that Chairman T'Riav called back the Origin Fleet to Alshain

Proper. I never got to test myself against the Federation flagship. But I guess there's always the future."

"Not any future I care to envision," Picard said.

"Which merely proves your lack of imagination," B'Har riposted. "Seb I await you," she said imperiously.

He bowed to Picard and then to Counselor Troi before standing at full attention. "Captain may I be relieved?"

Picard grasped the man's furry hand. "Mr. N'Saba you are relieved...good hunting."

"Captain, you remembered our salutation," N'Saba said. "There might be hope for your kind after all."

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## **Part Four: Day of Reckoning**

### ***IKS Kajh***

#### **(Main Bridge)**

#### **Somewhere in Sector 443...**

"Alter course," Jedalla snapped after he reread the message from Sutahr R'Vott.

"I have my orders," Brigadier Qorb replied, though with less than his usual vehemence.

"Your orders mean nothing now," Jedalla countered. "There is no longer a base to regroup at. Everything is falling apart! This is what happens when one is surrounded by incompetents."

Brigadier Qorb pursed his lips, considering the alternatives. The planetoid base he was supposed to deliver Jedalla had been destroyed by the Federation starship the Alshain were supposed to deliver to the Phalkerians as a down payment for a more permanent base in which Jedalla could strike at his enemies currently ruling the Exarchate. This meant that the Phalkerians were not likely to honor their part of the agreement and might even turn hostile.

The collapse of Jedalla's counter coup would imperil Lorath's own plan to unseat Chancellor Martok. This Qorb could not abide. He could care less what happened to Jedalla or his whole damnable race. But Jedalla might still prove useful, if he could salvage this disaster his subjects had made.

"All right Exarch," Qorb said, "Where do we go?"

"Yashk'lin IV," Jedalla said. The Klingon thought as much. "It's time I drew blood."

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### ***USS Gibraltar***

#### **(In Orbit of Yashk'lin IV)**

"Pell," Jasmine Glover called cheerfully as she stepped off the transporter pad. Both women embraced. "It's only been a few weeks but it feels like years."

"Tell me about it," Pell Ojana replied. She knew her time in the Briar Patch had left her a bit haggard, and Jasmine looked a little beaten up herself. But the Bajoran would never tell her that. "I've heard all the stories about your heroics."

"Damn, news travels fast huh?" Jasmine said, frowning.

"What's wrong?" Pell asked. The engineer shrugged.



"Well...to be honest," Jasmine lowered her voice. "I just don't want to get them to get the idea that I'm some sort of miracle worker. Because what if they come to rely on me and I can't deliver."

The older Bajoran threw her arm around Jasmine's shoulders. "Listen Jasmine, they already rely on you. Responsibility isn't such a bad thing."

"I know, but sometimes it feels...like a strait jacket you know," the sepia-toned woman confided.

"Is that how you feel about Terrence?" Pell asked without thinking. "Sorry."

"No, it's all right." Jasmine said. "I know you're the one person I can talk to about Terrence that can give me honest feedback."

"Why...thank you Jasmine," Pell replied, flattered. "I didn't know you felt that way about me."

"I didn't at first," she admitted with a shy smile. "But I've come to see you differently after our time on the *Aegis* and then at Pacifica."

"Those two weeks were magnificent," Pell crowed. "You know, the *Gibraltar* got sent there to be repaired after our tussle in the Patch. I got a chance to see your parents again."

"How are they?"

"Doing well, and you know they took a shine to Donald," Pell said. Jasmine looked askance. "Captain Sandhurst," Pell added for emphasis. Glover nodded her head, a slow smile of understanding spreading over her face.

"So, I'm not the only one with stories to tell," she raised her eyebrows mischievously.

"What happens on Pacifica stays on Pacifica," Pell winked.

"I thought that slogan was for Risa?" Jasmine asked.

The Bajoran shrugged. "Close enough. So, have you ever met Donald?"

"No, I don't believe I have," Jasmine said. "I would like to. I know that he and Terrence have a bit of a history."

"Yeah, but both of them make more out of than it should be," Pell said. "You know how men are." Both of the women shared a conspiratorial laugh as they exited the Transporter Room.

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### ***USS Gibraltar***

#### **Detention Center/Interrogation Room**

"This is hopeless," Lt. Ra-Goran muttered after Lt. Pava Lar'ragos sent the latest Alshain prisoner back to their new cell aboard the *Gibraltar*. Though the *Constitution* class vessel was smaller than the *Meharry* its detention center was larger, and could almost accommodate all the Alshain they could capture, with minimal discomfort. Of course Ra-Goran didn't care much about

the comfort of the murderous lupines and Lt. Lar'ragos didn't appear to be all that concerned either.

"This is a waiting game," Lar'ragos said with a confidence born of experience. "I really didn't expect any of the Alshain to open up during their first interrogation second; they're better trained than that. But what until the twentieth, or fiftieth; wait until the bad food, poor lighting, and cramped living conditions start to get to them, or their hope fades while they're rotting in some Starfleet stockade, they'll crack soon enough."

"Yeah, but someone else will get the glory," the Efrosian replied, wincing seconds later after he realized he had verbalized his thoughts. Pava's eyebrows beetled instantly, a look of confusion on his face.

"What did you say lieutenant?" Though they both held the same rank, Lar'ragos had seniority due to his long, impressive years in the uniform. From what little Ra-Goran had learned about him, Pava had turned down countless promotions and even a chance to serve on the *Enterprise-E*. Ra-Goran would've killed for those opportunities.

Then again, Efrosians didn't live as long as El Aurians. Perhaps Lar'ragos was merely pacing himself. Ra-Goran couldn't wait, and he knew there was little chance for advancement aboard a medical ship.

"Nothing," Ra-Goran mumbled, quickly looking down at several of the datapads on the table in front of him.

"Ra-Goran, you're forgetting I'm an El Aurian," Pava smirked, tapping one of his ears. "We're a race of listeners. So, things aren't going swimmingly aboard the *Meharry*?"

The young Efrosian glanced up at Lar'ragos. He quickly weighed his options. He didn't want to be known as a complainer, or someone who wasn't a team player. However, Ra-Goran had been dissatisfied with his posting for months and had kept it bottled inside. He admired officers like Lar'ragos, and wanted to be like them. However, with this dead end position slowing his momentum he feared he might not ever get his chance. Perhaps Lar'ragos could give him some pointers, Ra-Goran thought hopefully. He sighed, "Well sir...It's just..." He paused. Lar'ragos patiently waited him out.

"It's just that I wanted to be assigned to another ship," Ra-Goran admitted, and felt sleazy for doing so.

Pava nodded, "I see...go on."

"I feel I can really contribute more on a larger vessel," the Efrosian said carefully.

"You mean the *Meharry's* a rinky dink posting I take it," Lar'ragos summed.

"No," Ra-Goran protested, "Well..."

The El Aurian patted the young man on the shoulder. "I'm going to tell you a secret, something that one of my wisest friends told me a long time ago...even before I joined Starfleet."

Ra-Goran perked up, eager to hear the aged wisdom. "Terkim once told me that life doesn't mean anything without friends."

"I...don't follow your meaning sir," Ra-Goran couldn't quite hide his disappointment with the trite 'wisdom' Lar'ragos had just imparted.

"Listen, you're not too far out of the Academy, so I'm sure you're full of fire," the El Aurian said. "But don't burn too many bridges on the way to the top. The key to a successful career in this business is relationships. And the best way to build them is to do a good job, consistently, wherever you are. You can't do that if you've got your eye constantly on your future. Being so forward focused, you lose out on all the wonderful things that are present in the here and now."

"I guess that does make sense," Ra-Goran said after a few minutes of contemplation. "I must ponder it further."

"Sure," Lar'ragos patted the man's shoulder again. "But after a drink."

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### ***USS Meharry***

#### **Decontamination Chamber**

Commander Liana Ramirez had just returned from another tiring round of supervising the dispensing of the anti-viral medicine and now she had to spend up to another hour in a decontamination chamber. Unfortunately transporter biofilters were only partially effective against Uradai fever. Captain M'Bira had installed a makeshift old style decon chamber aboard her ship. Each person that had been down to Yashk'lin IV had to go through the chamber before they were allowed passage into the rest of the ship. Captain Sandhurst had tasked Lt. Ashok to set up a temporary chamber onboard *Gibraltar* for the duration of their stay at Yashk'lin IV. The only thing that was holding back a really foul mood was that she didn't have to commiserate alone.

"Feels good doesn't it," Commander Marc Bolden said as he slathered gel onto one of Liana's bare thighs. She looked down at him. He looked almost the same as he had at the Academy: average height, well developed muscles and upper arms, low haircut, a neatly trimmed goatee. It brought back old memories of their friendship, more akin to a rivalry. Liana had wondered from time to time why it had never developed into more. But she had been afraid to ask Marc at the time, and now there were too many years between them.

First Jeff, and now Marc, Ramirez ruminated. *Why are all my old ghosts coming out to haunt me?*

"Care to elaborate?" She asked, with a hint of coyness.

Oblivious as ever, Bolden replied, "Helping people." They had both just beamed back from the surface of Yashk'lin IV. There long lines of tattered, emaciated people stood in lines, some supporting each other or carrying loved ones, to await their injection of metazene. "At least it gives the sacrifices we make meaning. It helps put it all in perspective." The combined crews of the *Meharry* and *Gibraltar* were working hard to inject as many people as possible, but it would still take hours until everyone received a dosage. Liana didn't want to think about the people out there who didn't have hours left. She knew that many had died before *Gibraltar* had arrived at Yashk'lin IV, riding in to save the overwhelmed *Meharry*. The commander also knew that many more would perish just on the cusp of receiving medicine. It was all so unfair, but hadn't life always been so?

Bolden seemed to share her melancholy vibe, which was atypical for him. Though after what he had been through recently, she couldn't fault him for being in a funk. He stood up. Liana slowly raised her tank top, and the man massaged her stomach muscles as he applied more gel. "Yeah, I see what you're saying," Ramirez said, trying to stay professional. Throwing powder on her growing itch, she added, "I'm really sorry about what happened to the *Valour*."

"I know you are Lee," he said. Liana had never understood why the man had always called her Lee, as if Liana was too long. She thought he did it to ignore her, one tool in his repertoire of moves he employed as they both raced to class valedictorian. She chuckled.

"What is it?" Bolden asked.

"I'm sorry," Ramirez said. "I'm not making light of your loss. I was just thinking about the Academy. Whatever happened to Cycad?" The Phylosian had beaten both Bolden and Ramirez out for class valedictorian.

"Ricktor Prime. He was skipper of the *Grissom*." Bolden sounded frightfully detached.

"Oh," Liana murmured. "I forgot he got the *Grissom*. That's something I should've remembered. I've done a real bad job keeping in touch with everyone, and up on everything."

"Don't I know it?" Marc's forgiving smile punctured the dark cloud starting to swirl around them. "You've been so busy bulling your way to the top."

"Speak for yourself," Liana grabbed a glob of gel and began to work on Bolden's shoulders. "We hold the same rank."

"I know, but you'll make captain within a year," Marc replied.

"From your mouth to the Great Bird's ear," Ramirez remarked, only half-jokingly.

"Me...I don't really care about command anymore. If it comes that's fine, but it's no longer the driving purpose of my life."

Ramirez paused. She looked at him hard. "If this is a Changeling masquerading as Marcus Bolden the jig is up."

"No," he laughed. "The war's made me do a lot of rethinking that's all."

"It's done that for all of us," Ramirez remarked, thinking of Jeff. "But don't let it gnaw at you until there's nothing left. I made a vow to myself to not let it change me completely from the person I used to be. If it does, it'll be like the Dominion still won, even though they lost."

Bolden nodded, as he ran a long smear of gel down one of Ramirez's arms. "You know, you never made this much sense at the Academy."

"Stick it," Ramirez replied, punching the man's rock hard arm.

