

# Dark Territory Maelstrom

By DarkKush

*USS Cuffe*

**The Second Battle of Chin'toka**

**October 13, 2375**

Though blood stung his eyes, Captain Terrence S. Glover refused to look away from his dead wife. He stroked the still warm flesh of her charred face, locked on her sightless caramel eyes. He wanted to shout, to scream, to rage at the Heavens, but knew he could blame no one but himself for this tragedy...this loss.

*Why...how could I ever have wanted to be here? To be part of this battle?* He asked, though he expected no response, not any that could stitch together the chasm in his soul. It had been only three days ago that the Federation Alliance had been stunned when the Breen attacked Earth, striking Starfleet Headquarters before being demolished by planetary defenses.

Though their late entry into the war reeked of desperation, the Breen had quickly made their presence felt again, joining the Cardassian and Jem'Hadar vessels seeking to retake the Chin'toka system from the Allies. Terrence had wanted to be here, had lobbied to be here to be part of the force that would hold the line, to teach the Breen a lesson for attacking Earth, and to show the Dominion that the Breen wouldn't do anything to stop their losing streak. How wrong he had been, he realized as soon as the Breen employed a new weapon, an energy dampening ray that rendered most of the fleet powerless. After that, they began mopping up the deactivated ships and their helpless crews.

Terrence had just ordered the ship to fall back when they had been hit. Everything went dark, and seconds later, the world upended, and the captain was thrown from his seat as plasma beams sliced into the ship. They were now on the mop up list. Just finish the job, Terrence thought, holding Jasmine's head in his lap. *I want to be with her.*

He heard voices on the edge of his consciousness. Was it angels? Was it his ancestors? His mother come to greet him and carry him over the threshold? Maybe it was Jasmine? He eagerly began looking around, for the white light he had always imagined that would accompany death, but he saw only darkness. And then he felt a sharp, intense pain.

"Captain! Captain!" The harshness of the voice was softened by fear. "Captain, snap out of it!" Another slap brought Terrence back to reality. He threw a hand over his face to cover the intense light raking across his eyes. "Sorry about that captain," Terrence squinted, looking up at his first officer, Lt. Commander Ivan Cherenkov. The man placed the arm containing the wrist lamp behind his back, though he kept it on. "You were mumbling sir, nonsensically...about your wife. Once we restore power, we'll get you to Sickbay."

*Jasmine*, Terrence thought, his eyes widening, as an acute pain pinched his heart. He clutched the stiffening flesh in his arms and peered down. "Jazz...no," he whispered. He stared down into the burned face of Lt. Natalya Winters, the alpha-shift flight controller. His wife was alive, she was still on Earth. He felt relief, and then sadness, and then shame for celebrating that it was Lt. Winters in his arms and not Jasmine. He gently placed the dead woman on the deck, and tried to stand, but his legs betrayed him. Commander Cherenkov rushed to his side, and caught him. He tried to push Terrence back toward the floor, but the captain pushed upward. If he was going to die he would do it on his feet. Ivan made a motion and one of the bridge officers, a young Bolian named Mehta, rushed forward, carrying an emergency medical kit. In her haste, she almost tripped over Lt. Winters's corpse. But she caught herself. She quickly unlatched the case, pulled out a medical tricorder and waved it the length of Terrence's body, stopping at his head.

He forced himself not to be annoyed by the scanner's beeping and whirring, but each sound was like a slammed door. The Bolian sucked her teeth, and frowned.

"Well?" Both Ivan and Terrence asked in unison.

"Sir...sirs, I'm not a medical expert, but it appears that the captain has suffered a serious concussion.

"Anything in the kit for it?" Ivan asked, and Glover found himself irritated by the Russian's take charge attitude regarding his health.

"I can speak for myself Commander," Terrence groused. He looked at the young woman, "Anything?"

She bit her lip while perusing the scanner for the proper answer. She lit up when she found it. She took out an ampoule of clear liquid and attached it to a hypo. "I think this will unscramble those neurons in your head sir," she said. The captain pulled down his red collar so that she could apply it to his neck. She placed the cool metallic device against his neck. It made a shushing noise after she pressed the release button. Its sting faded in seconds, and so did the haze in Glover's vision. She then used a skin knitting laser with a pleasant burn to seal the gash on his forehead.

"How do you feel sir?"

"Functional enough Ensign," he replied, before smiling at her. "Good job." He patted the young woman on her shoulder. "Now, go take care of the others."

"Yes sir," the woman smiled. Terrence turned back to his first officer.

"Status report," he said, his mouth dry as sandpaper. He gingerly tried to shake the rest of the cowbells out, but winced from the residual ache.

When Ivan reached for him, Terrence waved him back. "Status report," he repeated.

"We just got hit with a sledge hammer," Ivan said, succinctly. "Everything's disabled."

"Not everything," Lt. Seb N'Saba said, his voice pained. Glover looked aft. Ivan handed him a wrist lamp before he asked for one. The captain switched it on and swung it low into the back compartment of the bridge. The Alshain Science Officer was slumping over his console, his whiskers twitching as he worked futilely on his console. Far too much dark blood shined on his matted, black fur.

"How are you feeling Mr. N'Saba?" Glover asked.

"Better than the ship," he croaked, looking in Terrence's direction. His blue, artificial eyes shone spectrally in the dimness. The captain smothered a retort to the man's usual flippancy. Now wasn't the time for an argument. It was the last way he wanted to spend his last few moments in the universe.

"Do we have power or not?" He asked. Operations Officer Gralf beat him to the punch. N'Saba's growl was low and deep in his throat. Glover attempted to roll his eyes at the two men's petty rivalry, but even that hurt.

"Every system connected to main computer and the warp core has been deactivated," the arboreal Xindi replied. "However, disconnected networks, such as those on the shuttle craft and escape pods, which have separate power sources are can be operated manually, should be unaffected." Glover glanced at N'Saba.

"You agree?" The Alshain struggled to fold his arms, and maintain his scowl, but he confirmed Gralf's assessment with a nod.

"We've got to find a way to use this to our advantage," Cherenkov said, "To turn the tables on those Dominion bastards."

"No," Glover shook his head carefully, "First, we've got to get as many people to the escape pods as possible. I want you and N'Saba working on that."

"But," Ivan started to protest, but was silenced by Terrence's hard countenance.

"If...Pedro survived, he'll be working on finding a way to restore the warp core, and if he does, we'll get main power back. We've just got to help him."

"How sir?" Cherenkov asked.

Terrence nodded at Gralf. "Mr. Gralf and I are going to test his shuttle theory. We'll use the Jeffries tubes to hike to the nearest shuttle bay and see if we can contact Main Engineering from there. Mr. Meldin, you have the conn." The steady Benzite Tactical Officer had maintained his post even as the ship had become a punching bag. Glover felt more comfortable leaving him in charge.

"Sir, you can barely stand on your own feet, much less tackle climbing through all of those tubes," Ivan shook his head. "I'm sorry sir, but I can't let you do that."

Glover laughed, "I want to see you stop me."

"Sir, do I need remind you of Regulation..." Ivan began.

"Every moment we stand here is one less we could be saving lives Ivan," Glover replied, shutting the man up. The Russian slowly nodded. Terrence reached out, grabbed the man's shoulder, and leaned close, "I know you're concerned about Aquiel...don't worry, I'll do my best to bring her, and everywhere else through this, but I can't do it without you."

"Acknowledged," Cherenkov nodded.

"Good, now let's get to work."

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## ***USS Cuffe***

### **Main Engineering**

"Sir, you can't be serious," Lt. Aquiel Uhnari failed to keep the disbelief out of her voice. "What you're proposing could blow up this ship."

Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas huffed, "Which is what one of those Dominion ships could do any second."

"That doesn't mean we should help them," Uhnari replied, more sharply than she intended. Rojas scowled.

"I wasn't asking for your opinion," he snapped, as an uncharacteristic streak of anger flashed through his eyes, bright enough to be seen through the gloom. Main Engineering was usually the brightest, noisiest place onboard the whole ship Aquiel thought. But now it was as quiet as a tomb.

Wrong choice of words, she realized, but couldn't help herself. "Okay..." she managed to say to her superior. "What do you need me to do?" She had come a long way from the tempestuous young officer she had been, known more for her combative reputation than her service record. Meeting Lt. Commander Geordi LaForge had been instrumental in righting her course. He had also become a mentor, shepherding her from the communications field into engineering. He had also been more, but that was another lifetime.

The Haliian knew though that Aquiel's choice not to challenge Lt. Commander Rojas though she thought his idea was insane would make Geordi proud. She was just sad that she wouldn't live to see the pride on his face. But she could at least take some cowardly solace in not being there to see his grief, nor that of her sister Shianna.

"That's more like it," Pedro smiled. "I need you and Hutchinson to open the valves to the deuterium tanks, while Krasnikov and Verda release the

antideuterium. I'll manage their flow into the warp core, creating an internal combustion that should bring the warp core back on line."

"If it doesn't blow us all up like a Romulan candle," Ensign Hutchinson griped. Aquiel was glad Dana was on her side, though she kept the thought to herself. Pedro couldn't maintain his frown at the comment. He buried it with a sagely nod.

"If that happens, then it'll be on my head," He said, "Because as soon as you open the valves, I want you all to vacate Main Engineering, and take anybody still alive with you." The comment prompted Aquiel to briefly gaze over the bodies and detritus littering the floor. Engineering had been hit hard after the Breen had deployed their weapon. The engineers assembled were the only ones able to stand on their feet, and Krasnikov, leaking blood like a faucet, was weaving. Lt. Verda, a pale green Troyian was propping the wounded man up.