"That hurt," Bolden lied. "If we weren't high-ranking, respectable officers now, I would wrestle you like the old days. I still owe you a whuppin'." Their rivalry had even extended to the Academy wrestling team. After Liana had bested Bolden she quit the team to return her focus to her studies. He had been yapping about a rematch for years.

"Have a hankering to be 0-2 huh?" Ramirez chided. "Too bad we are high-ranking officers now," and for the first time in a long time, she truly meant it.

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## **Yashk'lin IV**

### **Refugee Processing Center**

"You guys are life savers," Dr. Elian Paskor smiled at Lt. Issara Taiee, his counterpart on the *Gibraltar*. "Without the convoy, your medical supplies and our combined replicators have created enough metazene to hold this virus back for another two weeks." The younger woman blushed.

"Glad we could be of assistance sir," Taiee said, "I wish we could've been there for you sooner."

The man's smile slowly faded into a grimace as he remembered the Alshain strike against his ship. "You're here now and that's what counts...and don't call me sir. It makes me feel old."

"What should I call you then..." Taiee paused, catching herself before she added the honorific.

"How about you call me after the shift is over?" He smiled. "And the name's Elian."

"I'm sorry...but I don't think that's a good idea," the woman nervously stated. "You're a superior officer."

Paskor held up his hands. "Hey, I might be half-Orion, but it doesn't mean I'm a Lothario."

"I-I didn't mean to imply," Taiee's face turned beet red. Elian laughed.

"Loosen up Lieutenant, it's a joke."

"Oh."

"Listen, I'm not trying to seduce you, I just wanted to do some shop talk, compare notes in a less restrictive setting," he said, tapping the hardened plastic faceplate of his biosuit. "In fact, several of my staff will be there."

"Oh," Taiee said again, her natural complexion returning behind the faceplate of her own suit. "But sir, I mean Doctor Paskor, why would any of you want to hear what I've got to say. You're the CMO of a medical ship. I'm just a glorified med tech."

Paskor frowned. "You shouldn't downplay your accomplishments," he admonished. "I've glanced over your service record. You've kept the *Gibraltar* crew together through some very rough scrapes. Give yourself some credit."

"Okay," Issara said, with a deep well of skepticism.

"You've got to believe in yourself," Elian said. "I don't know Dr. Murakawa personally, but she is well regarded at Starfleet Medical, and she wrote a glowing account of your actions during Taskforce Peacekeeper." The young woman merely nodded.

"Murakawa doesn't have a reputation for rewarding incompetence," Paskor said.

"I know," Issara rolled her eyes. Denise Murakawa hadn't been an easy woman to get along with when she temporarily took control of *Gibraltar's* medical branch. However, Issara had persevered and the two women had come to mutually respect each others talents by the end of the Briar Patch mission.

"See, I knew you weren't an automaton." He smiled. "See you at 0800."

"It's...", Taiee paused, trying to find the right word. Unable to, she shrugged, "It's a date."

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Main Bridge)**

Ensign Brett Lightner rapped his fingers along the smooth edge of the console as he sung off-key.

"Now I see why the 20<sup>th</sup> century was considered barbaric," Ensign Kuenre Shanthi, still getting used to his new-well, new to him-and hopefully permanent Science terminal.

Brett turned around in his seat, a hurt expression on his face. "*Werewolves of London* is a classic," the young pilot replied, "and a pretty darn appropriate tune with our special guests aboard."

"Then why don't you go down to the brig and entertain them for a change," Shanthi replied with a wry grin. "I'm sure you'll have better luck getting them to cough up state secrets than even Lt. Lar'ragos."

"Maybe," Lightner said, his eyes alight with merriment. "Perhaps I missed my calling."

"You definitely missed that last note," Shanthi riposted, causing an uncharacteristic peal of laughter from Operations Officer Olivia Juneau. Brett smiled. He had been sitting beside Olivia for several months now and he couldn't recall if he had ever heard her laugh before. He decided he liked the sound, and he liked how even more attractive it made her look.

"Hey, I tried out for Federation Idol," he said.

"And that's why you're here," Shanthi shot back. Brett knew he was going to like this rookie. Despite their sharing the same rank, Shanthi was the newest addition, literally fresh out of the Academy. Kuenre had taken a few bumps on the Briar Patch mission but he seemed to be rebounding well.

"If you guys don't stop I'll never get any work done," Lt. Juneau said. Olivia was currently occupying the center seat, in the absence of the four senior bridge officers. If Lt. Commander Pell Ojana hadn't been added to the crew's roster after the last mission, Olivia would've been the fourth in the chain of command. However, she didn't appear to be put-off by her 'demotion'. Perhaps she would, or Brett might have been if Pell was anal, but the Bajoran was fitting in quite well. In fact, she seemed to have loosened Captain Sandhurst up and that was a good thing for all considered.

"Captain," the intense Ensign Hanoj, sitting in Juneau's resident seat at Ops ruined the mood. The Bolian was a little too into her job for Lightner's taste. Though Brett considered himself a hard worker and took pride in his job, he made sure not to allow his work to substitute for his life. Hanoj was the exact opposite. She also seemed to take issue with those she felt weren't working as hard as she was. Brett was glad the woman was normally on the Beta shift. "Sensors are picking up a massive tetryon particle surge."

"Tetryon particles?" Olivia asked, a curious expression on her face. "Ensign Shanthi, does your readout confirm that?"

"Yes," Shanthi said, his voice displaying his confusion. "That doesn't make sense."

"Increase our scans of the affected area," Olivia told both Shanthi and Hanoj. "How large is the area in question?"

Brett almost laughed as he watched both eager young officers race to provide the answer. Hanoj beat Shanthi by a hair. She looked up, her naturally split lips breaking into a satisfied grin. "It's approximately 480 meters long, and about 340 meters wide. Strange that's its so localized."

"That's because it's a ship," Shanthi replied darkly.

"You have proof of that Mr. Shanthi?" Hanoj asked. It was clear that the woman didn't like being upstaged.

"Those dimensions fit the parameters for a Klingon *Vor'cha*-class attack cruiser," Shanthi answered. "The real question is what are the Klingons doing here, and why are they cloaked?"

"Cloaked?" Brett asked, gulping in trepidation. He really wasn't in the mood to fight for his life today.

"Yes," Juneau replied, "How could I forget? Tetryon particles are sometimes emitted by cloaking devices. Good deduction Mr. Shanthi."

"That sounds like a stretch," Hanoj said, still unwilling to concede.

"Well, I would rather us be wrong and I look foolish than to have the Klingons pull a fast one on us," Juneau said. "And I'm not going to give them the chance."

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Transporter Room)**

As soon as the *Meharry* officers were beamed off the pad, Donald dismissed the Transporter Officer. After the man had left, the captain said to Pell Ojana. "Was it just me, or was there something off about the *Meharry's* XO?"

The Bajoran's nose ridges crinkled in thought. "I agree with you. She did seem...I don't know...detached."

"Yeah," Sandhurst replied. He wasn't sure if he should say anything to Captain M'Bira about it or not. Perhaps it was no big deal, or the Caitian was on top of it. He was certainly impressed by her capture of a whole crew of Alshain, even though Command had now charged him with bringing the prisoners to Starbase 116 for extradition.

"Donald, the *Meharry's* just been through an ordeal," Pell offered after a few minutes of pondering. "Everyone has different ways of coping with their burdens."

"Yeah," Donald said again, still troubled by the slightly vacant look in Commander Sidhani's eyes. "I suppose so."

"Captain M'Bira is more than capable of managing her officers," Pell said. "How about you let her deal with it?"

"You're right," he said, laughing slightly. "Perhaps I was letting the senior officer thing go to my head." Donald had beat M'Bira to the chair by several months which technically made him the senior flag officer. It wasn't a position Sandhurst was used to, another captain deferring to him.

"You should be doubly glad I decided to stay onboard then," Pell said, "Every balloon needs a needle sometimes."

"Says the needle," Sandhurst joked. Switching tracks, he asked. "So, where's Lt. Glover?"



"Jasmine should still be in Engineering. She and Lt. Ashok are replicating materials to rebuild *Meharry's* dilithium chamber. It was fused together during the Alshain ambush."

"But she did agree to have dinner with us?" Sandhurst asked.

"Of course," Pell said.

"I can't believe I'm actually looking forward to having dinner with a person named Glover," Donald remarked dryly.

"It's a start," the Bajoran replied. "Perhaps one day we can double date."

"That would be the day," Sandhurst laughed. Captain Terrence Glover, Jasmine's husband wasn't on Donald's holiday card list, and the feeling was mutual.

"What I have to do to change your mind?" Pell asked, a naughty tone in her voice.

"Oh, a few things come to mind," Sandhurst grinned as he locked the woman in an embrace. Before he could kiss her, a red alert sounded.

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### ***USS Valour*** **Sector 443**

"The *Prowlers* will overtake us in less than ten minutes," the officer at the helm said, coughing seconds later after a tendril of smoke slithered into her lungs. Captain Kojo's eyes stung, but she forced them to stay open.

She glared at the viewscreen. Its sensors were directed aft, at the ten Alshain *Prowler* interceptors behind them. Though the *Prowlers* had lighter armament than *Howler* interceptors, they were faster. And the shield nullifier the ships possessed more than made up for their lack of firepower. They had more than enough to carve up the *Valour* like *lingta* roast.

The captain tapped her combadge. "Westin," she rasped. Before the Alshain set upon them like a rout of avenging *Jat'lyn*, Kojo had found time to put on one of her old uniforms. Neither the Alshain nor the Phalkerians had jettisoned their clothing or personal effects. It had disgusted the Kriosian to think the Phalkerians might make some use of them.

"On my way," the man said, perfectly nonplussed as the ship was falling apart around them. Kojo restrained herself from laughing. The rest of the bridge crew wouldn't understand the source of her amusement.

"Get here now!" Kojo commanded.

"Aye sir." Westin answered. The ship trembled again.

"Another hit to our port side," Lt. Meleek-Zar replied. "Our ablative armor has been boiled off that side. The portside of the ship is defenseless."

"Damn," Kojo said softly. She sent an evacuation command through her armrest terminal. Once the left side of the ship was vacant, she planned to

seal it off just in case the Alshain managed to puncture the weakened hull there.

"Tactical, I want you to smear the blood of that *petaQ* all over the stars," Kojo yelled.

"I love Klingon curses," one of the bridge crew said, but she couldn't see them through the billows of smoke. The fire suppressant system had malfunctioned an eternity ago. But even through the smoke, Kojo could see the shafts of energy lancing from the ship, and piercing the Alshain ship that had just struck *Valour's* portside. Kojo crowed as the ship's volley engulfed the smaller ship.

Almost a minute later Westin finally arrived. He roughly held the Phalkerian that had had been sitting in Kojo's seat when she had retaken the *Valour*.

Westin pushed the man forward. The Phalkerian stumbled slightly before regaining his balance. He seemed unperturbed by the smoke or the heat from a couple new fires yet to be put out.

"I am Nardin sin Phalzan," the Phalkerian said with an ample amount of haughtiness. "I demand you release me and my colleagues to Phalkerian authorities immediately."

Kojo laughed so loudly her stomach hurt. "The Federation doesn't have normalized relations with the Phalkerian Domain. There are no treaties, or extradition laws. Your people saw to that when you sat out the Dominion War."

"We weren't going to be used as fodder for more advanced nations," sin Phalzan retorted.

"So, that's what it's all about, your part in all this," Kojo said, absently rubbing her chin. "You want to be one of the big targets."

Nardin smoothed his blue-black tunic. "Yes, we do."

"Well, you'll never live to see that day unless you help us now," the Kriosian warned.

"Starfleet officers don't murder prisoners," sin Phalzan sneered.

"I'm not your typical Starfleet officer," Kojo said with as much malice as she could muster. The confident smirk on the Phalkerian's face slowly faded. He looked nervously at Westin. The young man nodded.

"What exactly do you wish Captain?"

"Do you know anything about the weapon the Alshain are using to nullify our shields? Their ships didn't possess this technology in the Briar Patch, so I'm wondering if you had something to do with it. Perhaps the Phalkerians are more than what they claim to be."

Before Westin could react, the Phalkerian pushed him. The human flew against a bulkhead, slamming into it with a sickening thud. Sin Phalzan moved quickly, pinning Kojo's arms as he leaned close to her ear. "By the time you

figure that out, it'll be too late for you." He laughed, opening his mouth wide so that the captain could watch as his thick, purplish tongue dislodged an artificial tooth. He swallowed the tooth and whatever was inside it. Kojo turned her head as the Phalkerian's now fetid breath gushed out of him. He pitched forward, falling on the woman. She threw the heavy corpse off her.

"Security," she quickly tapped her combadge, "Secure all of the Phalkerian prisoners. Scan them, particularly their mouths for artificial teeth and suicide capsules." Waiting on a response, Kojo rushed to check on Westin. The man was stirring, mumbling nonsense. It looked like he might live, though he would need medical attention.

"Captain," the voice squeaked. "All of the Phalkerians are dead."

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Main Bridge)**

"That does seem like quite a stretch Mr. Shanthi," Captain Sandhurst said as he leaned over the man's terminal. On the screen was the outlined section of space filled with tetryon particles. Juxtaposed was an image of a *Vor'cha*-class ship. Donald rubbed his chin. "It's obvious you agree with him Lt. Juneau; otherwise you wouldn't have issued a red alert, without consulting me."

"I'm sorry sir, but I thought the situation necessitated quick action," the junior lieutenant replied.

"Which was a wise decision," Pell came to the younger woman's defense. "The crew's safety should've been your number one concern."

"The lady's got a point," Lt. Lar'ragos added.

Donald pursed his lips, but didn't reply to Pell's assertion. Instead he asked, "Pava what do you think? If it is the Klingons, the Romulans, or someone else, why haven't they attacked? They are well within range."

"Perhaps they are just spying on us," the El Aurian offered.

"That's possible," Sandhurst conceded. "If a ship is out there," he added, not unwilling to let go completely of his skepticism, or foolish hope that more bloodshed could be avoided."

"There's only one way to find out," Lar'ragos said. "We've got to flush them out."

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### ***IKS Kajh*** **(Main Bridge)**

"We've been sitting here too long," Jedalla complained. "They were bound to discover us sooner or later. We should've destroyed them all hours earlier."

Brigadier Qorb didn't want to admit that the lupanoid might've been right. Instead he focused his efforts on trying to negate the antiproton beam the *Constitution* class starship was aiming at them. Eventually, they would run out of resonance frequency adjustments for their cloak.

"We must strike while we have the advantage," Polemarch Zef A'Zel naturally joined Jedalla's chorus.

"Surely you aren't afraid that your attack cruiser can't handle three inferior vessels," the Exarch pointed at the two Starfleet vessels and the lone Yashk'ani warship above Yashk'lin IV. "Or perhaps it's not the ship you doubt, but yourself."

Qorb rose slowly from his seat, seething with anger. "Challenge my authority one more time, and my oath to General Lorath be damned, I will paint the walls with your blood!" The Exarch stood his ground, his lips pulling back to reveal a glittering row of teeth.

"I haven't tasted Klingon flesh in ages, the last I remember it was quite stringy," He grinned. Qorb cursed long dead gods for making him an honorable Klingon, before retaking his seat. He wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible so he could rid himself of Jedalla and his entourage.

"Sowee TAH!" Qorb bellowed.

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***USS Meharry***  
(Main Bridge)

"Captain!" Commander Anchal Sidhani yelled. "Klingon warship decloaking off port bow."

"I can see it Commander," Captain M'Bira said charitably. Space wavered before them as the large ship slowly revealed itself.

"Shall I raise shields?" Sidhani asked.

"Not yet, the Klingons are our allies," the Caitian replied. "We should at least give them a chance to explain why they are here."

"I think the cloak explains it all," Sidhani challenged.

"Damn right," M'Bira's sensitive hearing picked up Ensign Kaneq's muttering. She had already reprimanded the young man for his inflammatory comments to the Alshain. The captain realized that she would have to speak with him again.

"Hail them," M'Bira said. There was no response. Seconds later, Lt. T'Lok replied.

"Sir, we're getting a hail from the *Gibraltar*."

"Onscreen." M'Bira could feel Sandhurst's tension across the stars.

"Captain M'Bira I want you to get the *Meharry* out of here now," the man said, his jaw setting firmly.

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Main Bridge)**

"Captain Sandhurst," M'Bira replied, "I can't do that. I have crewmembers both on the planet below and on your ship. I won't abandon them."

"This isn't a request," Captain Donald Sandhurst didn't want to be cruel, but he felt he had little choice. "You are to leave this system immediately, and you won't stop until you reach Starbase 116 or encounter another Starfleet vessel."

"The Klingons haven't made any hostile move towards us." At any other time Donald would've been heartened by M'Bira's naiveté, but not now. Not with lives on the line.

"And we've got to move before they do," Donald replied. "This is a highly unusual situation. The Yashk'ani captain has already informed me that the ship has no business in their space. The Yashk'ani don't have formal relations with the Empire. It's a good bet with all of the Alshain activity lately in this sector that this ship belongs to one of the Klingon Houses that were supporting them."

"Even if that ship has ill intent, Captain, three ships are better than one," M'Bira protested.

"We can handle this," Sandhurst lied. "Two ships against one is more than enough." The third ship hanging above the planet belonged to the Yashk'ani Civil Protection Force.

"Not against a *Vor'cha* class battle cruiser," the Caitian said, "Not in your condition."

"*Meharry's* not ship shape either," Donald said. "Listen Captain, we don't have a lot of time to sit here and argue."

M'Bira swallowed loudly. "But about Commander Ramirez? She is still in our decon chamber."

Sandhurst grimaced. He didn't like going into battle without his capable XO by his side. However, he was glad she might escape the bloodbath that was likely to occur in the next hour. Donald briefly glanced at Pell. The Bajoran was filling in for the absent Ramirez. He wished he could send her to the *Meharry* too.

He could sometimes see himself living with Pell, but he never wanted to die with her. Though they had been estranged for quite some time, Donald had always been comforted by the idea that if his time came up, Pell would still be alive and that his life had meant something to at least one person, not obligated to like him because of blood, or now, position.

"Listen Captain M'Bira," Donald winced. "Commander Ramirez probably won't be the happiest camper when she learns about my decision. Tell her..." he paused, searching for poignant, perhaps final words. "Tell her...to deal with it."

A flicker of a smile lightened the gloom on M'Bira's face. "Good luck Captain Sandhurst."

He nodded. "Thank you. But I don't need luck to carry the day." Just two or three *Sovereigns* or *Akiras*, the captain thought. But he kept the thought to himself. M'Bira signed off. Half a minute later he was gratified to see the *Meharry* turn around and head off into the space, in the opposite direction of the incoming Klingon attack cruiser. Donald then contacted the Yashk'ani to run through an ad hoc battle plan. The *Gibraltar* would attempt to take the brunt of the assault, allowing the Yashk'ani to attack from the side. Hopefully their efforts would shield the planet from attack as well.

"I feel like Sulu," Ensign Lightner said unbidden. "Facing down the Klingons just like in the old days."

"Don't be so quick to assume who's in that ship Ensign," Sandhurst warned. "I have a very thin hope that we can avoid a slug fest today."

"Not likely," Lt. Lar'ragos remarked. There was already a hard glaze in the man's eyes. He was primed. Ready. *I wish I was*, Donald thought, hating the swarm of butterflies in his stomach.

"Hail them," he ordered Lt. Juneau. She nodded her head before replying.

"No answer sir," the woman said.

"Try again," Sandhurst urged. She shook her head again. He sighed.

"Raise shields, plot in a course for evasive maneuvers," he said. The respective officers immediately translated his commands to action. "Here we go again," he muttered, wishing he could be anywhere else but there.

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Main Engineering)**

Engineering was usually the first or second target in any engagement. That didn't change with this battle. Despite the central, heavily fortified location of the engine room, the Klingon ship's disruptors punctured the hull, striking deep into the ship.

Jasmine had been sitting in the Chief Engineer's office, swapping tales with the quiet, though amiable Lt. Ashok while his team gathered the needed materials to rebuild *Meharry's* dilithium chamber.

Both had quickly gone into action when the red alert sounded. Ashok had checked with the bridge and found out the situation. Jasmine had contacted Captain M'Bira. With a good number of Ashok's staff onboard the *Meharry*, she didn't feel right leaving the man in a bind. M'Bira agreed.

"So, where do you want me?"

"For the moment, you're my assistant chief," the large Bolian said.

"Fine," Jasmine replied, her anxiousness starting to rise to the fore. "What do we do now?"

"I generally intend to wait, we'll have enough work soon enough," Ashok glumly replied.

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### ***IKS Kajh*** **(Main Bridge)**

"What are you doing?" Jedalla bellowed. "You're letting one of them get away!"

"Precisely," Brigadier Qorb watched the globular-hulled starship trek away on impulse power.

"There goes your general's anonymity," the Exarch remarked, his voice nearly choked with exasperation. "I don't understand you Klingons!"

Qorb smiled. "That's obvious. Whoever the medical ship contacts, we'll be gone when they arrive. Plus, the identification of additional Klingon involvement in Alshain-Federation affairs will ultimately drive more wedges between the infernal Klingon-Federation alliance, and that suits General Lorath's long-range plans anyway."

"Impressive," Polemarch A'Zel responded. Queen Symea nodded appreciatively as well. The Exarch remained unimpressed.

"Fine," he eventually snorted. "But you destroy something all ready."

"Brigadier," the communications officer said. "The Federation starship is hailing us."

"Let's answer them then," Qorb replied, with a fiendish grin.

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Main Bridge)**

"The Klingon ship is powering forward disruptors," Lt. Lar'ragos said, just a hint of tension in his voice.

"Evasive maneuvers," Sandhurst commanded Ensign Lightner.

"We're not the target Captain," Pell said, pointing at the screen.

The bow of the large battle cruiser glowed a hellish red as a powerful discharge engulfed the Yashk'ani ship. The smaller warship's shields caved instantly as the barrage drove through the ship, demolishing it.

"My gods," Donald heard Ensign Hanoj, now at an aft Missions Ops console, whisper. Sandhurst had served with the woman's older sister Hanul on the *Starship Cuffe*. She had been lost on a mission in the Tong Beak Nebula. He didn't intend to lose Hanoj or anyone else today. But at the moment Donald didn't know how to prevent it.

"It looks like it's our turn," Ensign Lightner said ominously as the Klingon ship turned to face them, its forward disruptor array looking like the maw of a hellhound.

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***USS Meharry***  
**(Captain's Ready Room)**  
**Sector 443**

"Turn this damn ship around right now!" Commander Liana Ramirez, dressed only in her skivvies, her skin slick with decontaminant gel, stood over Captain M'Bira's desk, her knuckles planted into the smooth wooden finish.

"You're forgetting your place Commander," her counterpart, Anchal Sidhani said, rising from her seat. Liana turned around to face her. Commander Marc Bolden stepped in between the fuming women.

"I think everyone needs to calm down here," he said, before wiping a glob of gel away from his eyelid.

"I'm not calming down until we return to Yashk'lin IV," Ramirez huffed. "That's my ship taking on the Klingons. We can't leave them alone!"

"Don't you think I voiced the same concerns to your captain?" M'Bira asked. "But he was adamant that we leave the sector. I protested, but he's the senior officer."

"And he was right," Sidhani added. "This is a medical ship. We got lucky against the Alshain period. But we'd fold like a bad hand of Rolandan Wild Draw if we tried to take on a Klingon attack cruiser. Captain Sandhurst's sacrifice will be remembered."