"I'm not leaving you," Verda said. Aquiel noted there was more behind the statement than merely loyalty to a superior officer.

"You'll follow orders," Pedro said, in a tone that brooked no debate. "We don't have a lot of time to argue. Those bastards could be on us any second."

Verda swallowed back a comment and helped the limping Krasnikov over to the antideuterium tanks. She propped the man beside the ladder while she scaled it. Both Aquiel and Hutchinson took to their task, slowly releasing the fuel into the main warp chamber. The clear liquid steadily filled the chamber.

They climbed back down the ladder and ran over to Pedro. He was staring at a gauge by the warp core. "I haven't done this since the Academy," he said, "I still can't believe people had to do this by hand once, well, not really, but we don't even have old computers."

"That's why I think this is still a bad idea," Aquiel admitted. Rojas shrugged.

"You got a better one?" He asked. The Haliian didn't have any answer. Verda and Krasnikov rejoined the group.

"All right, now carry out the second part of the plan," Rojas ordered, "And be quick about it. I'm itching to start the fireworks show."

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## ***USS Cuffe***

### **Jeffries Tube-Level D-14**

Captain Glover was tired, but he wasn't going to show weakness to Gralf. Plus, with the larger Xindi behind him, forcing his bulk through the tight, cylindrical tubing, Terrence couldn't slow down if he tried.

"How much further to Main Engineering Captain?" Lt. Gralf huffed, but Terrence knew the man wasn't tired. He detected a tension in the voice. *A possible fear perhaps? Claustrophobia?* He hadn't seen anything of that nature in the man's

psych profile. Then again that said very little, and war changed people, and usually not for the better.

"We should be there...in roughly another ten minutes," Glover said, angry at himself, though he knew he had no reason to be. The *Cuffe* was a huge ship, despite its compact size. It was a miracle that the two men had only ten minutes to their destination, but both men knew it would not be enough. However Glover was determined to press on. If he had to die in the pursuit of a mission, then it would be a worthy demise.

A loud rumbling shook the ship. He tried to glance back at Gralf, but could only make out a dark shape behind him. *Is this it*, he thought, *the end?*

Lights flickered on inside the cramped tube. "What the Hells?" Gralf asked.

Glover's compin chirped madly. He struggled to activate it.

*"Captain, this is Commander Rojas, we've got power, but I don't know how long, so if you've got a rabbit, please pull it out of your hat now."*

"Pedro, how the hell did you do it?"

*"I'll tell you at the After Burner, once you got us out of the war zone."*

"Okay, okay," Glover said. "Well done. Glover out." He tapped his badge again, and gave instructions to Lt. Meldin. Almost instantly, he felt the tug of the engines as the ship turned to carry out the captain's orders.

"Pedro," Terrence laughed, "Pedro did it!"

"Should we return to the bridge now sir?" Gralf asked, an eagerness in his voice. The captain shook his head, a bit regretfully.

"Not yet Mr. Gralf, we need to be on hand in case Pedro needs help," Glover replied. He used his elbows to propel him forward. "Let's keep going."

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## ***USS Cuffe***

### **Main Engineering**

Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas stood alone, at the base of the warp core. He stared up into the depths of the tall cylinder. Normally it was swirling with a vibrant multitude of colors, but now a sickly green tide whirled within. He hadn't the time to mix in the other fuels. He took the most potent, anticipating a quick jolt. But now it was fading.

He tapped his combadge, "We out of the woods yet Mr. Meldin?"

*"Almost,"* Meldin had always been too laconic for Pedro's taste. *"However...the Dominion forces have fallen back."* He added, a curious tone to his voice.

"What?" Pedro was confused. He had never known the Jem'Hadar to ever slack up. "What's going on up there?"

*"I'm not sure," Meldin replied. "But it appears the Dominion is allowing escape pods to go unmolested. Several starships are assisting in the efforts. Perhaps, we can turn around and..."*

Pedro never heard the rest.

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***USS Cuffe***  
**Main Engineering**  
**Antechamber**

Lt. Verda stood by the dull gray blast doors, pressing her hands against them. Aquiel squeezed the woman's shoulder and whispered in her ear, "It's going to be all right. Commander Rojas...Pedro...knows what he's doing." The small engineering team was waiting anxiously as Commander Rojas restarted the engines. So far, so good, but Uhnari was still concerned. In the meantime Dana had found a medical kit and was doing the best she could to repair Krasnikov's wounds. She had the man prone over the master display.

Verda looked at her, her cheeks wet with tears. "I hope so." Seconds later, a loud blast shook the entire chamber, throwing the group to the floor. Krasnikov grunted, and Hutchinson cursed as Krasnikov's wounds began to bleed again. Verda scrambled back to door. The heavy duranium had been pushed outward. She touched it, and screamed in agony, yanking back her curling hands. Aquiel ran to her and grasped her wrists, turning her hands around. They were scorched. She looked up and met Verda's eyes. They both knew.

"Oh Gods no," Verda shook her head, her voice cracking. "No," she turned back toward the door, but Aquiel held onto her.

"No," Aquiel said, "There's nothing...."

"Don't say that," Verda rounded her on, "Don't ever say that!" She pulled free from Aquiel and went back to the door. However, she didn't touch the scorching metal. Instead she kneeled in front of it, her wail just as rending as the blast that had caused it.

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***USS Cuffe***  
**Jeffries Tube-Level D-14**

He felt a second tremble beneath him. "What was that?" Glover asked, stopping. Lt. Gralf hit the back of the captain's boots, grumbling something unintelligible. "What did you say?" The captain asked.

"Nothing," the Xindi replied.

"What was the cause of that tremor?" Glover asked, concerned. He knew all the sounds of his ship and that didn't sound right.

"Probably something unforeseen with Commander Rojas's solution," Gralf answered bluntly.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Terrence replied. "I hope Pedro didn't do anything crazy." A second explosion plunged the corridor into darkness.

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## ***USS Tempest***

### **Main Bridge**

"I believe the human phrase is 'bat out of hell'," Lt. Commander T'Vari replied, arching an eyebrow.

"That sounds most appropriate," Captain Ian Berkhalter said, with an inopportune grin for his Vulcan Tactical Officer. He, along with the rest of the bridge crew were transfixed by the starship plowing through the debris, a trail of fire behind them, issuing from the ship's nacelles. It reminded Berkhalter of the old footage of Earth's fire rockets. The spectacle had momentarily pulled him away from recovering escape pods. Now the runaway ship threatened to crush some in their way. "Can we raise them?"

"No sir," Lt. Gregory Hause, his Operations Officer, replied. "They've got some power, but it's fluctuating and it's not enough to maintain a sustained signal for communication."

"Damn it Glover," Berkhalter grumbled quietly, "You figured out a way around the Breen weapon, but it might cost us additional lives in the process." He turned to his First Officer.

"Liana, is there some way we can alter its course?"

"Perhaps changing the polarity of our tractor beams," Lt. Commander Liana Ramirez quickly replied, "to make them repel, not attract, and using them to push the *Cuffe* out of the way."

"Do it," Berkhalter replied without hesitation. Ramirez put her idea in motion. Seconds later, a cone of green energy focused on the *Cuffe*, turning it starboard, just avoiding a gathering of pods and lifeboats. The *Tempest* bridge crew erupted in cheers. Even Berkhalter pumped a fist. *Finally we're doing something right today and not just cleaning up a mess*, he thought.

"Uh oh," Hause gulped. "You're not going to like this."

"What now?" Berkhalter grumbled, following Hause's pointing finger. "Shit." The *Cuffe's* nacelles were engulfed in flame and the ship was heading for the line of Dominion vessels quietly ringing the battlefield. For some eerily strange reason the Dominion and Breen ships had pulled back and allowed the *Midas*, *Victory*, and *Tempest* to recover as many survivors from the battle as possible. Berkhalter wasn't sure how they would respond to a starship bearing down on them. It might bring them back out to the battlefield and reignite the battle, and it was one that the



captain wasn't sure the allied reserve fleet waiting at the edge of the system, defending the Federation's border, could win, not with the Breen's new weapon.

"After that ship," the captain ordered.

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## **Central Command Vessel *Gianour***

### **Command Bridge**

Gul Omal Panar gripped her armrests, her neck ridges pinching with restrained anger. "Why can't we engage them?" She asked, forcing herself not to shout at the Vorta standing placidly at her side.

Sarkos barely glanced at her before responding, "Because the Founder wishes it."

"That ship is on an intercept course, heading right for us. Clearly they are provoking us," Panar retorted. "Honor demands we respond to their provocation."

Sarkos sniffed, as if he smelled refuse. "And clearly you are willfully oblivious of the true condition of that vessel. It was deactivated by one of the Breen ships. Though somehow the crew has found a way to counteract the dissipation ray," the Vorta paused to rub his hairless chin. "Interesting."

"I propose we retrieve the ship for study and detain the crew for questioning," the Jem'Hadar First grumbled, surprising Panar that he half-way took her side in the debate. "In order for our victory to be complete we must deny the enemy any glimmer of hope."

"Care to tell the Founder that?" Sarkos challenged. The Jem'Hadar scowled, but didn't reply.

"I will," Panar said. She snapped at her communications officer to open a channel.

"That won't be necessary," Sarkos said hurriedly, "I am sure the Founder would understand your need to prevent damage or destruction to your vessel."

"I'm glad that Her Divinity considers Cardassians lives as worthy as those of our enemies...and the Breen," Panar didn't try to douse her sarcasm. Sarkos either ignored the jab, or was oblivious to her challenge. The Vorta merely nodded.