Liana's nostrils flared. She had never wanted to hit someone so badly in her life. "It's not over yet."

"It soon will be," Sidhani said.

"Commander Sidhani," M'Bira admonished.



"No, it's not what you think," the commander said. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just...I fought the Klingons in the Archanis Sector during in the last war. I know how thoroughly ruthless the ridge heads can be."

"Well, we've had dealings with the Klingons too," Ramirez offered, though with less certainty. "At Lakesh."

"I know," Sidhani said, an arrogant gleam in her eye. Seconds later said eye had already begun to puff up, courtesy of Ramirez's fist.

Sidhani touched her eye, her face contorting in rage. "You witch!" She screamed, before jumping Ramirez. The women fell on M'Bira's desk, grappling, yanking, cursing, and each trying to gain advantage. Bolden tried to break them apart, receiving several punches, kicks, and scratches for his futile efforts. The three of them rolled off the desk, and thudded onto the carpeted floor.

"That's enough," M'Bira said, calmly rising from her seat. The felinoid then roared, the raging sound reverberating off the walls. The frightening sound stilled the three grappling commanders.

M'Bira came to stand over them. Liana's heart actually thumped faster now at the sight of the furious woman. Her fur stood on end, and sharp claws jutted from her paws. Her lips were pulled back to reveal long, sharp fangs. "I won't tolerate this kind of behavior on my ship!" The captain's voice was lower, rougher, and more dangerous. "Commander Bolden, escort both Commanders Sidhani and Ramirez to the brig. If you want to finish your squabble there so be it."

"Yes sir," Bolden said. He helped both women to their feet. The fight had seemed to sap the anger out of both of them. Ramirez felt ashamed, embarrassed about her loss of control, but mostly she felt frightened for her crewmates on the *Gibraltar*. She knew she would never forgive herself when *Meharry* eventually got the news of the ship's destruction.

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### ***USS Valour*** **(Main Bridge)** **Sector 443**

Captain Kojo knew outrunning the faster *Prowlers* wasn't possible, so she had ordered Stell to reverse course. The *Valour* had shot backwards, into the midst of the pack, knocking them out of formation. Before they could recover, the *Valour* picked off four of them, leaving only four left.

After another half-hour of chasing, evading, maneuvering, and occasional fighting, the Alshain squadron had been reduced to two. Though *Valour* had again paid a heavy price. Lt. Chang was the most prominent on the casualty list. Shields were down to ten percent and weapons were even less

than that. It would take hours for the backup generators to recharge the weapons banks.

However, Kojo was still in a slightly superior position. "Offer them terms of surrender," she informed Lt. Meleek-Zar. He transmitted her command.

"I'll never surrender," Sutahr Visla R'Vott snarled. On the split screen, Nadfar Rog roared.

"I made a promise to great Garrm himself, and I intend to keep it!"

"One of the ships is making a run at us," Meleek-Zar said.

"Damn, they're going to spear us!" Kojo said. "Everyone to the escape pods." Several of the escape pods had been ejected during *Valour's* first tussle with the Alshain. Only a handful remained. It would be a tight spacing, but everyone would have to endure.

"Captain," Meleek-Zar placed his feathered hand on her shoulder. "Come on."

She looked up absently at him, "I won't leave my post."

He regarded her for a few seconds. "Something told me you would say that," he said, his hands running along her neck. The last image Kojo saw was the needle-like bow of the *Prowler* racing toward her.

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### ***SFS Blood Shadow***

#### ***Prowler-class Interceptor***

"Rog, you wonderful idiot," Sutahr R'Vott crowed. She watched Rog's *Prowler* lance the Federation ship as if it were a boil. A majestic fire erupted from the bowels of the wedge-shaped and it erupted seconds later, the shockwave smacking into her small vessel.

She held fast as it rode out the wave. "Sutahr," Kveld Tiung looked up from the navigating/sensor terminal. The interceptors only held three persons. Gmoro, the Weapons Officer, sat behind them. "Three escape pods ejected from the *Valour* before it was destroyed. Two survived the blast."

"Scan them for Kriosian life signs," R'Vott reported. She cared little about the other Starfleet officers, but if Rog hadn't finished the job, she wanted to mount Captain Kojo in her vacation villa.

"There is one Kriosian bio-signature," Tiung said.

R'Vott licked her lips. "Time to collect my trophy."

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### ***USS Meharry***

#### ***Sector 443***

"Captain, medium-range sensors are picking up a massive warp discharge ahead," T'Lok looked away from her terminal. The Tiburonian's face was a web of dread. "Readings indicate a warp core explosion."

Commander Bolden, sitting in Commander Sidhani's seat, sat up. He glanced at the captain, his eyes brimming with expectation. M'Bira ordered the ship to alter course.

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***USS Gibraltar***  
**(Detention Center)**

Lt. Ra-Goran felt useless. Stuck on the *Gibraltar*, away from his own station and his security team while his ship was facing gods knew what frustrated him to no end. It didn't help that Lt. Lar'ragos had sent him to watch over the Alshain prisoners. With each strike inflicted upon the *Gibraltar*, the lupanoids' laughter and goading increased.

He also the taunting was getting to some of the other security guards, the younger ones Ra-Goran noticed. His hand grasping the butt of his phaser, the Efrosian approached the forcefield. "I'm not going to tell you to be silent again."

"Oh," Syot Graf D'Grekker laughed. "And what are you going to do to silence us?"

"You wouldn't dare drop that forcefield," Kveld Jast replied. "You aren't brave enough." This statement evoked another rabid howl of laughter. Ra-Goran's temperature rose. He wanted to wipe the smug smiles off the lupines' faces, but he knew if he lowered the field, the Alshain would rip him and everyone else in the room to shreds. Ra-Goran wasn't a coward, but he wasn't a fool either.

"I'm sure there are ways I can assure your compliance," he said with a wicked smirk of his own. Walking over to the cell's control panel, Ra-Goran began manipulating its controls. The energy field began inside the cell began to expand, pushing itself deeper into the cell. The Alshain moved away from it.

"What are you doing?" D'Grekker asked, after the crackling field singed one of his men.

"Yes, what are you doing sir?" Junior Lieutenant Tela asked. "That's not a regulated use of the forcefield."

"I'm aware of that," Ra-Goran smiled at the Elasian. "In the heat of battle you learn a few things. This is just one of the tricks I picked up during the war."

"Sir, what you are doing constitutes torture," Tela said, as more Alshain howled in pain as they came into contact with the field.

"I'm just trying to get them to be quiet," Ra-Goran said. "I think they know I mean business now." He detracted the field.

"I'm going to bathe in your blood!" D'Grekker roared.

"Why don't you come out here and do it then," Ra-Goran challenged just before the field deactivated and the lights went out.

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Main Bridge)**

Pell helped Captain Sandhurst off the floor. The familiar taste of blood filled his mouth. He spit it out, along with a tooth or two, before speaking. "Damn, how bad was it?" He said around a swollen, nearly bitten off tongue.

"Bad," Pell said, a vicious gash across her forehead. She kept wiping the blood pouring from it away from her eyes. Donald immediately forgot about his own pain. He rushed to apply pressure to the Bajoran's wound but she batted his hand away. "Worry about me later. Find a way to save us again now Donald."

He shook his head, ordering his jumbled thoughts. Donald quickly assessed the bridge. Iron will kept Pava at his post. Juneau was draped over her console, and Lightner was battling a fire that had erupted on his part of their shared station.

"Pava, what's the situation?" Sandhurst asked.

"That last shot took everything out," he said calmly. "We've got nothing. The weapons systems are offline, the engines. Everything."

"Damn," Sandhurst whispered.

"This can't be too bad right," Lightner asked hopefully, turning around in his seat, his console a charred ruin. "You faced something like this on that Kobayahsi Test right?"

"Yeah," Sandhurst glumly recalled, "I did."

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### ***SFS Blood Shadow*** **Prowler-class Interceptor**

Sutahr R'Vott had changed her mind. Instead of letting the other Starfleeters go she had decided to compound Kojo's failure by killing them as well. Unfortunately, the escape pods were equipped with impulse propulsion, and some maneuverability.

The *Blood Shadow* had had to chase them, but the sutahr had actually found that enjoyable. She was an Alshain after all and the hunt was in her blood.

Rounding finally on Kojo's pod, R'Vott toggled the comline. "I hope you can hear me Captain Kojo. I've destroyed the other pods and now I wanted you to know that I-Visla of Sept R'Vott will send you back to whatever hell sired you!" She ordered the Weapons Officer to activate the firing control.

The disruptors punched through empty space. "What happened?" She said, still not quite comprehending how the escape pod had vanished before her eyes. She glared at Gmoro. "What did you do?" She demanded.

"It's another Federation vessel," Kveld Tiung said, pointing out the forward port. It was only a speck, but enough for R'Vott to make out a globe-shaped primary hull.

"No, I won't let them deny my vengeance!" She roared, pounding the viewport. "Tiung, set a course for that Starfleet ship."

"No," the young officer said.

"What?" R'Vott was floored. "You disobeyed one of my orders! Do you know what that means?"

"That we won't fruitlessly expend our lives like Nadfar Rog did," Tiung held the woman's gaze. She hadn't such fortitude from the subordinate.

"Your cowardice will be a black mark for your Sept, Hells, your entire Clan," R'Vott warned.

"Our compound failures have done that already," Tiung said. "As they have for your Clan and Gmoro's. The only way to remedy that is to live. Our time of reckoning is not today, but it will come."

"Tiung is right," Gmoro replied. "Sutahr, please see reason."

R'Vott knew that both of her subordinates spoke truth, but the anger for Kojo coiled in her heart like a deathworm. For what seemed an eternity, she struggled with her decision. Finally she said, "Get us out of here." She kept her eyes on the speck of starship for as long as possible, promising the gods and all of her ancestors that she earns their respect again with Kojo's blood.

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### ***USS Meharry*** **(Sickbay)**

"Oh my God!" Commander Marc Bolden shouted. "I can't believe it."

"Me either sir!" Lt. Commander Kirce Carrick was grinning ear-to-ear. "The captain's alive."

"What am I...chopped liver as you humans say," Lt. Meleek-Zar wryly replied. Kojo said nothing. She sat up on her biobed, refusing Dr. Paskor's entreaties to treat her more serious injuries. She wanted to make sure the Alshain had been handled first.

"Take me to the bridge," she commanded Bolden.

"You're not going anywhere," Dr. Paskor replied, a touch of duranium in his voice. "And I'm not going to argue with you about this captain."

"Fine," Kojo huffed. "That makes it less stressful." She slid off the biobed. "I've had far worse scrapes than these. Take care of Mr. Westin instead. Humans are far more fragile." She glanced at the injured security guard on the biobed beside hers. A ring of small devices-cortical stimulators Bolden believed-were attached to the man's forehead. Carrick had already taken station by her subordinate's side. "See that he doesn't die, I have plans for him." The Kriosian commanded. With that she headed toward the door, grabbing Bolden's arm and dragging him along.

Once they were outside Sickbay, Kojo leaned against the man. He helped her to the nearest turbolift. "If you tell anyone about this, I'll use your head as the dish for my next batch of skull stew," the captain warned.

"It's really good to see you again sir," Bolden replied.

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Main Bridge)**

"Damn," Pava Lar'ragos muttered as Ensign Tela's last breath issued from the restored comline. He repressed a shudder.

"Go," Sandhurst said, his expression as hard as concrete. "Pava, do whatever you have to stop the Alshain from frinxing up this situation even worse than it is now...and bring back Lt. Ra-Goran in one piece."

"You got it," he said. "I'll bring back Ra-Goran in one piece. As for the Alshain..."

"Go," Donald repeated.

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Deck 10, Corridor H)**

Pava had picked up Master Chief Tark and fellow noncom Sahira Dunleavy along the way. He had shed enough blood with both of them during their time on the *Gibraltar* to feel confident that they could handle whatever the Alshain had in store for them. Tark was so fired up Lar'ragos thought about just sitting back and letting the fearsome Tellarite have at the lupines. But he had never been much of a spectator.

The trio caught up with the Alshain on Deck 10, Corridor H. Pava's finely honed listening abilities had detected the click of the phaser, and he had pushed Dunleavy across the corridor seconds before she would've been vaporized.

The three took up firing positions and returned fire. They traded fire with the Alshain for several minutes, the ship rattling around them as the Klingon warship continued to pound *Gibraltar*.

Frustrated with the stalemate, Pava decided on another tactic. After the latest volleys had been exchanged, he called out, "If you release Lt. Ra-Goran we'll allow you to leave the ship unharmed."

"You're in no position to bargain," the El Aurian recognized the arrogant voice of Syot D'Grekker. "From the looks of it, my people are here."

"The Klingons you mean?" Pava didn't know what to make of the canid's silence so he pressed on.

"From the looks of things that's not a rescue party out there. They're taking us apart." Tark snorted, opening his mouth as if to say something, but Pava silenced the testy Tellarite with a sharp air slice across his throat. "I'm sure you don't want to die with us. I'll give you access to a shuttle right now. You can make your own stand against the Klingons if you like." The ship trembled again, and the lights in the corridor briefly winked out, punctuating Lar'ragos's offer.

"Fine," D'Grekker said after a few anxious minutes of heated debate among the Alshain. "But the Efrosian goes with us. He's our insurance policy that you won't negate the deal."

"No dice," Lar'ragos said, though he had already anticipated D'Grekker making this demand. He argued with the man for several more minutes, eventually relenting. He also was certain that D'Grekker would demand more assurances, so he handed his sidearm to Tark, and ordered both noncoms to vacate the corridor. He personally escorted the Alshain to the nearest shuttle bay. The going was at times slow as they navigated through the debris strewn corridors.

Lar'ragos feigned surprise, sprinkled with a dash of fear when D'Grekker forced him to accompany them. He glanced at the mortified Ra-Goran and winked. This was going better than expected.

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### ***IKS Kajh*** **(Main Bridge)**

"Brigadier we're getting a hail from one of the *Gibraltar* shuttles," the communication officer said. "They are using one of the approved codes."

"Some of my warriors were onboard?" Jedalla asked, "Stop the attack at once!"

So near victory, Brigadier Qorb didn't want to call off the attack. But he was curious about this new wrinkle, and he also knew the *Gibraltar* wasn't going anywhere. Allowing them to stew for a little while as they came to accept their fate wouldn't bother him one bit.

"Cease," he commanded the Weapons Officer.

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***USS Gibraltar***  
**(Main Bridge)**

"He did what?" Sandhurst asked, his stomach knotting with fear and concern. "Of all the crazy stunts Pava's pulled over the years..."

"Well sir," Tark said, "He seemed like he knew what he was doing." Dunleavy nodded in agreement.

"Most of the times he does," Sandhurst replied, "but times when he doesn't can get very bloody."

"Let's just pray that this isn't one of those times," Pell offered.

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***Shuttle Peary***

While the Alshain were transfixed as the shuttle bay on the Klingon warship opened up like the mouth of a large beast, Pava pulled the small non-Starfleet issue disruptor from the small of his back.

The small vessel's cabin was soon alight as he began firing. He felled three Alshain before D'Grekker leapt from the shuttle's pilot's seat. The lupanoid clamped steel-like jaws on Pava's shoulder. The gun fell to the floor. Lar'ragos tried to head butt the large man, and then gouged out one of his eyes. D'Grekker wouldn't let go. He began to pull at the arm in his mouth, and Pava screamed as he felt his muscles, flesh, and bone were being torn from his body. Behind him stood the remaining Alshain, each slaving for whatever D'Grekker decided would be leftovers.

Just beyond them, he saw Ra-Goran struggling with the Kveld named Jast over the shuttle's controls.

"Pava," Donald's voice issued from his blood-soaked compin. "Pava come in." Pava voice-activated the combadge. "Are you all right?" The captain asked. "What's happening?"

"I'm doing fine," he said through clenched teeth. "Beam the kid out of here now...I'll be along." He cursed when he felt the transporter effect tingle over his body.

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***USS Gibraltar***  
**(Main Bridge)**



"Damn it Donald," Pava raged, holding his nearly severed arm as he sat in the middle of the bridge, right in front of the captain's chair. "You didn't give me enough time to sabotage the shuttle's warp engine. I could've blown them all hellward!" He swatted away Pell as she rushed to attend to him. The El Aurian tried to stand but thought better of it.

Despite his concern, Sandhurst chuckled. He couldn't help but be impressed by Pava's ingenuity and tenacity. "Actually that's a good idea," he said, directing Ensign Lightner, who had moved over into Lt. Juneau's seat to initiate a self-destruction on the shuttle. "But you forgot old-timer that we can do that from the bridge these days."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?" Pava asked.

"You didn't ask," Sandhurst replied. Lar'ragos rolled his eyes.

"I thought all captains were mind readers," the El Aurian retorted. Sandhurst's combadge chirped. He tapped it.

"Captain," Lt. Ashok began, but Sandhurst cut him off.

"Wrong again Pava," he said. "It's not captains that are mind readers, but engineers. I was just thinking about you Mr. Ashok."

"Oh...uh...mmm...captain, I don't know what to say," the Bolian replied.

"About the engines," Donald emphasized, eliciting a pained laugh from Pava. By then, the El Aurian had allowed Pell to use the bridge's medkit to tend to his injuries until they got him to Sickbay. "We're going to need them back on line, ASAP."

"We're doing our best here," Ashok answered.

*Your best isn't good enough*, Sandhurst thought. But he said, "Well I've got a free pair of hands and nothing or no one to use them on. I'll see you shortly."

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### ***IKS Kajh*** **(Shuttle Bay)**

Syot Graf D'Grekker kneeled. He had never imagined that one day the Exarch would stand in front of him. Jedalla lightly touched the man's shoulder. "Arise," he said, his voice as lofty and majestic as Alshain Proper's highest peaks.

He and the remaining warriors rose in unison. "We are yours to command." The Exarch smiled.

"Of course you are," he brushed past D'Grekker to gaze at the shuttle, "and I see that you've brought me a prize. You and your Sept shall be handsomely rewarded."

"Thank you Exarch," he bowed, keeping his head lowered. The regal Queen Symea also breezed past him to join her mate on the shuttle's boarding

ramp. They climbed into it together. Their three children rushed in behind them. D'Grekker wanted to accompany them, to be in their presence again, but he maintained his position. He occupied his thoughts with the memory of Lt. Lar'ragos flesh in his teeth, the sweet saline taste of El Aurian blood in his mouth.

"What is this flashing light my husband?" The Queen's question brought D'Grekker out of his reverie. He frowned. "What kind of bauble is this?" He looked at Jast and then the other men. When they had piloted the shuttle into the hold, all of the systems had been deactivated. D'Grekker then glanced at the Polemarch that had accompanied the Exalted Pair.

Something passed between them, and without having to be told, D'Grekker sprang into action. "Get out of there, get out of the shuttle!" He screamed. He bounded into the hold, grabbing the startled Queen and throwing her out of the open hatch. He was thankful that Jast stood ready to catch the shrieking woman. He yanked the startled pups next.

Jedalla rounded on him, swiping him with a razored claw. The blow knocked D'Grekker against the wall of the small shuttle. "No Excellency, you don't understand. I think there's a bomb!"

The Exarch froze, tensing immediately as his eyes swept over the blinking red light in the aft portion of the shuttle. "Is that not where they place their warp core?"

"Yes," D'Grekker said.

"Those *rakuun* will suffer for this," Jedalla seethed.

"I'll pilot the shuttle out of the hold," Jast offered before D'Grekker could. He regarded the man with a slit-eyed gaze. "No, I am the senior officer."

"If that's so, then you will be needed in the war to come," Jedalla replied. "You Kveld, get this shuttle away from us now!"

"At once Excellency," Jast jumped into the cabin.

"But..." D'Grekker began, but a frigid look from the Exarch froze the protest on his tongue.

"Come with me Syot," he commanded. "The longer you dally, the more you put us all in danger."

"Yes, Milord," D'Grekker gave Jast a withering gaze before he left the shuttle. Rushing with the others out of the hold, he thought too late that activating even the ship's impulse engines might detonate the warp core. But he kept the thought to himself. By doing so, it wouldn't be his failure if that was the case. It would be Jast's.

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***USS Gibraltar***  
**(Starboard Nacelle)**

Despite Donald's growing attachment to *Gibraltar's* center seat, he still considered himself an engineer at heart. It had been difficult for him at first to give Ashok dominion over Engineering, but over the months Sandhurst's confidence in the Bolian had grown slowly but steadily, and Donald's own insecurities about the command path he had chosen had lessened.

Now he easily worked under Ashok's direction, helping the harried crew replace and install the remaining damaged warp coils preventing the warp engine from generating a warp field that would allow them to escape the explosion he knew was imminent.

Jasmine Glover worked silently beside him. Every few seconds she wiped sweat from her eyes as she placed a new coil into position, sealing it with a stabilizer. Donald never thought he would be working with a Glover again, actually he had hoped he never would be. But he had to admit, if their lives weren't on the line at the moment, he would've found it to be a pleasurable experience. Jasmine was the consummate professional.

After handing her the final piece, Jasmine worked it into place. She climbed out of the nacelle, and closed the hatch. "It should be good to go sir," she informed him.

"Good work," he smiled. "All of you," he turned to Ashok and the mixed *Gibraltar* and *Meharry* crew.

"Care to do the honors sir," Ashok said, gesturing toward the warp core initiator. Sandhurst took a step forward, then stopped himself.

"Actually, Mr. Ashok, I'll pass. Lt. Glover, please..."

"Oh, no I can't," the woman protested.

"I insist," Donald said. "Or more importantly Pell probably would."

"Okay," Glover laughed softly before she walked over to the terminal attached to the softly pulsing warp core. She pressed the button. Mere seconds later Donald heard the first boom.

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### **IKS Kajh (Main Bridge)**

"Sir, the *Gibraltar* has restored warp power," Lt. Kosta, his sensor officer replied.

"Impossible," Brigadier Qorb said. But the sight on the main viewer was miraculously real. "How did they do that?" He asked the sensor officer. A second before the starship was lifeless, waiting for the killing blow.

Even though they still had no chance, Qorb had to applaud them for their efforts. After the warrior couldn't provide an answer, the brigadier dismissed the man's piqued expression with a wave. "The only difference it makes is that we can honestly say that the starship did provide some

resistance, if not a worthy challenge, a challenge nonetheless. Target their engines. Bring the full complement of our arms to bear."

Before Qorb gave the final command, the explosion knocked him from his seat. The burly Klingon sprang quickly to his feet, but had to grab onto to his chair to stay upright. The attack cruiser was now quaking madly. He watched helplessly as a serpentine power surge coursed through the bridge, electrocuting several of his officers. He backed away from his seat right before its armrest consoles exploded, driving bits of metal and sharpened plastic into his flesh.

"There's been a warp core explosion, right outside the shuttle bay!" Kosta had impressively maintained his post.

"Damn those Alshain!" Qorb spat. "Those beasts can't even pull off a simple extraction. I told Lorath it would be madness to ally ourselves with them, but now his stubbornness may doom us all."

"Brigadier," Kosta called again. "A massive plasma fire has swept from the shuttle bay into the bowels of the ship! The explosion also ruptured the hull near engineering. Chief Kreb is reporting that the reactor core has been destabilized. *Kajh's* destruction can't be prevented!"

Qorb cursed. "Sir," Kosta said, "Shall we abandon ship?" Several of the surviving bridge officers looked at Qorb, their expressions a range of resolve and fear.