"Arm spiral wave cannons," She ordered.

"Hold!" Sarkos said, with the imperiousness of a Legate. "Preventing damage to your vessel doesn't mean that you destroy the Federation ship. You could just as easily use evasive maneuvers, employ your tractor beam to slow its trajectory, and then offer assistance."

"Are you insane?" Panar asked as many in her crew gasped.

Sarkos smiled. "The Founder has issued an order. We are to allow the remaining Starfleet ships and vessels safe passage, so that they can spread the horror of their defeat, and the invincibility of our forces, due to the Breen super

weapon, to the rest of the Federation Alliance. Their own fear will undo them. It is a masterful plan, and you will not ruin it," he declared, still smiling, but his eyes had turned into pale blue ice chips. "If you cannot follow the chain of command you will be replaced." The small Jem'Hadar contingent tensed, their eyes brightening at the prospect of conflict.

Panar bit back the comment burning her tongue. "Well?" Sarkos asked, goading her. Panar looked at her crew and she saw a mixture of defiance and trepidation. What good would it do for her, or her family, to defy the pompous Vorta, especially right after a great victory against the Alliance? If she minded her tongue, she would surely be feted back on Prime. She might even receive the Legate's Crest. But if she gave into her pride, and revealed her true disgust of the Vorta and his Jem'Hadar thugs, and scoffed at the divinity of the shape-shifter, Panar knew Sarkos would not hesitate to make good on his threat. And then a Dominion toady would be occupying her chair, and she had worked too hard to allow that to happen.

The gul promised herself that Sarkos would receive his comeuppance at her hand, but not today. Panar sighed before relenting. "Do as he says, make the offer."

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### ***USS Cuffe***

#### **Jeffries Tube-Level D-14**

Lt. Gralf shook him roughly. "Captain, captain," the man yelled.

"Wha?" Glover asked groggily. He blinked several times, the darkness punctured by a cascade of stars. The captain shook his head, wincing. He gingerly touched the throbbing bump already forming on his forehead. "This isn't going to help my concussion," he grumbled. "Glad Dr. Cole isn't here."

"What was that sir?" The arboreal asked.

"Nothing, are you okay?"

"We arboreal are sturdy stock," Gralf replied.

"I'm certain," His pounding headache did nothing to lessen his drollness. Gralf's miffed grumble was almost payment enough. The need to chuckle reminded him of Pedro, and his heart thudded almost as loudly as the pain pulsed inside his skull. "Pedro...Engineering...." He started forward again, but Gralf grabbed his ankle. "What the hell are you doing Mr. Gralf?"

"We need to return to the bridge. That is where you belong, actually you belong in Sickbay."

"Hold on a minute, the last time I checked, I'm the captain."

"A captain suffering from two severe blows to the head. Do you think that might've affected your judgment, or your ability to render assistance to Commander Rojas, even if he is still alive?"

"Still...alive," Glover's voice choked. "Don't you ever say something like that...don't you ever even think it!" He snarled, his foot lashing out and connecting with Gralf's nose. He heard the crunching of bone and he started crawling forward again. But Gralf had been correct about the hardness of his species. An even firmer grip locked on his ankle, and ground the bone until it snapped. Glover bit back a whelp. He tried to turn around in the cramped, dark space to at least stare in Gralf's direction.

"What did you just do? You just assaulted a superior officer; *me*, for goodness sakes. I'll have your ass for this!"

"You broke my nose, I broke your ankle, a fair exchange," Gralf mumbled. "Besides, you might in time come to thank me for saving your life. You know this ship better than I do, and even I can feel it's out of control. Something bad...something terrible happened in Engineering, and it's my duty to keep you from it. If that costs me my rank, then fine."

"You son of a bitch!" Glover roared, lashing out with his good foot. But he struck only air.

"Sir, I suggest we turn back now," the Xindi said.

"You do that, I'm going forward," the captain declared. "And once I find out what's going on in Engineering, I'll deal with you."

Gralf sighed loudly, and then grabbed Terrence's other ankle. "You wouldn't," the captain dared, trying futilely to use his other leg, with its dangling foot to beat back the Arboreal. Gralf quickly broke the captain's second ankle.

"No!" Glover wailed more in anger than agony, pounding the metal plates surrounding him. His anger was mixed in with fear and concern for Pedro. He knew that Gralf was right, he felt something awry had happened, but he didn't want to leave his friend facing it alone, whatever it was. And now Gralf had robbed him of that. Terrence hadn't been there when his wife had lost her arm and leg early in the war, and he had always felt that she silently blamed him, or better yet, he blamed himself for not being able to protect her. And now it might happen all over again, but this time he wasn't a half-quadrant away. He might be able to actually help, if not for Gralf. He buried his head in his hands and cried, his tears flowing like a rainstorm. Once the storm had passed, he said quietly, his voice lethal, "I will never forgive you for this."

"I know," Gralf, just as quietly, responded. "I know."

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## ***USS Cuffe*** **Main Bridge**

Lt. Commander Cherenkov had been able to double-time it back to the main bridge as soon as power was restored to the engines. He and Lt. N'Saba arrived just

as Pedro's transmission was cut short and the ship was gripped by a powerful explosion. It threw the Russian against the perturbed Lt. Meldin, who had still been occupying the center seat. The Benzite steadied him while also deftly vacating the command chair and plopping Ivan down into it. Hardly missing a beat, Ivan asked, "Status report?"

Meldin had taken the Executive Officer's seat usually occupied by Ivan. He looked down at the inset console, flickering simultaneously with the bridge's lighting. The Benzite frowned. "I-I can't say." Through the static on the main screen, Ivan saw the ship careening toward a line of Dominion vessels.

"I think that says it all," Cherenkov grimly quipped. *I just hope I get to see Aquiel's face again*, he prayed.

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## ***USS Tempest***

### **Main Bridge**

"Cardassian ship hailing," Hause said.

*Oh shit, here it comes*, Captain Berkhalter thought. Though the *Tempest* was as quick and tough as any ship the captain had served on or commanded, he knew it was no match for a *Galor*-class destroyer in a straight-up fight, especially when they were trying to recover a runaway starship. But he would be damned if he backed away, and he knew Liana would never let the thought even cross his mind. He glanced at the olive skinned woman by his side. She sat ramrod straight in her seat, her gaze as hard as duranium. Berkhalter swallowed his doubts. "On screen," he said with as much authority as he could muster.

Berkhalter was surprised by the loveliness of his adversary. A comely Cardassian woman glared at him, the anger in her eyes clashing with the relative softness of her scaly features. A dash of teal in the center of her forehead off set the grayness of her complexion. The markings on the breastplate of her dull brown cuirass identified her rank as a gul. "I'm Captain Ian Berkhalter of the *Starship Tempest*," he began his introduction, but the woman held up a hand to silence him.

"We wish to offer you assistance in corralling the *Nebula*-class starship," the gul said through gritted teeth. If Berkhalter hadn't been sitting he would've hit the floor in surprise.

"Come again?" He asked, still not believing it.

The gul sighed, and started repeating herself. Commander Ramirez nudged him, and Berkhalter said, "Oh, I didn't mean that..."

"What did you mean?" The Cardassian's gaze was relentless.

"Oh, uh, never mind. How do you wish to provide assistance," Berkhalter asked as his exasperation and incredulity got the better of him.

"I propose we trap the ship in a pincer of tractor beams, halting it from ramming into our fleet," the gul proposed. The idea had merit, and they had just used a novel tractor beam approach on the *Cuffe*. Going to the well once more wouldn't drain it, or Berkhalter hoped it wouldn't.

"And then we allow the ship to return with you," said a Vorta, stepping into range of the main viewer. "We have no desire to reignite hostilities."

Berkhalter merely nodded, "Sounds good." He had completely given up on trying to understand any of this. After the Dominion had pounded the holy hell out of them they quit, and now they were offering to help the survivors of their onslaught. If there was some type of diabolical, masterstroke the Dominion had devised, the captain couldn't see it. So, he decided against all logic to take them at their word. The captain glanced at Lt. Commander T'Vari. The Vulcan's expression was more inscrutable than usual.

"Reverse the polarity on the tractor beams, and once in range, attach it to the old girl's aft section," Berkhalter ordered.

"Aye sir," T'Vari replied. On the screen, they watched as the Cardassian warship broke free from the wall of Dominion vessels to intercept the *Cuffe*. They latched onto the primary hull, slowing the ship, but not stopping it. Gouts of flame were sparking from the *Cuffe*'s nacelles, driving the ship forward.

"I don't like this," Lt. Commander Ramirez huffed, folding her arms across her chest. "I don't trust them."

Berkhalter didn't either, but he saw no point in adding to Liana's black mood. "Are we in range yet?"

"In half a second," T'Vari said. Then: "Now."

"Engage," Berkhalter ordered. Another greenish tractor beam issued from the *Tempest*, finding purchase along the *Cuffe*'s hind quarters. "Good job." The captured starship trembled in its vise, shaking the *Tempest* in the process. "Divert more power to the tractor beam," Berkhalter said, growing concerned. "We've got to find a way to stop that thing before it shakes itself apart."

"Captain, I suggest we send engineering and medical teams over to the *Cuffe*, I'll take the lead," Commander Ramirez said, never shy about taking initiative. The young woman continued to impress. *She'll make a hell of a captain someday*, Berkhalter realized. *Someday soon*, he thought, a bit sad about the prospect of letting her go.

"Make it happen," Berkhalter said.