"No!" Qorb shook his head. "You may go, and take as many with you as you can find. I can't live with such shame. But you must go bear witness to the general, be the living proof of his shortsightedness."

Kosta began to protest, but Qorb drew his dk'tahg. "Go!" he bellowed, waving the tri-blade dagger at the man.

"What about the Alshain?" Kosta asked, wisely keeping his distance.

"Any Alshain you find alive, kill them!" He roared, before he sat back down on his ruined throne. "Tell Lorath that my eternity in Gre'thor will pay the price for disobeying him!"

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### ***IKS Kajh*** **(Emergency Evacuation Area)**

"What of Qorb?" Jedalla asked, perturbed that the low born D'Grekker deigned to touch him, even gingerly as he steered the Exarch into one of the escape vehicles. The Queen was already inside, majestic even in the sparse, cramped space, huddling with her three youngest pups. They were keening with barely restrained terror. "We should check on him. He is Lorath's envoy after all."

"And the general should have someone to blame for this debacle," Queen Symea replied, with righteous venom.

"Klingons are a resourceful race," Polemarch A'Zel yelled over the thundering klaxon. "I'm sure he'll escape." D'Grekker entered the vehicle last. He shut the hatch behind him.

The Exarch quickly staked out the pilot's seat. He tried several controls, whipping his head around. "A'Zel, or Syot, get up here! Why are you sitting around with this damnable ship coming apart around us?"

"At once," both men rushed to take the controls. Jedalla sidled out of the seat, and D'Grekker pushed the older A'Zel to the side. Jedalla growled with approval before going back to comfort his wife and children.

D'Grekker couldn't believe how the gods had chosen to smile on him. He felt like one of the ancient Dynastic chariot drivers, as he released the clamps holding the vehicle inside the *Kajh*. Once free of the imploding ship, he activated the pod's small impulse engine, hoping he could create enough distance to avoid the worst of the *Kajh*'s destruction.

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Main Bridge)**

Captain Donald Sandhurst was again on edge, but what else was new? "Are you sure we're out of the blast radius?" He asked Ensign Hanoj again.

"Yes sir," the Bolian cheerfully replied. "Thanks to you, we'll only feel a slight bit of the shockwave."

"What about Yashk'lin IV?" Pell asked, anxiety carved into her face. "A reactor core breach so close might irradiate their entire planet."

Sandhurst's mouth drew into a tight line. There was nothing he could say to mollify Pell, or himself. Though he was overjoyed that he and his crew had pulled together to someone escape the Reaper once again, his self-satisfaction was tempered by the realization of how many lives they were not able to save today.

Damning decorum, he left his seat and stepped up onto the command deck. He pulled Pell close to him, turning her away from the viewscreen as the Klingon attack cruiser exploded, the edge of the wave washing over Yashk'lin IV.

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## Part Five: In Interesting Times

### ***USS Enterprise-E* (Observation Lounge) En Route to Starbase 116....**

After Admiral Covey had brought the debriefing to a close and returned to her ship, Picard had excused the rest of the assembled officers, save Commander Riker and Captain Aurelia.

Jean-Luc took a sip from his cup of steaming Earl Grey as he sought to order his thoughts. Picard had postponed his meeting with Captain Aurelia until after the two ships rendezvoused with the *Defiant*. The stretch of time gave him time to reign in his temper and he hoped it did the same for his counterpart. The lull also provided Picard time to scour over the woman's record.

Despite a fairly impressive service jacket, he was surprised that the woman had been given such a prized command so soon. From her heated rhetoric and impatient demeanor, she didn't seem to possess the temperament to be a captain. Though Will thought otherwise.

It was for that reason that Picard wanted his Number One to sit in on the meeting. He needed another perspective. And since Riker had served with the woman personally, he provided a very valuable insight.

"Captain Aurelia," Picard started slowly, "I wanted to discuss our recent engagement with the Alshain Origin Fleet." She nodded, looking at him expectantly. The woman wasn't going to make this easy, Picard realized. "I...wish to discuss how you conducted yourself."

"Hold on," Aurelia cut in. Picard glanced at Riker. The larger, bearded man winced. The *Enterprise* captain knew he had taken the wrong tact instantly. "I got my ship through a fleet of Alshain in one piece, with minimum casualties or damage. I would say that I conducted myself pretty damn well."

"There's a certain decorum that one must..." Jean-Luc tried again, but Aurelia cut him off again.

"I don't mean to be rude," she said, her voice rising. "I'm sure you mean well, but I already have a father. You and I are equals, and I don't appreciate your paternalistic tone."

"All right Sintina," Riker began.

"That's Captain Aurelia," she snapped, adding "*Commander* Riker" as if it were a slur. The young woman then stood up. "I can't believe how ungrateful and arrogant you people are! Without us, those Alshain would probably be roasting you over a spit by now and this is the thanks we get."

Picard forced his tone to remain diplomatic. "We do appreciate your assistance."

"It doesn't sound like it," Aurelia replied. Her gaze turned to Riker. "And you Commander Riker, Will, I don't know what happened to you. The old Will Riker wouldn't have needed me to 'explain' my actions, he would've understood them."

Riker's face reddened, but the man said, "Things change Sintina-Captain Aurelia. We all have to grow up sometimes."

"Well it doesn't mean you have to grow old," she shot back. "Captain Picard, I know you're a legend, an icon. Hell, I read about your exploits before, during, and after my Academy days. But the Dominion gutted the officer's corps, and there's a whole new breed of captains these days. We were weaned on war, and we're more willing to insure that future generations don't get the baptism of fire that we did. If that makes us a little gruff, or the rules a little bit more flexible, so be it." She paused to pat Riker's shoulder. "Now, if you don't mind, I've got business to attend to on *Independence*."

Picard let the tempestuous woman go. After she left, Riker turned to him. "Captain, I told you that Sintina's a pistol."

"More like a fully charged phaser cannon," Picard joked, before his expression turned serious. "Will, I know that Aurelia is your friend."

"Probably not after today," Riker replied, only half-jokingly.

"But I have my concerns about her, and to be honest the whole crop of new captains springing up in the wake of the war," Picard said. "We need good, reliable people out there Will."

"I know where this is going," Riker frowned slightly. "I like where I am Captain."

Picard half-smiled, "and I couldn't ask for a better Executive Officer. But what I am asking you is to think about it again. The Federation seems to be deteriorating, and all we need is for one of the new hotshot captains, like your friend, to embroil us in another conflict."

Riker smiled. "Actually sir, that's what some of the graybeards in the Fleet were saying about you and our Briar Patch mission." Picard chuckled in response.

"I haven't been called anything remotely close to 'young' or 'hotshot' in a long time," the *Enterprise* captain reflected. "Now that you've put it that way, perhaps I've been too hard on Captain Aurelia."

Riker shook his head, laughing softly. "No, you weren't. In fact you probably should've really come down on her. Captain DeSoto had to read her the riot act more than once. So did I," he recalled, a fond gleam in his blue eyes.

"If you go after that fourth and then fifth pip, you'll get to do so again," Picard promised. "I think she still needs your mentoring."

"That does sound tempting," Riker admitted. "I'll take it under advisement."

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***USS Meharry***  
**(Guest Quarters)**

Captain Nandali Kojo smiled wickedly, "You're not afraid, are you?"

"No," Ensign Phil Westin replied a little too quickly, cinching the robe's belt. "It's just a little awkward that's all...I mean your son is older than me."

"So are my several of my grandchildren," the Kriosian added. Westin's face turned scarlet, drawing more laughter out of her. "That was a joke Mr. Westin. You don't think I look like a grandmother do you?"

He nodded. "No way." She chuckled again before turning away from him. She finished submitting the activation code. Minutes later her son Kavel appeared. He scowled at her.

"What do you want?" He asked the customary Klingon greeting. Kojo kept her joy at seeing her son behind a steely demeanor.

"I need information," she said. "I'm sure you are aware of the recent confrontation involving two Starfleet vessels and an unidentified Defense Force ship-*Vor'cha*-class at Yashk'lin IV?"

He pursed his lips, considering the questioner more than the question. Kavel hadn't even reached the Age of Ascension before his father died. Before Kojo's demise his family had disowned him for marrying Nandali. But with Kojo being the last male heir of the House, the family laid claim to her children. In the most shameful act of weakness Nandali had ever displayed, she had allowed them to be taken, rationalizing that they would find more acceptance and have more opportunities as scions of a great Klingon House.

Nandali would never forget the frightened look on Kavel's face, or his cries as Kojo's stern mother Azerot dragged him away. From the cold look in his eyes for a mother he hadn't seen since the beginning of the Dominion War, Kavel had never forgotten it either. It also didn't help matters that Kojo had fought against the Empire during the brief Klingon-Federation war, a conflict that had cost the life of Dorei, his mate.

"What does this have to do with you?" Kavel asked. Kojo hoped, or imagined that she heard a fleck of concern somewhere in the gruff question.

"My ship was destroyed by Alshain marauders in Sector 443," the captain answered. "A Klingon ship later appeared at Yashk'lin IV, and it was somehow connected with the Alshain."

"Is this line secure?" Kavel squinted hard, as if he could detect deceit from across space like a Betazoid.

"Yes," Kojo nodded. Her son glanced past her, a look of pure disgust on his face.



"Who is that?" He bellowed. Westin gulped, but stood his ground.

"No one of concern to you," Kojo snapped. "Do you have any information or not?"

"I can get you what you seek," Kavel said slowly. "But we need to meet. Subspace communication is too vulnerable to compromise."

"Understood," the captain replied. "Where?"

"Here," Kavel said. "Something tells me you know where my domicile is?" Nandali nodded, unable to speak for the moment. Kavel had never invited her to his home before. She had never met his new mate, and she had to admit she looked forward to doing both.

"I'll be there within a fortnight," the captain promised.

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### ***USS Meharry*** **(Holodeck)**

"I lied," Dr. Elian Paskor said as he strolled along the beach, dragging his feet along the warm sand.

"About what?" Lt. Issara Taiee asked, equally enjoying the feel of the beach beneath her bare feet.

"I am something of a Lothario," Paskor admitted. "Blame it on the green genes I suppose." Taiee glanced up at him, with an awkward close-mouthed smile. The younger woman wasn't sure if Elian was making a joke or not.

He wasn't sure either. All his life, and for much of his career he had had to fight against stereotypes about his father's people. Despite centuries of contact, the imaginations of other species were still filled with wild tales of Orion animal women and brawny, multi-pierced male corsairs.

It had only been a few years ago that he had stopped caring what others thought about him. After he had proven himself enough to silence the doubts in his mind, Elian didn't have time to wait around for others. "I guess what I'm trying to say is, I did have something of a hidden motive inviting you to the get together. I wanted to get to know you better."

"Why?" Issara asked, her tone suspicious but the look in her eyes was a mixture of confusion and intrigue.

"There's something...sweet about you," the half-Orion said. "Innocent. It's a very rare thing to see that these days."

"Thank you," she said after a few minutes. The doctor slowly placed his hand over hers and they walked in silence for a few minutes.

"What is this really all about?" Taiee finally asked.

"I'm not sure," Paskor replied. "I know you're thinking, what planet did this guy come from right about now, and I do find you attractive I'll admit. However, it doesn't have to be anything more than what it is at the moment."

"Okay," Issara replied, "because I don't have time for anything else...even if I wanted to, which I don't," the human added a bit too quickly. Paskor smiled. The chief medic noticed that Taiee hadn't removed her hand from his.

"My wish is your command," he said, feeling more heartened than he had in a long time.

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### ***USS Meharry***

#### **(Photon Torpedo Handling Area)**

"Gee Commander, this is an odd request," Lt. Luna McCall replied. "Perhaps we should check with Lt. Glover first."

"I think you're forgetting that I outrank you both," Commander Anchal Sidhani snapped. "Now, do you have an empty photon torpedo tube available or not?"

"Of course, we've got a handful," McCall said, pointing at the oblong, black casket-looking tubes.

"Excellent," Sidhani said. "You know the way out."

"Are you sure you're all right?" McCall asked. "Shall I get Dr. Paskor?" The younger woman obviously knew of her friendship with the Orion medic. She perhaps thought there was something more, like many others did.

"He's busy," she snapped, "Now, get back to your station!"

McCall's face reddened and the young woman worked her jaw muscles, an insubordinate remark struggling to rip from her lips. But she wisely swallowed it and left Sidhani alone.

Anchal wished Paskor were here. The sensory deprivation treatments he had supervised had helped her immensely, until everything had unraveled again during the Alshain ambush. And now Elian was on the holodeck with the *Gibraltar's* medic. She hadn't wanted to disturb him. He seemed to have taken a surprising shining to the unremarkable younger woman, and Sidhani felt he deserved some happiness in his life for a change.

The commander opened the casing and peered down into the darkened hold. She inhaled, pushing back her fear as old memories began to simmer. She had to face her demons alone and destroy them or be destroyed. Before her fear held her back, Anchal climbed into the torpedo tube and sealed it.

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### ***USS Meharry***

#### **(Chief Engineer's Quarters)**

"I still regret not attending," Lt. Commander Pell Ojana said as she watched the happy couple jump across the broom.

"You were half way across the galaxy," Lt. Jasmine Glover replied as she reclined on her small sofa. "Even Terrence understood that."

"I know," the Bajoran replied, before placing another spoonful of ice cream in her mouth. "It's just....I'm a sucker for weddings. Things just sort of happened with Soyam and I. He had always talked about having a more formal ceremony once the Cardassians had been removed from Bajor. He had always been too idealistic for his own damn good." She smiled sadly. Jasmine nodded in sympathy, before turning off the monitor.

"I think you've seen enough," she said, a note of sadness creeping into her voice. "Or perhaps I have."

"So, what are you going to do about it?" Pell challenged. "I know you still love him Jasmine. You wouldn't be watching your wedding again if you didn't."

"I do love him," Glover replied, "but it's complicated, you know?"

"Yeah, I do," Pell said. "That's why I'm going to keep my mouth shut about it and let you work it out."

"Thank you," the engineer smiled, before yawning.

"Rough day?" Pell asked.

"Yeah," the woman said before stifling another yawn, "and you know right now I wouldn't have it any other way. I need this."

"I'll let him know that," Pell responded.

"Thank you," Jasmine smiled again. "I might be beat, but I'm never tired enough not to go for another carton of butter pecan."

"This stuff is addictive," Pell laughed. "I so hate you right now."

"Don't," Jasmine teased. "I suspect Captain Sandhurst wouldn't mind you having a little meat on your bones."

"And the *Aegis* crew didn't think you had a sense of humor," Pell winked.

"Really?" Jasmine asked, intrigued.

"Well...sure," Pell answered slowly, "but I wouldn't be worried about it."

"So, the crew talked to you, about me?" Jasmine pressed.

"It's no big deal, I was something like an unofficial counselor on board," the Bajoran replied.

"So, what else did they say about me?" Pell paused, an awkward expression on her face. "They didn't like me huh?" Jasmine frowned.

"That's too strong a conclusion to make," Pell replied. "It's just they didn't get to know you all that well before..."

Jasmine puffed out her cheeks and mimicked the sound of an explosion. "I guess I can see where they were coming from. I never really felt comfortable on the *Aegis*," the woman admitted. "It was so sterile and cold, a

ship built solely for killing." She shivered. "And of course the stuff between Terrence and I didn't help my disposition either."

"I agree with you that *Aegis* wasn't built for comfort," Pell said. "However I miss her. She went before her time."

"Agreed," Jasmine said. "Do you think Terrence will get another *Prometheus*-class?"

Pell shook her head. "It's doubtful," she answered. "There is only a handful in the Fleet and its doubtful anymore will be in production soon. There are so many more priorities the Federation has to deal with first before they can crank up the war machine again," the Bajoran darkly joked. "Though I doubt Terrence has much yearning to get back in the saddle just yet."

"I know," Jasmine's eyes moistened, "with Samson still missing." She lowered her head and said a quick prayer for her father-in-law. Pell joined her seconds later, praying that the Prophets delivered him from whatever evil had befallen him.

"Don't worry, once the admiral comes waltzing back, Terrence will get back into the captain's hunt," Pell said with forced cheer. "I know he would be mortified if he got nothing less than a *Galaxy*-class."

"A *Galaxy* was his main ambition," Jasmine remembered. "He wanted a ship we could raise a family on," her voice quieted. "That's never going to happen."

"Don't be so pessimistic," Pell admonished. "Federation scientists are coming up with new stuff everyday. Sooner or later they'll find a way to give you back what the Dominion stole from you."

"I know," Jasmine replied coldly. "But I'm not going to be a guinea pig again. I just can't deal with getting my hopes up for nothing." Once again, the Bajoran decided to wisely let the matter drop.

After finishing a second carton of ice cream, Pell said her goodbyes. After escorting the woman to the transporter room, Jasmine decided to head to engineering. Unfortunately Pell's visit had stirred up ghosts that the Lieutenant didn't want to face at the moment. Glover knew they would be waiting for her when she returned to her room and right now she actually preferred Lt. McCall's company to theirs, she realized with a cynical grin as the lift carried her into the depths of the ship.

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***USS Gibraltar***  
**(Captain's Ready Room)**  
**Yashk'lin IV**

Captain Donald Sandhurst hated leaving Yashk'lin IV with so many people in dire straits but his ship desperately needed repairs. He had begun

preparing the battered *Connie* for departure hours after the arrival of the *Galaxy-class Buran* and the medical ship *Hippocrates*. They would be lending as much assistance as they could to the survivors, many suffering from burns and radiation sickness caused by the destruction of the Klingon ship so close to their planet.

Sandhurst felt terrible about it. Not even Pell could dislodge the dark cloud that had gathered over him. The Bajoran mistakenly believed it was caused by guilt. In part it was, but the thing that really frightened Donald and that he was afraid to reveal to her was that he would do it again, consign millions of innocent Yashk'ani to death and worse to save her and his crew. The truth sickened him, but Donald had to face it and figure out what to do about it. He blamed the Baron for the blot now on his soul. The monster had tortured Donald, ripped him apart and rebuilt him into some type of mutated version of himself.

He accepted pain and death far too easily now. He barely blinked an eye reading the reports of the crewmen who had died on this mission. Life had lost something special, something sacred for him. Suffering had become routine. He had first seen this in the war, and the Baron's ministrations had brought it home to him. All that mattered was your little circle, your corner of the galaxy and anyone that trespassed onto that corner was frinxed. Donald chuckled mirthlessly as he stared out the window of his viewport. He was becoming more like his foil Captain Glover everyday.

He allowed his door to chime twice before he responded. Commander Liana Ramirez walked slowly into the room, though to Donald it almost looked like she slinked into the room. Uncharacteristically, she kept her head down, avoiding eye contact. After Sandhurst had told the woman to take a seat. He started before she could, "Commander Ramirez, your behavior was inexcusable and unbecoming," he snapped. The woman almost flinched from the force of his words.

"I'm sorry sir," she said.

"And you should be," Sandhurst replied. "You not only represent this ship and crew; you represent Starfleet, the Federation, and most importantly yourself. You let us all down the other day."

"I know," she replied.

"No, you don't," Sandhurst huffed, laying into the woman. "Though Captain M'Bira had intended to sweep this under the rug, I'm not. You're officially on report; a reprimand will go on your permanent record."

"But sir," Ramirez pleaded. "If I get a black mark on my record..."

"You might not ever get these," he tugged the red undershirt beneath his tunic where his captain's pips were located. "And if you ever act so immaturely again, I'll make sure you don't."

"You have my word." Ramirez promised. There was wetness in the corner's of the woman's eyes, but she was too strong to cry, too proud to beg Donald to change his mind. But he asked for her opinion anyway. She offered none.

"All right," Sandhurst sighed, "Dismissed." After the woman left, he pulled out the datapad with the reprimand and deleted it. He smiled. *I might have a darker soul*, he realized, *but that doesn't mean I still don't have a sense of humor*.

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### ***USS Gibraltar*** **(Executive Officer's Office)**

"So, how did it go?" Commander Marc Bolden asked as soon as Ramirez pounded through the door. She didn't answer him until after she breezed by and claimed her seat.

"Not good," she said glumly. "But hell, I deserved to get chewed out. I acted like a two year old."

"But incredibly sexy nonetheless," he added.

"Marcus, you're not helping."

"Sorry." He said with a shrug, before adding. "Are you going to be all right?"

"Yeah," she smiled. "Captain Sandhurst is a pretty forgiving sort. He's probably already deleted the reprimand I expected him to give me. I doubt he even wrote one up. I think he just wanted to rattle me, and don't think I didn't need it."

"Wow," Bolden smirked. "Lee is actually deflating her own ego, and who thought that all the wonders left in this universe existed solely in space."

"Stick it Bolden," she laughed. "So, what's next for you?" She didn't want to deaden the light mood, but her curiosity, and concern for her friend got the better of her.

Bolden sighed, a sad expression now shadowing his features. "I've decided to stay here for a while, to help with the environmental clean-up effort," he said. "I don't think I'm ready to don my space shoes again so soon."

She nodded. Liana could only imagine what Marc was going through: the loss of his ship and much of his crew, his career in limbo. Some time away from it all might be good for him though. "Are you starting immediately?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Well, *Gibraltar* will be on blocks for at least another week to repair this fresh damage."

"What are you proposing?"

"That we catch up on old times?" Ramirez smiled. "What do you say?"

“Actually, my social calendar is booked,” Bolden said, then added, “Oh, what the hell? As long as it doesn’t involve wrestling count me in.”

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***USS Buran***  
**Sector 443**

Captain Storr had called the captains together for a final briefing before the *Meharry* and *Gibraltar* set out for Starbase 116.

The white haired Vulcan had kept the meeting brisk, not allowing any of his more emotional colleagues to dwell in grief, regret, or recriminations. Donald was thankful for that in a way, but at the same time he needed to vent, and he didn’t feel right talking about his overwhelming feeling of helplessness in the face of such misery on Yashk’lin IV to his crew, even Pell.

If anyone could understand, Sandhurst had assumed that his fellow captains might. They each commanded powerful vessels that were capable of rescuing planets or leveling them. They each were responsible for hundreds or thousands of lives. They each had been entrusted with a tremendous responsibility and power. So, surely they could understand how impotent and weak Donald felt now, as disillusioned.

Fortunately for Storr, he had learned emotional repression early on, and had forgotten or never learned the adage misery loves company. After the meeting had been adjourned, Captain Batung of the *Hippocrates* pulled Storr to the side. Captain Kojo stalked out of the room. Kojo was staying aboard the *Meharry* until they reached SB 116. After that, the future appeared murky for the woman.

Donald silently wished the best for her. He had never met Kojo before, but they both had served aboard the *USS Cuffe* under Captain Glover. Sandhurst had wanted to swap *Cuffe* stories, hoping to lighten the woman’s load, but the formidable Kriosian would never stay around long enough to allow Sandhurst to work his magic.

Exiting the room in Kojo’s wake, Captain M’Bira rushed to catch up to him before the turbolift doors closed. Sandhurst ordered the lift to take him to Transporter Room One. “How are you doing Donald?” She asked. It had taken him several days to get the woman to chuck her formality. After they had both bled together, lost crew together, and witnessed the near immolation of a planet together, protocol didn’t account for much.

“I’m fine M’Bira,” he replied with a little smile. “How is your crew?”

The Caitian’s muzzle twitched. “Not well, Lt. Ra-Goran especially. My counselor and the counselors from the *Buran* are doing excellent work, but I am sending all of my crew to the counseling staff at Starbase 116 as soon as we dock.”