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***USS Cuffe***  
**Main Engineering**  
**Ante-Chamber**

Lt. Uhnari was holding the quivering Verda when the darkness was pierced by four bright shafts of light. A voice in the darkness said, "I'm Doctor Blassingame, Chief Medical Officer on the *Tempest*; we're here to help." The team activated several wrist lamps, and swept them around the room. The *Tempest's* chief medic spied the distended duranium door, "My God. Was anyone in there?"

The question brought on another round of crying from Verda. Aquiel nodded a few times before finding her voice. "Yes." She whispered.

"Who was it?" Another member of the medical team asked, drawing a disapproving grumble from Blassingame.

But Aquiel answered the man's question the best way she knew how, "A friend."

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## ***USS Cuffe***

### **Main Sickbay**

The transporter beam had placed Captain Glover on the biobed only seconds before, but he was already sitting up, trying to force his uncooperative feet to touch the ground. "Juanita," he whispered, his eyes riveted to a scene across the room out of his worst nightmares. Medics from both the *Cuffe* and the *Tempest* were trying to hold both her and Lt. Verda back from the transparent tube holding a body charred almost beyond recognition. But the knot of stone in Terrence's stomach was all the confirmation that he needed. That lump of blackened flesh and shorn bone was Pedro. It had been Pedro. His friend, no, his best friend, and Terrence had failed him, as a friend, as a captain. "No," he groaned, the pain unbearable. He rammed his fist into the bed, and then ground his knuckles onto the bed's unyielding surface to give himself enough purchase to stand up.

"Captain Glover, just what are you doing?" Dr. Rieta Cole, his chief medical officer, ran over to his bedside. She stood in front of him. With her arms folded across her chest and that scowl on her face, she reminded him of his mother. "You're in no condition to move. We haven't had a chance to look at your ankles. Lt. Graf informed me you were injured, but until I am able to take a look for myself you're confined to that bed sir. Doctor's orders," she said in a disapproving voice, made all the more authoritative due to her clipped British accent.

"Then take care of the problem now," Glover snapped. "I'm going to see my friend." She looked back in the direction of Pedro, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry sir, but there's not much you can do for him now," She said, her expression becoming melancholy. "The explosion in Engineering exposed him to fatal levels of deuterium and antideuterium radiation."

"I need to see him, I need to be with him," Glover pleaded. He hated begging, but his image was the least of his concerns right now. He not only had to be there for

Pedro, but for Juanita as well. The young pilot was bawling, her cries ripping across the packed Sickbay. An older, dark-skinned man with snowy white hair and a kind face, had succeeded in pulling the woman away, but he had to hold on to her. "Who is that?"

"Dr. Blassingame," Cole explained. "From the *Tempest*. His team has been a big help to us. There's no way we could deal with all of the injuries....and other casualties that occurred, and on half-power, without their assistance." Another member from the *Tempest* had been able to corral Verda away from Pedro's impromptu casket.

"Half-power," Glover mumbled. "What's our status?"

"You'll have to ask Commander Cherenkov about that," Cole said. "It's not my area of expertise."

"Touché," Glover said, though without the usual joy their repartee always brought him. Verbal sparring with the good doctor was the last thing on his mind right now. "I'm getting up, without or without you." He slid off the bed, wincing in pain, as his legs buckled. He fell forward, and with surprising strength and speed, Dr. Cole pushed him back onto the bed.

"Some people just have to learn the hard way," she replied.

"Get out of my way," Glover said, gently moving her to the side as he tried to sit back up. Cole sighed loudly. Uh oh, the captain thought, that sigh of frustration sounding a lot like Gralf's did back in the Jeffries Tube. He went to into a hypo-assisted slumber wondering what Rieta was going to do to him next.

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## ***USS Cuffe***

### **Observation Lounge**

Captain Berkhalter hadn't felt right commandeering his counterpart's ready room to meet with the *Cuffe*'s senior staff, so he opted to hold a meeting in the ship's spacious observation lounge after conducting a brief tour of the damaged vessel. The *Tempest* skipper had also wanted to get a first-hand look at the efforts to repair the ship's critical systems, especially propulsion before he heard the assessments of the department heads.

There hadn't been much discrepancy between what he saw and what the *Cuffe* and *Tempest* repair teams reported. They were doing a splendid job, all things considered. His engineering chief, Fatima Eaves, was working with Lt. Uhnari, the *Cuffe*'s senior engineering officer to restore full impulse power. They had achieved quarter impulse power; which was impressive considering they were also cleaning up the radiation caused by the accident that had claimed life of Lt. Commander Rojas.

Berkhalter made sure to keep the meeting short, though there was one officer he kept behind after dismissing the others. Lt. Gralf gave him a sour glance. "Is there something I can assist you with further sir?" The captain was put off by the man's insolent tone, but he chalked it up to the stress he had been under.

"Listen, Commander Cherenkov told me what happened with you and Captain Glover. I just wanted to let you know that once he's back, he'll understand you did what you thought was best."

"Like hell," A harsh voice boomed. Berkhalter hadn't even heard the door hiss open, and from the startled look on Gralf's face, the arboreal hadn't either. A hulking Captain Glover stood in the doorway, his face a mask of anger.

"Terrence, it's been a long time," Berkhalter put on his best disarming grin. But his counterpart was having none of that.

"Off my ship Ian. Now!"

"Terrence, I wasn't informed you had been cleared from Sickbay," Berkhalter said. If Terrence wanted to play hardball, he could play with the best of them. Though his Omega Squadron flight team had lost the Rigel Cup against Glover's Novas at the Academy, Ian had made them earn it.

"I'm standing here, aren't I?" Terrence declared.

"Barely," Berkhalter retorted. "Listen Terrence, you've just been through a really traumatic experience, emotionally...and physically." He winced at the mention of Glover's physical torment because it shifted the fuming captain's focus back on Gralf. Though the stout man was doing his best to look unruffled, Berkhalter was close enough to see him trembling slightly. *Just what kind of ship are you running here Terrence?* Berkhalter wondered. *What the hell had the war done to him? Stupid question,* answered the other half of the internal monologue.

Glover hobbled into the room with an unstable gait. "I need to speak with Mr. Gralf, alone."

"I'm sorry Terrence, but I don't think that's wise, for either you or Lt. Gralf," Berkhalter said, planting his boots into the carpet.

"I don't give a damn what you think," Terrence seethed. "Mr. Gralf prevented me from saving my friend's life, and he did it by physically assaulting me."

"I did my duty," the man said quietly, keeping eye contact with Glover.

"I want you off my ship," He said, jabbing his finger at the man. "I want you gone."

"Terrence, you're letting your emotions get the best of you, and it's unbecoming," Berkhalter snapped, pushing niceties to the side. "Good Ops Officers are hard to come by. Don't do something in the heat of the moment that you'll regret later," he advised.



"Like you did on M'Kallas III," Glover shot back. Berkhalter's next words died on his tongue as his stomach clenched. "I had no choice," he said quietly. "I had to leave them...."

"You made a decision in the heat of battle," Glover said, with surprising warmth. "The rightness or the wrongness aside, you can't take it back. But you own up to it, and you moved on. That's what both Galf and I need to do right now. We have a lot to talk about."

Berkhalter swallowed before pressing on. "I can't allow that," he tapped his combadge. "Counselor Ellan," he called.

"Yes," the Deltan answered promptly.

"This is Captain Berkhalter. You're needed in the Observation Lounge, pronto."

*"I'm on my way."*

"Perhaps I'm not the best person to listen or give advice to either of you," Ian admitted, "But Lt. Ellan knows you both. I think he'll be better qualified."

"But a whole lot more touchy feely," Terrence groaned. Ian was glad to see the man had a little bit of humor left in him even though he hadn't forgiven him totally because of the cheap shot about M'Kallas III.

As if reading his mind, Terrence grumbled, "Sorry about mentioning M'Kallas III."

"Hey, we've all got our cross to bear," Berkhalter said, unable to shake the sadness from his tone. "I just pray that you won't have to carry a similar one before this war is over."

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### ***USS Cuffe*** **Captain's Quarters** **Five Hours Later...**

Captain Glover pondered his answer for a few moments. "Come in," he eventually griped. Dr. Rieta Cole walked into the room, unfazed by the gruff response.

"Glad to see you too," she said drolly.

"Now's not a good time," Glover replied before turning his attention back to gazing at the black screen on his desktop computer. He had been staring at it for the last half-hour. He hadn't been able to do anything else since Jasmine had told him that she couldn't attend Pedro's funeral. She gave him some excuse about being knee-deep in the Corps of Engineers efforts to rebuild San Francisco after the Breen attack. Terrence knew that was important work, but Pedro was family, and as far as Terrence was concerned, you don't cut out on family. Even Admiral Glover,

Terrence's father, stuck on the Romulan front, was going to send a personal message. Pedro had been one of the biggest boosters of Terrence settling down with Jasmine. He had shored up Glover's fading certainty about the pairing on more than one occasion. She owed Pedro, if for nothing else, she owed him for that. He didn't know how he was going to explain her absence to Pedro's family. It felt like he had failed his friend all over again. And to think they wanted him to conduct the eulogy.

He was really feeling unworthy, of everything, and he needed Jasmine right now. She was his wife, for God's sake. But ever since she was injured at Tyra, Jasmine had pulled away from him. He had tolerated it though it had hurt him tremendously. Terrence thought that if Jasmine spent time on Earth with her sister and nephew it would help heal her physically and emotionally. Perhaps it had, but the healing was occurring without Terrence being present, and it felt wrong not to be there, or to even feel involved. He was her husband, he should be there, she should want him there, but she had pushed him away, time and again. Unable to control his pent up frustrations, he had lashed out at her. Their conversation had ended in an argument. On one level Glover knew he should've conducted himself better, but at the same time, Jasmine should've known, should've sensed somehow through the bond they were supposed to share that his anger was covering up his pain, and she should've understood. But she got moody and defensive, and struck back.

Tears were streaming down her face before she had disconnected the call. Glover's pride had prevented him from calling back. So he had sat alone in his cabin, stewing.

"Is everything all right sir?" Cole asked, bringing him back to the present. Glover turned back around and stared at the woman. She shifted uncomfortably, shrugging her shoulders. "Stupid question right?"

"Yes," Terrence wasn't in the mood to mince words. "What do you want?"

Cole pursed her lips, and the captain could tell she was struggling not to aim another acerbic comment at him. "Just checking up on my patient," she said. "I'm old fashioned that way."

"Hmmm," Glover folded his arms across his chest. "Is that right? Then where is your bag or your instruments?"

The medic held up her hands and wiggled her fingers. "These are all the tools I need."

"What are you really here for...Rieta," He hesitated over calling the woman by her first name. He wasn't sure how personable he wanted to be at the moment. Though the familiarity did take the tension out of the woman's posture. She visibly relaxed.

"Permission to speak freely sir?"

"Sure, and while you're at it, take a seat. You standing by the door is starting to make me nervous."

"I didn't think anything could make the Great Terrence Glover nervous?"

"I'm not feeling all that great today," Terrence quietly admitted. In fact, he hadn't been feeling great since the war started. He had lost so many friends along the way, the closest being Lt. Dryer, Lt. Commander Bheto, and now Pedro. *When was it going to end?*

"Sir, we're at war, and unfortunately these things happen."

"I'm not a child Doctor!" Glover snapped.

"Neither am I," she riposted, "And I would prefer that you not talk to me like one." Glover was impressed by the woman's fire.

"I...apologize," he said. "I'm...not on top of my game today."

"That's understandable," Cole said softly, and Glover knew that she meant it. She did understand. Working as a medic, she dealt with life and death situations even more than Terrence did sitting in the command chair. She probably knew loss better than anyone on board. He wished she was the counselor instead of Ellan. The gregarious Deltan was too emotive and grabby for Terrence's comfort. He had done the perfunctory session and psych review after admitting he wanted to throttle Gralf in the conference room.

Terrence wouldn't know if Ellan was going to report the incident to the higher-ups or not. He certainly didn't feel unstable, or a risk to his crew and if the counselor put some garbage like that in his report Glover would fit it with every ounce of strength he could muster. But at the moment he didn't care.

The *Cuffe* was scheduled for significant repairs, and he was going to escort Pedro back home in one of the starship's shuttles. He would learn of his fate when he got back.

"I see that Gralf is taking a leave of absence," Cole said. Glover raised an eyebrow.

"Oh."

"Please don't be coy with me sir. I had to give him a check-up before he disembarked."

"Had to?" Cole merely shrugged and smiled, but Glover wasn't amused. "If you wanted to dig for information Doctor, you could've come to me."

"I'm here now, aren't I?" Though Terrence should've been pissed by her insolence, the challenging stance she took made him smirk. Before Dr. Nemato, the *Cuffe's* former Chief Medic had taken a position at Starfleet Medical, he had recommended Cole to replace him. The Antosian had promised Glover that she was tougher than she looked, and once again Nemato had been right.

"Yes, Lt. Ellan thought it would be best if we both took some time away from the ship, but the only time I'm leaving this vessel is for Pedro's funeral. Operations officers are easier to replace than starship captains."

"Gralf doesn't deserve that," Dr. Cole said with a scowl. "I don't know much about him, but by almost every measure he is more than competent. Am I incorrect?"

"No," Glover grumbled, after a long pause. "He's...a good officer."

"An officer so committed to protecting your life that he was willing to sacrifice his career, or even worse, incur your wrath," the medic concluded. "He deserves some understanding from you."

"I understand what he did!" Glover gasped, exasperated. He threw up his hands. "And I know he's a good officer damn it! I wouldn't have selected him if he hadn't been. It's not about that."

"Then what is it about...Terrence," Cole said quietly, without accusation. She leaned forward, peering deeply into his eyes. "You can tell me."

The captain sighed. "He...Gralf, he didn't trust me," Glover said, his voice cracking. "He didn't trust in my ability to make everything all right. He didn't even give me the chance to attempt to save Pedro. He capriciously made the decision for me."

"He took power away from you, that's what it's about, isn't it?"

"No," Glover shook his head. "It isn't about me." He paused, an askew grin formed across his face. "I can't believe I just said that."

Dr. Cole chuckled, "Neither can I."

"But I'm serious. It isn't about me. I could've done something to help Pedro, and Gralf stopped me. He didn't trust me and I no longer trust him."

"Believe me captain there's nothing you could've done. Death was instantaneous. There's no way Lt. Commander Rojas could've predicted the volatile mix would explode, or when. Gralf saved your life."

Glover grunted, and looked away for a long time. Eventually he turned back around, "That's cold comfort."

"No, that's survivor's guilt talking," Rieta replied.

"Ellan tried to lay the same line on me," Glover said. "I wasn't in the mood for psychobabble then and I'm not in the mood for it now."

"I'm not here to analyze you; I'm here to...to be a friend."

"Okay," Terrence shrugged, noncommittal.

"I appreciate the enthusiasm." The drollness had returned. "It looks like this is going to be a long trip."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm accompanying you and Lieutenants Rojas, Verda, and the others to Allensworth Colony," Dr. Cole said, matter of fact, "If you don't mind of course."

"Well...I...," Glover stammered, not sure what to say. "You don't have to do this."

"I want to," Dr. Cole said. "Pedro really helped make my transition to the *Cuffe* far easier than it could've been, especially in wartime. It's the least I could do to accompany him home."

"Thank you," Glover smiled, his eyes glistening. Dr. Cole got up from the couch and squeezed his shoulder. A jolt ran through his system. He scooted back in his chair and Rieta stepped away from him. They both looked at each other.

"I...I have some reports to finish up in Sickbay, I better get back there," Cole said quickly.

"Okay," Glover said. Cole backed out of the room, Terrence watching her leave. Alone again, he turned back to the blank screen. Someone had stepped up for him in his hour of need, he realized. It just hadn't been his wife.

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## ***USS Cuffe***

### **Cargo Bay Seven**

Lt. Aquiel Uhnari traced her hand along the cold, polished torpedo casing, seeing her reflection clearly on its gleaming black surface. She shuddered when she thought about what the tube contained. Alexei Krasnikov had been an orphan, the engineer had only learned hours ago. And he hadn't spent the few years of life he had been given building a family, or thinking of what he would leave behind. He had requested to be launched into space to spend eternity a silent witness to the ongoing engine of creation.

Alexei had always been a quiet man, which had baffled the gregarious Pedro, but Uhnari had seen nothing wrong with it. She smiled briefly as she thought about her checkered service record, with less than stellar ratings from her commanding officers on Deriben V and Relay Station 47. Sometimes it was better to just keep your mouth shut, she had learned the hard way after many tempestuous years.

"I probably knew Alex better than anyone," Ensign Hutchinson said softly as she stepped into the room and past Aquiel to take up a position over the casket, opposite the Haliian. She gazed down at the tube, "And I didn't know him at all." Aquiel was shocked by the young woman's ghastly appearance. Her skin was pallid, and her normally lush red hair was disheveled and stringy, lying limply on her shoulders. Her eyes were red and the skin around them looked red and swollen from tears. She looked broken, drawn in, not at all like the vivacious, outspoken young officer whose bluntness Pedro had relished. But Aquiel couldn't blame her. How else was she supposed to react to the carnage they had just survived, but so many of their comrades, enough to almost fill up the entire cargo bay, had not? And that's on top of the massive casualties the entire fleet suffered, and the daily

tragedies that assailed everyone each day when Captain Glover released the casualty reports.

Uhnari didn't quite know what to say. Her life hadn't been an easy one and tragedy had visited her early and often enough to toughen her hide, but most of the crew hadn't had a clue how cruel and capricious the universe could be until this war. Hardships had taught her to hide her fears, by ignoring them or turning them into fuel to allow her to strike back. That was how she had coped, but it wasn't a mechanism she would recommend for anyone else, even her worst enemy. Aquiel could see how hurt the young officer was, how everything about her was crying out for help. Uhnari worked her mouth, a palliative on the edge of her tongue. But she couldn't say it. She couldn't lie to Hutchinson and tell her everything would be all right. Because it wasn't going to be, she felt, not until the Dominion lie in ruins. And she didn't know if that would ever happen.

So, she opted for something equally as bland and inadequate, "Alexei was a good engineer, a good officer," she said, the words sounding detached and cold to her own ears. Hutchinson merely nodded, not looking up, and Uhnari wondered if the woman had even heard her. A part of her hoped she hadn't. She left the younger woman to her grief.

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### ***USS Cuffe***

#### **Outside Cargo Bay Seven**

"Lt. Uhnari," Lt. Commander Cherenkov called after her, the rough edge of his voice almost absent. She had never heard him speak with that tone. She turned around.

"Yes sir?" She asked.

He waved quickly, "No ranks," he said just as quick. "I had stopped by your quarters, and you weren't in. I checked the computer and it informed me you were here."

"Yes," Aquiel nodded, "I was..."