"That bad huh?" Sandhurst asked, his smile turning into a pained frown.

"Yes," she nodded. "Though some of my crew had seen combat, many of them were on the fringes of the Dominion War, tending wounded veterans or serving on relief details for border worlds. The kind of vicious, hand to hand combat they just endured will be something that will scar them forever." She concluded, lowering her head.

"Well, it's best they see it now so they can be prepared for the next time," Sandhurst replied. The Caitian placed a furry hand on Donald's chest, over his heart. He looked at her, curious about the gesture. "What are you doing?"

"Just seeing if there's a heartbeat in there," M'Bira said. "Did the captain's chair make you so cold Donald?"

"I honestly don't know," the captain replied, shaking his head. "But whatever it was, the blinders are now off. M'Bira for your sake, and that of your crew, I suggest you remove your blinders before someone...or something snatches them off for you."

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### ***Cousteau***

#### **(A week and a half later...)**

Ensign Brett Lightner finished "Yellow Submarine" with a smattering of applause from the senior staff. Lt. Commander Pell Ojana couldn't believe that there was something endearing about the young man's off key delivery. She figured it was more his earnestness and his zest for life that were more appealing than his singing.

She wished she had more of the ensign's happy-go-luckiness, but the Cardassians had squashed that out of her decades ago, and the years kept adding onto that stone the snakeheads had placed on her heart when they executed her husband Soyam.

Unfortunately she was starting to see the weight of the galaxy weigh down too many people that she cared for. Terrence Glover, her former captain and one of her closest friends seemed rooted in the dark for the last several years, and she saw the light dimming in Donald's eyes more too with each new crisis.

There was too much fire in Commander Ramirez to ever succumb to the gloom. However, the handsome Commander Bolden, from the *Valour*, might be able to douse her flame. The two sat together on the yacht's starboard side long, leather couch, sandwiched between Juneau and Pava. Lt. Commander Carrick, also from *Valour*, sat on the arm of the couch. The yacht was packed to the gills. Sahira Dunleavy sat cross-legged on the floor beside Ensigns Shanthi and Hanoj. In the makeshift performance area, Lightner



fronted a motley band made up of Ashok with his Vulcan lyre and the Tellarite Tark with a Terran flute. Lt. Issara Taiee cradled her saxophone as if it were made of pure latinum. Donald sat beside her on the opposite couch. He had placed the yacht on automatic pilot so he could enjoy the concert.

Pell regarded Lar'ragos for a second. Whatever light the El Aurian might've possessed he had probably lost it centuries before either she or Donald was born. There was something unsettling about the man, dangerous. But for some reason, he and Donald shared a bond as strong as hers and Terrence's. For that she was glad, because Lar'ragos wasn't someone she would want as Donald's enemy, or anyone else's either. The El Aurian gamely partook in the fun, but his dead eyes didn't match up with his smile.

Lightner continued to warble through several more Old Earth songs until Ensign Hanoj asked to join in. The Bolian gave a rousing rendition of a song Donald seemed to recognize instantly. "'Shout' was one of my mother's favorites," Sandhurst replied, a wistful gleam in his eye. "She was an aficionado of songs she called soul music," he added. "Care to dance?" He got up and reached out his hand.

"Donald, are you serious?" Pell asked. They had only danced in public once before, at a first contact function aboard the *Chevalier* and that had only been because protocol had demanded it. He pulled her up with surprising ease and into his arms. They awkwardly began to dance. Despite his enthusiasm, Sandhurst was wise to let her lead. Eventually the tiny cabin filled with couples: Pava and Carrick, Ramirez and Bolden, and even Kuenre and Dunleavy. Only Juneau hung back.

Seeming to feed off the positive reaction, Hanoj belted out more songs, with the band backing her up. The couples continued to dance until a proximity alert ended their fun. Donald released Pell and ran to the cockpit. He was just sitting down when something slammed into the yacht, causing the tiny vessel to judder. Pava, followed by Pell were at Sandhurst's side immediately.

The El Aurian was scanning the sensor log. "I don't see any ships," he said, half-relieved.

"Because there aren't any," Sandhurst said. "I think we just ran into some space debris."

"I hope it didn't damage the yacht," Pell said in sympathy.

"Me neither," Donald said glumly. The first thing he was going to do when he got back to Space Station Lemuria was personally check the outer hull for scratches or other damage. He would hate to ding up Captain Picard's yacht. Not only would it be highly irresponsible, all the bridges he had attempt to repair with Picard and his crew would go up in flames.

"So, what do we do now sir?" Ensign Lightner asked. The puppy-dog look on the young man's face made his feelings clear. He didn't want the party

to end. Pell was both glad and surprised to find out Donald shared that sentiment.

"Let's dance," Captain Sandhurst said.

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**Villa of House Lorath  
(Khemet Sector)  
Klingon Empire**

"Captain Zarkh, son of Yabak, your service to the Empire will not be forgotten," General Lorath said with a knowing smile. Zarkh curtly nodded, returning a stained, jagged tooth smile.

"See that it doesn't," the captain replied before disabling the comlink. Seconds later, several beings were beamed into his private chamber. Lorath allowed them to orient themselves to their new surroundings for a few minutes before he began.

"Lt. Kosta," he snapped, "Report." The *Kajh* science officer began rambling, trying to explain the reasons for Qorb's failure. But there was no true excuse, and even if there was a legitimate reason, it would do nothing to replace the loss of almost four hundred warriors and one of the best warships in the entire Defense Force.

After he had heard enough from Kosta, he dismissed the man. Lorath would decide later if he would kill the sensor officer. He turned his full attention onto the Exarch and his family. They had been regarding him coldly while he had torn into Kosta. Captain Zarkh had told him that he had retrieved both escape vehicles from the *Kajh* on the rim of Sector 443. Instead of reporting the incident to his authorities, Zarkh had wisely come to Lorath first.

"Exarch Jedalla, I had hoped we would meet under better circumstances," Lorath began charitably.

"Minor setbacks, nothing more," Jedalla said. "All we need to do is gather the scattered forces still loyal to me and strike Alshain Proper now, where the people by now are tearing apart the capital city awaiting my return."

Lorath shook his head, pursing his lips. "You've been stuck in that crate for too long Exarch," the general said. "Chairman T'Riav has declared martial law, and he has enough support from the military to enforce it for the foreseeable future."

"Impossible," Jedalla roared. He futilely looked at his consort and then his children and two-man entourage for support. "That blowhard T'Riav is Chairman now? What happened to C'Oemnm?"

"Murdered," the general answered. "After he gassed the protestors clamoring for your return, murdered a dissenting Committee member, and possibly flattened a Federation Embassy."

"Orthlin C'Oemnm was a fool, but he wasn't unhinged," Jedalla spat. "I wonder what is really going on behind the veil."

"I do as well," Lorath replied. "And I am working to remedy that unfortunate situation as we speak."

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### **The Warrens (Undercity) Alshain Proper**

Far beneath the glittering skylines existed another world, one in which survival instinct and barbarity were far more essential to continuing on to the next day than a recreational pursuits for the nobility.

Though Sharrl N'Soto cared little for convention, her Peer upbringing made her revolt at the site of Jang O'Jinn chasing after a *grubit* like a common, rangy urchin. The dauphin had doffed the expensive clothing of his station and was now dressed in the shabby, rough-hewn fabrics of the untitled. N'Soto wore similar clothing.

They had escaped into the underbelly of the capital city in an attempt to avoid being captured by forces loyal to the Committee. The restoration had sputtered, leaving them no choice but to merge into the muck of the Warrens. N'Soto's captain's attempt to buy or bribe passage off world had been stymied by the martial law decree issued by the new Chairman, T'Riav.

So, they had decided to bide their time, waiting for the right opportunity to escape off world and hopefully find Jedalla before the flame of restoration extinguished completely.

The captain had reluctantly allowed Jang to accompany N'Soto on her food hunt. He had spotted the sickly looking *grubit* darting away from an overflowing garbage receptacle before she had and the young man quickly gave chase, causing an unnecessary ruckus in the process. N'Soto furtively looked around, trying to see if anyone was paying too close attention the Jang. The last thing she wanted to do was have someone alert the authorities or worse.

"Quiet down," she whispered harshly after Jang crashed into another garbage receptacle as the agile *grubit* dashed behind it for cover. Jang ran around the side, hoping to block his escape. He growled in anger moments later. "It got away."

"That's all right, we'll find another one," N'Soto said, "or we'll find something else to eat."

"I don't like to be denied," Jang snapped. He inhaled deeply, a smile spreading across his face. "I've got its air scent. Come, it's just around the corner." He grabbed her hand briefly to yank her along. After he broke contact, he ran around the corner. N'Soto reached him just in time to see the young man being hurled to the ground, a residual shock coiling around his body. The dauphin passed out.

N'Soto gasped, but had enough presence of mind to draw the sidearm the captain had given her. She didn't see anything or anyone, but her senses told her something was there. Obviously, Jang hadn't been felled by the air, despite its noxious odor at this sublevel. She moved forward cautiously, her disruptor pistol held in front of her. She had only taken a few steps before she felt something biting her neck. She slapped at the offending insect only to find something metallic sticking out of her neck. N'Soto pulled it out. "What is this?" she asked herself, turning it over. "It looks like an isolinear tag," she surmised, slowly catching on. She threw it on the ground and crushed it with her boot.

She moved to Jang's side. She now saw a tag sticking out of his neck. N'Soto went for it. Before she could pull it out, they were both whisked away.

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### **Ministry of State, Central Ministries Complex Arcology** **Alshain Proper** **(Three weeks later...)**

Coordinating Member Phalin K'Phrey's hackles rose. The Cardassian graciously bowed. Though dressed in a simple gray tunic and pants that matched his scaly flesh, K'Phrey could tell by the man's stiff bearing that he was a soldier merely draped in civilian garb.

"I had been hoping to meet the Chairman," the Cardassian said.

"Chairman T'Riav is busy," K'Phrey replied. "He sent me in his stead."

"That was most sagacious of him," the Cardassian said. "I am glad that he was willing to meet with us at all."

"Yes," K'Phrey snorted. "So am I." He flicked his hand in the direction of the empty seat facing his large, *baakonite* desk. The Cardassian sat down slowly.

"So, what do you want?" K'Phrey asked.

"Exarch Jedalla procured several experimental interferometric pulse generators from my superior, without providing due compensation."

"Jedalla's no longer rules here," K'Phrey sneered. Two of his children had died during the Dominion War. He hated the Cardassians almost as much as he loathed the Son'a. "Whatever deals he made with your 'superior' were negated when he was deposed."

"Fair enough," the Cardassian nodded. "But my superior is not a man of the past. He's a person of the future. And he believes our people share a mutual future."

"More like a mutual enemy," K'Phrey figured.

The Cardassian smiled. "Yes...a mutual enemy. And for that reason alone, my superior has sent me to offer Chairman T'Riav the same deal he gave Jedalla."

"And what would that deal consist of?"

"Access to your dilithium mining interests in the Monax System in exchange for more of our advanced weapons."

K'Phrey tried not to laugh in the man's face and failed. "What kind of fool do you take me for?"

"Our weapons have proved successful against the Federation on several occasions thus far," the Cardassian replied defensively.

"If they've been so successful, why do you need us?" K'Phrey reasoned. "Why not drive the Federation from your homeworld?"

"We don't have the soldiers or weapons for such an undertaking yet," the Cardassian replied. "Even the ships we have now are running low on dilithium, and our stored crystals have almost run out."

"That's no concern of mine," K'Phrey snorted. The Cardassian frowned.

"My superior thought you might say that," He rose out of his chair. "I won't waste any more of your time. Perhaps the Son'a might be more interested."

"Son'a," K'Phrey laughed. "You better hurry on your way then, catch up to them before we do."

"We won't forget this," the Cardassian said.

"I already have," K'Phrey replied.

**THE END**