"I understand," Cherenkov said solemnly, his face as gray as a tombstone. "If...you need someone to talk to," he left the offer hanging. The blond-haired human, with the rangy, muscular frame had caught her eye the moment he had come aboard to serve as Executive Officer. Aquiel had been worried about how serving under Cherenkov would be because he had come across like a hard ass during his introduction to the crew. But the various rumors swirling around why the man had left Special Missions for the exploration fleet had intrigued her. No stranger to controversy herself, she understood what it was like to make a mistake and how hard it was to redeem yourself. So, Aquiel had never allowed the man's taskmaster

personality burrow too deeply under her skin. In response, Ivan hadn't treated her based on her past either, which she appreciated.

"I'm fine sir," Uhnari said. "Really," she reached out and briefly brushed Cherenkov's hand. The hardened visage softened slightly.

"You don't look fine," Ivan said.

*You should take a look at Dana and then compare,* Aquiel thought, but kept the quip to herself. Now was not the time to be flippant.

"We've all lost a lot today," Cherenkov said, his gaze far away, as if he was thinking of more than just today. "I...I just wanted to ensure you were okay."

"Thank you, really," Aquiel said. "I'll hold up. I've come through worse."

"Is that so?" Ivan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Let's not go there okay?" Uhnari said, and the Russian nodded.

"Fair enough," Cherenkov replied. "Listen, if you need to talk..."

She managed a smile, "I'll know who to call on, and thank you really Ivan. I mean that." One corner of the man's mouth almost upturned, but he quickly suppressed the gesture, maintaining his steely visage.

"Well...I guess I better get back to the bridge," Cherenkov said, the tone in his voice telling her that was not what he wanted to do. "The captain ran me off, and told me to get some rest, but there's so much left to do."

"Yes, there is," Aquiel agreed. She wasn't sure if she wanted Ivan to go or stay, so she said nothing to keep him. They both had tremendous pressure with a lot of people counting on them right now. Until a new Chief Engineer could be assigned, Aquiel was the senior officer in that department and would oversee Main Engineering's initial restoration. And Ivan was practically the acting captain. Understandably Captain Glover had been devastated by Pedro's death, and was barely functioning from what Aquiel had heard. She knew it would be a waste of time to ask Ivan, because he would never divulge such information about a superior officer. "I guess I had better head back to Engineering. Perhaps some hard work will keep us occupied and our minds off..."

"It won't," Cherenkov said curtly, "but at least we'll be too tired to do anything about it."

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## ***USS Cuffe***

### **Juanita Rojas's Quarters**

Her roommate had left the room, giving Juanita the privacy she needed. She had played with the controls on her desktop for what seemed like hours. How could she do it? How could she tell her parents that Pedro, their eldest son, her brother was dead? She had insisted that she be the one to convey the information.

Commander Cherenkov had suggested otherwise, but the captain had backed her. Now she had to deliver.

She ran a hand through her violet-dyed hair and chuckled. Despite his reputation, Pedro had been a bit of a prude when it came to her, and he hated her varying hairstyles and questionable fashion choices. "You look like you're on the *Sutherland*," he had grumbled more than once.

To which she would often reply, "But you have been on the *Sutherland*." And Pedro would always laugh, but he would never tell her what went on after whatever official derring do had taken place. She began tearing up again, realizing she would never hear her brother's voice again, or be swept up into his arms and twirled around madly.

"Oh God," she whispered, "Please give me the strength." The tears began to flow again and painful sobs wracked her body. Juanita pushed away from her desk and went to the replicator. She hovered over it, unable to make a decision about what she wanted to drink. Pedro had rigged the device to produce real alcohol, and Juanita figured that a drink might stiffen her spine.

"Screw it," she muttered, turning back to the blank screen. Her stomach roiled with fear as she slowly approached the table, her innocuous desktop computer had now taken on an ominous cast. She sat down cautiously, and forced herself to activate the screen. Inputting the code to Allensworth Colony, Juanita found herself gazing her startled mother within seconds.

"Juanita, honey," Luz Rojas smiled, "I didn't expect to hear from you so soon again. How's your brother?" The force had gone out of the question as Luz got a good look at her daughter. "Where's Pedro?"

"He's," was all Juanita could get out before more tears overwhelmed her. She placed her head on the cold desk and pounded the desk and the computer screen, lost in time and grief.

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## ***USS Cuffe***

### **Main Transporter Room**

Captain Glover cracked a hard smile, but stopped himself from chuckling when he saw the mortified look on Gralf's face. The startled Xindi dropped the duffle bag hanging from his shoulder. "S-Sir," he stammered as he quickly stood at attention.

"At ease," Glover waved from behind the transporter control station. "You want to know what I'm doing here right?"

Gralf nodded, gulped, and then replied, "Well, yes."



"I'm beaming you down to the station," the captain said. Gralf looked even more nervous. "I'm not going to scramble your atoms. Well, perhaps not too much," he couldn't help but add.

"Sir, I don't think this is a good idea. Perhaps I should contact Lt. Ellan." Terrence held up another hand. The man's skittishness was starting to annoy him.

"Listen Mr. Gralf. I'll cut to the chase. I was out of line in the Observation Lounge, but I'm not apologizing for it. Pedro was my friend, and he meant a lot to me. I can never forgive you for denying me a chance to save him, despite your intentions."

"I understand," the Arboreal lowered his head.

"But at the same time, you acted out of loyalty and your own sense of honor. I have to respect that...whether I like it or not. Things will never be the same...for any of us. But I would like you to stay onboard."

Gralf looked back up. "Are you serious sir?" The captain tersely nodded.

"Sir, I appreciate you seeking out this time to talk to me, but I can't give you an answer just yet. I see the trust you've lost in me, and I don't know if I can work or thrive under a leader that doesn't trust me. I can tell you this, as long as the war continues I will not leave you in a lurch, but after that..."

Terrence nodded again. "Okay, that's fair enough. Well, do you now feel comfortable with me behind the controls?" He ran his fingers across the terminal's smooth screen like he was playing a piano.

Gralf grunted and studied the man with such intensity that it made Terrence nervous. When he turned away from the Xindi, Gralf laughed. "Now I do," the Operations Officer said. "If you wished me harm I would've seen it in your eyes."

*He still really doesn't trust me,* Glover realized, shocked and a bit frightened that any of his crew would view him or his motives with suspicion. Gralf picked up his bag and stepped up onto one of the transporter pads. "Permission to disembark?" He asked.

"Permission granted," Glover said, almost as an afterthought. After he had beamed Gralf off the *Cuffe*, he remained in the Transporter Room, contemplating the pit he had fallen into over the last two years and if he would find a way out of it again.

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## ***USS Cuffe*** **Counselor's Office**

"Your meeting with Lt. Gralf before he disembarked is a good sign," Lt. Ellan said, with a sympathetic smile. "I know how hard it still is for you."

Glover nodded, the lump in his throat as hard and cutting as a jagged stone. He hated having to come to the counselor, to have to submit to the psychological

evaluation. He was out of his element, with his fate in the hands of another person, a subordinate officer no less. Terrence was not pleased. "I did what I thought was the right thing to do." He finally managed to say.

"And it was sir," The Deltan counselor nodded. "I'm sure in time the rift between you two can heal."

Glover doubted that, but he nodded. "So, is the evaluation over?" He asked, a bit too eagerly.

"Yes sir," Ellan said. "I will submit my evaluation and recommendations to Command. You should receive their answer hopefully within hours, tomorrow at the latest."

"What are your recommendations?" Glover asked. The Deltan's grin brightened. The counselor was quite familiar with Terrence's impatience. They had tangled more than once over the captain's attempts to hurry through Ellan's annual sessions.

"Captain I think you remain fit to command this vessel, but you've undergone a terrible tragedy, one that I will recommend that you need time away from the war, away from this tremendous stress, to reassess your life and to....reconnect with yourself."

"Reconnect....with myself?" Glover snorted; but it was better than laughing at the absurd notion. "I'm pretty familiar with myself; always have been."

"I'm not so sure," the Deltan said, his smile fading as a cold, very uncommon dispassion settled over his features. "To be honest sir, you're on the edge, and I want to give you time to step away from the precipice. This war should've shown you that you can't handle everything, that not all things are within the realm of possibility, but instead your desire to control things, fate as it were, has increased exponentially. I'm concerned that if you endure another significant stressor while you are in such a fragile state, with all the burdens you have placed on your shoulders, you might crack."

"I won't," Terrence promised, though the old familiar cockiness hadn't limned the words. It sounded like he was trying to convince Ellan, trying to convince himself more than stating a fact.

"I'm sorry sir, but you mean too much to this crew, and this crew means too much to you, to allow you to not be at the helm when you are optimal. So, I have recommended you are removed from active duty while the ship is undergoing repairs."

"You can't do that," Glover huffed. "I'm not a basket case!"

"Not yet," Ellan retorted, not backing down. "And I'm not going to let it get to a point where you become a danger to the crew or yourself. I'm a big proponent of preventive care. A few days off might work wonders for you. I'm certain Lt. Commander Cherenkov is capable enough to handle things while you're away."

"I didn't say he wasn't," Glover replied, his anger bubbling beneath his skin.

"Why not take a chance to go to Earth? You haven't seen Mrs. Glover for months," the Deltan suggested cheerily, the cool clinician persona now banished.

The captain couldn't argue with that. He did want to see Jasmine. He needed to see her. With so much in his life spiraling out of control, he needed her love and reassurance. Terrence struggled with the words, but finally said, "All right...I'll do it. After..." his voice caught, "Pedro's funeral." Just as quickly, Ellan's smile drew into a thin, tight line.

"I understand sir," he said quietly.

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**Starbase 21**  
**Observation Lounge**  
**Romulan Neutral Zone**  
**October 20, 2375**

"We've got to send a clear message not only to the Dominion, but to our own citizens!" Sub-Admiral Hesporian pounded the sleek black tabletop. Despite the slenderness of her frame, the force of the blow caused the table to rattle. "We are not losing this war, and they need to be reminded of that."

"No, *we're* not losing this war," crowed Karnon, the brigadier representing the Klingons, "Despite Starfleet's commendable efforts, the installation of Starfleet and Romulan vessels with anti-dampening measures is still ongoing. That leaves our Defense Force as the most capable to handle and defeat the Dominion, including leading this mission."

"You've done such a fine job leading the Alliance that you sought our help eh?" Nauarch Anvos D'Anzan of the Alshain Starforce chortled. Talks finalizing bringing the Alshain Exarchate were still ongoing, but at a good enough point that Command recommended that one of their military officials participate in the meeting.

Admiral Samson Glover saw that Deputy Defense Minister T'Las was visibly perturbed, which wasn't a good sign since the Vulcan woman had achieved Kolinahr decades ago. Rear Admiral Sumitra Aggarwal, the aide to Fleet Admiral Shanthi, Starfleet's commander, wasn't too pleased either. Both of their holographic likenesses shimmered in two seats flanking Samson, courtesy of holographic generators. T'Las was actually on Earth, coordinating war efforts, and Sumitra was half-way across the quadrant at Starbase 116. Samson had cashed in more than a few of his credits to get both luminaries to hear out the plan he had devised with Captain Rahul, his former Executive Officer on Deep Space Five. The admiral knew that he was allowing the meeting to get out of control and devolve back into ancient backbiting and recriminations, and that he had to something about it.

"Somebody has to clean up the mess," Karnon shrugged, prompting laughter from the Klingon contingent. Both Hesperian and D'Anzan glowered at the man.

"Enough," Admiral Samson Glover stood up, raising a hand. He glowered at the meeting's occupants. "We'll get nowhere with all this constant bickering. Now, please let Captain Rahul complete his presentation." The admiral turned to the Efrosian standing calmly beyond the large circular table, in the front of the room. "The floor is once again yours."

"Thank you admiral, and esteemed colleagues," Captain Rahul said before turning back to the flat screen. It currently displayed a graphic representation of the Romulan front, and the strong line of Romulan and Federation defenses holding the Dominion forces to a standstill. "Admiral Glover tasked me with finding an appropriate target to strike to cripple the Dominion's current momentum." He moved his hand over the screen, and the scene shifted.

D'Anzan gasped. "You aren't seriously entertaining this are you?" He looked from Rahul to Glover.

"Well, actually yes," Glover shrugged, "with Command's approval that is."

"If it rattles the beasts, then I'm all for it," the Klingon brayed. "I will have the Chancellor himself lend support to your plan."

Glover nodded, "And what of the Praetor?"

"As soon as this meeting concludes, I will forward your proposal on to Romulus," Hesperian promised.

"I...can't even fathom the personal dimension of this plan to you Nauarch D'Anzan, nor the cultural or political implications," Glover began, his voice filled with empathy, "But I can promise you that if it is successful, it will significantly shorten the duration of this war."

"The Maw holds nothing but death," D'Anzan warned. "But I will nonetheless take your proposal to the War Ministry and the Exarch. If my superiors can't talk sense into you then I will leave it to the gods. I pray that you will heed their answer before it's too late."

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## **Starbase 21**

### **Observation Lounge**

After the Deputy Defense Minister had signed off, Admiral Aggarwal sighed before looking at Samson with an askew grin. "Sam, what else do you have up your sleeve?"

"Why would I suspect something like that?" He asked a bit too innocently.

"How many years have we known each other?" the rear admiral grinned.

"It seemed like yesterday that you were my Executive Officer, and look at you now," Glover reminisced, a wistful tone in his voice. "Time does fly."

"Yes it does," Aggarwal agreed.

"But look at you now," Samson beamed.

"I wouldn't be here without you," Aggarwal replied.

"No, you got those admiral bars due to your own efforts. Now, the position with Admiral Shanthi, that was all me," he joked, thumping his chest. "And since you've been on the job for over six months, I think the Fleet Admiral owes me one."

"Well, what can I do to help out?" Aggarwal asked, a mischievous gleam in her eye.

"What have you got stirring in your pot?"

Samson put on his most winning smile, prompting Aggarwal to good-naturedly scowl, "Oh boy."

"It's nothing that bad, I assure you. I have a favor to ask of Fleet Admiral Shanthi, if the other powers approve the plan."

"I'm sure they will. Having Minister T'Las sit in was a canny move, a sign that the Santiago Administration is fully on board with this gambit."

"I do try to line up all my ducks, before I go duck hunting," Glover rarely patted himself on the back, but he felt another light display of confidence might make his request go down a bit smoother.

"So, what can I do for you?" Aggarwal asked again.

"I want my son heading the Starfleet contingent into the Maw."

"Come again?" Aggarwal asked, after a few moments of stunned silence. Samson repeated the request. "But I thought Captain Rahul helped craft this plan with you? He would be the logical Starfleet primary on this."

Glover blew through his teeth. "Yes, Rahul's tactical skill and astrometric knowledge were vital to forging this plan. But Rahul is a new captain, damn near raw. A steady, experienced hand is needed for this mission, and Terrence has that kind of hard-bitten, combat experience."

"And you've discussed this with Captains Rahul and Glover?"

"I expressed my opinion to Rahul, but I haven't spoken to my son in several days," Samson said. "He's taking some personal time."

"I heard about what happened to his vessel during the battle," Aggarwal said, her expression stricken. "My condolences." Samson nodded as he accepted it. Sumitra had served as a surrogate for Terrence's far flung mother more than once and he knew her sadness and concern were genuine.

"What did Rahul have to say?" Aggarwal asked.

"He...didn't agree," Samson admitted soberly. "But he trusts my judgment. He also trusts Terrence."

"Terrence has experienced quite a bit of emotional turmoil recently," Admiral Aggarwal said gently, "Do you think he can handle a mission of this magnitude?"

"Sumitra do you think I would even suggest this if I thought otherwise?" Samson replied.

"I know what happened after Lt. Commander Rojas's death," Aggarwal intimated. "I've read Lt. Ellan's report, and so has Admiral Shanthi. I think it would be best for Terrence to get the rest that his counselor recommends."

Admiral Glover shook his head, a sad smile on his face. "Terrence is too much like his mother. He works out his problems best by working, by contributing, by making an impact."

"By lashing out? By getting revenge?" Aggarwal countered. "There were some disturbing signs in that report; not to mention Captain Berkhalter's. Have you read either?"

"I perused them," Samson said tightly. "I know my son a lot better than some counselor...or a captain who barely knows him."

"Lt. Ellan is more than 'some counselor' and you know that Sam. He's one of the best in the business."

"I know," Samson grouched. "His psych evaluation rated him as command capable," the admiral added. He knew that Terrence would be livid if he knew that his father had delved into his personal file, but the admiral would do anything to protect his son, even if it that meant removing him from the captain's chair if he had become a danger to himself and others, and Admiral Glover knew that wasn't the case. And the records backed up his gut. "I heard about the plans to sideline him after he returns back to active duty, to test him out before putting him back at the front, but I think it would be a waste of a good captain, and a keen tactical mind. Terrence will wither if he's not in the thick of the action."

Aggarwal nodded, smiling wearily. "I'm a parent now too, so I can relate. I know you're worried about him as am I, but I have my concerns about his suitability for this mission. I will take your request to Admiral Shanthi though."

Samson was disappointed that he hadn't been able to convince Sumitra to become an advocate for his plan. He knew that if he had asked Thuosana directly, she would've dismissed it as nepotism. Even though Samson knew in his heart his decision was based on a personal reason, he also thought that Terrence would be more capable of getting as many of their people back as possible. Rahul was good, but Terrence was better.

"Thank you for listening Sumitra," Samson smiled. "Please let me know as soon as Thuosana makes her decision."

"Oh, I'm sure she'll want to tell you personally," Aggarwal said, her grin crooked. Samson's smile brightened. That might give him one more shot at it, he concluded.

"I look forward to hearing from her."

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## ***USS Cuffe*** **Main Engineering**

Lt. Verda stood on the upper level catwalk, gazing into the tenebrous darkness of the inactivated warp core. She stared at the cracked casing running the length of the cylinder that can fractured due to the volatile brew Pedro had cooked up to reignite the engines. He had spent so much of his life in this room, watching over the warp core as if it were a child, devoting so much time to it and it repaid him by breaking when he needed it most. It had betrayed him. The Troyian felt a visceral hatred for the inanimate cylinder. At times like these she wished she were a more primitive Elasian, so she could spew her hatred and bile at the cylinder, so that she could rail against it and continue smashing it to pieces, like it had done to her.

She pulled the ring out of her pocket and held it in her palm. The Denevan crystal glinted in the dim light from the ceiling. "Why hadn't I told you yes?" She muttered to herself, punishing herself as she had for days. "Why had I kept you waiting?"

Verda bent over, cramping as the tears started to stream down her face again. "Why did I let you go without telling you how I felt about you? How I loved you."

"Verda? Lt. Verda, are you alright?" It was Lt. Uhnari. Verda enclosed the ring in a fist and placed her hand at her side. She turned around slowly; wiping her cheeks with her other hand.

"I'm, I'm..." she sobbed. "Fine." Similar to her, Uhnari was dressed in mourning garb, though Hallians preferred a deep crimson color, whereas Troyians grieved for their death in brown, to symbolize the earth to which their loved ones were returning.

Uhnari reached out to her, but Verda recoiled. "I'm sorry," Aquiel said, her voice tinny. "I didn't mean to offend."

Verda had learned to shelve many of her cultural customs once she had joined Starfleet, but physical contact by one not at her status level had been one of the hardest to overcome. Born into the Troyian nobility, Pedro had often made fun of her aristocratic idiosyncrasies, showing her how pompous and silly she could be at times. Making friends had been hard for her, but with Pedro's and Aquiel's help, she had begun to break out of her shell. But at the moment she felt vulnerable and the old ways returned with a vengeance.

"Forgive me *Lady Verda*," Aquiel said with pronounced, mock offense. "Shall I offer my commoner's hand for you to lop off now?"

"No, it is I who should apologize," Verda said, remembering that Aquiel had pulled her hands from the burning door in the Engineering antechamber seconds after the explosion that had killed Pedro. At the time she had been too distraught to notice or care about the cultural breach. "Old habits..."

"I see," Uhnari said. "I...uh...came to tell you that the shuttle is ready."

"Okay," Verda nodded. "Could you give me a moment?"

"Sure," Aquiel said though she hesitated to leave her alone. "What were you doing in here?"

"Just checking the progress of the repairs," Verda lied. Aquiel nodded, but the look on her face told Verda that the Haliian didn't believe her.

"I'm just going to be right outside the door if you need me," Uhnari said.

"It won't take long...I just want to say goodbye," Verda mixed a bit more truth into the lie, "By the time we return this old warp core will be gone."

"Yeah," Aquiel nodded, buying it. "We spent a lot of time on her, didn't we? She got us through quite a few scrapes."

*But not quite enough,* Verda thought, though she didn't voice it.

"A few minutes," Aquiel said, "and then I'm coming back."

"A few," Verda nodded, already turning back to the warp core. Once the Haliian had left, Verda took the ring and flung it into one of the warp core's fissures. She imagined she could hear it hitting the bottom, and shattering like her heart had. It was the final sacrifice she would ever make to the beast. She had already submitted her resignation, and would fight like hell to make sure she never returned to his accursed place.

Squaring her shoulders, and putting on a plastic smile she stepped out into the corridor, surprising Lt. Uhnari. "See, it only took one minute. I'm ready to move on now."

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## **Starbase 21**

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

**October 22, 2375**

"Thuosana, it's good to see you again," Admiral Samson Glover said and he meant it. He had been friends with the Starfleet's head since the Academy. And even though they didn't always see eye-to-eye, he respected her greatly. It had been too long since had seen her, and he noticed a few more gray hairs and a lot more stress marks running down her dour brown face. It made him a little thankful that he had never been bitten by the ambition bug to the extent that Thuosana or his own wife and son had. Shanthi regarded him a few seconds from the viewer, her stern gaze softening slightly.



"Likewise Sam," Fleet Admiral Shanthi replied, favoring him with a small uptick at the edges of her mouth, "Which is why I regret to tell you that I've vetoed your plan."

"Why?" Samson asked, crestfallen. "It was a good, solid plan that would've hit the Dominion where it hurt, and showed them we were still united."

"Oh, I don't mean the plan entire," Shanthi clarified. "Just your desires to have Captain Glover lead the Starfleet contingent. He's not ready Sam, and you know that. I've known Terrence since he was a child, and I know both of you consider action as a form of therapy, but the stakes are too high this time. The mission will go on, but Glover will not be participating. Sub-Admiral Hesperian will be supreme commander of the taskforce and Captain Rahul will serve as her second, and commander of Starfleet forces."

"But," Samson began, stopping after Shanthi held up a hand. "And we're moving up the timeframe for the mission. We'll strike within a fortnight. The *Cuffe* might not even be space worthy by then."

"Admiral I must protest," Glover said.

"Protest all you like," Shanthi said, though without hostility or arrogance. "I've already discussed this with T'Las, the Security Advisor, and Defense Minister, and they all approve."

"I see," Samson shifted his gaze away to take control of the anger twisting his features. He felt stabbed in the back. Unable to hold back, he glared at his superior. "So, everyone thinks my son is crazy is that it?"

"No Sam, that's not it at all," Shanthi remarked, with more gentleness than Samson expected and knew he deserved. "Terrence's emotional state wasn't even discussed. Rahul's knowledge of the plan was deemed more critical to its success."

"I see," Glover replied, but he wasn't totally convinced. "Rahul is capable, but you know that plans never go the way we intend."

"I'm a little surprised at your lack of regard for Captain Rahul," Shanthi reproached him, her voice rising. "He performed in exemplary fashion for you at Deep Space 5."

"I know that," Samson groused. "But that has nothing to do with this."

"And that's the problem," Shanthi riposted. "You're so concerned about Terrence that you've lost perspective, even to the extent that you're denigrating one of your own former officers."

"Hold on a moment!" Glover snapped. "I'm not doing that," he paused as his past statements and actions flashed through his mind, "Am I?"

"You tell me," Shanthi said, her voice more even keel this time.

"It wasn't what I meant," Samson shook his head. "Rahul is a good captain, I just..." He paused, struggling for words, "I just don't know what to do."

"None of us do," the Fleet Admiral admitted. "All we can do is the best we can with what's available to us. But in order to do that, you've got to have a chance. Terrence is a hero to the Federation a dozen times over. Let Rahul get his chance."

Samson pondered his old friend's words. "Okay, he'll get his chance. Now, if you'll excuse me Thuosana, I've got some apologizing to do."

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## **Rojas Residence Allensworth Colony**

Though the large spread of food smelled wonderful, no one was hungry. Even the normally voracious Sennaar, a Nausicaan that had served with Pedro on the *Carolina* was merely picking at the food on his plate. Terrence had long since given up and went outside on the large veranda.

When Terrence and the crew he had ferried on the shuttlecraft *Rising States* had first arrived, he had been reluctant to see Pedro's parents. Though he had known Benito and Luz for years, and they considered him a part of the family, his guilt and shame had been gnawing at him nonstop since Pedro's death. How could he bring their body to them now? How could he look them in the eye and tell them he failed them?

He had spent several days after Chin'toka holed up in his office, writing and recording personal messages to send to the families of all of the dead, thirty-six in all. He hated to admit it, but he couldn't deny that the message he had composed for Pedro's parents had been the toughest of all. Terrence had been silently relieved that Juanita had taken on the burden.

But that hadn't saved him from having to face Pedro's parents, and incurring their wrath. He had resigned himself to their condemnation, but their grief had transmuted into a fierce love and protectiveness that had enveloped everyone aboard the *Rising States*, even the prickly Lt. N'Saba, after Glover had landed it at the colony's spaceport. The Rojas family had been waiting for them. And they had hovered over them, fussed over everyone ever since. Surprisingly N'Saba had taken it in stride.

But it had made Terrence feel worse. He wanted them to curse him, to blame him, to punish him for surviving, while their son had not. They did none of that, and Terrence didn't know what to say, or how to act or react. So he had ghost walked through the last couple days, until the funeral. Seeing Pedro's closed casket, hearing the eulogies, had been too much.

He had broken down and failed his friend again by being so overcome that he hadn't been able to eulogize him. Dr. Cole had recommended that he leave early, and she had accompanied him back to the Rojas residence.

She sat with him now, her hand entwined in his, out on the porch. The house was packed with mourners, and more people kept coming to pay their respects, spilling out into the front and backyards.

Strange enough, most of the people were in a festive mood. It hadn't taken Benito long to crank up some Salsa music, and the pall had been quickly replaced by a sense of celebration. Death wasn't something Terrence celebrated, but he couldn't be angry at the others for celebrating Pedro's life. He knew that's what his friend would've wanted.

"Terrence, there you are, I've been looking all over for you." The captain looked up, not believing his eyes or ears.

"Pell," he said, stunned. "What are you doing here?" The beautiful, auburn-haired Bajoran made her way through the crowd and walked up the steps. Pell Ojana was one of his oldest friends. Beside her was another familiar face. "Christina?"

Lt. Commander Christina Raeger, Deep Space Five's former Communications Officer and a long on again/off again paramour of Pedro, looked exactly how Terrence felt. Her eyes were red and puffy, her blonde hair unruly as if it would've taken too much energy to style it. At first her blue eyes had a dull sheen, until she spied Rieta sitting beside him. Glover quickly removed his hand from hers. Christina and Jasmine were very close. "Where's Jasmine?" She asked, a suspicious edge in her voice.

"She couldn't make it," Terrence tried not to sound defensive. "This is Dr. Cole, my Chief Medical Officer."

Rieta stood up and extended her hand. Christina glared at it as it was diseased. "I'm going inside to see Juanita."

"Okay," Pell said. She turned to Dr. Cole and grasped the woman's still outstretched hand. "Lt. Commander Pell Ojana, nice to meet you."

"Same here," Dr. Cole said. Glover stood up and they awkwardly embraced.

"Pell is one of my closest friends," Terrence informed the doctor. "In fact, if it hadn't been for her, I probably wouldn't be captain of the *Cuffe*."

"Is that so?" Cole asked, curious.

Pell made a face. "Not so. My recommendation to Captain Diaz had very little to do with your selection." Glover knew that was true. He had been selected by Admiral Nechayev to spy on Captain Diaz because Command suspected her of belonging to the Brigade, a forerunner of the Maquis. Those suspicions had proven correct, though Terrence had failed to expose the woman's treachery. That happened after Diaz retired and recommended that Terrence replace her. Still he liked to remind Pell of how much she meant to him.

"I see you two have a lot to catch up on, so I'll leave you alone," Dr. Cole replied. After she was gone, Pell leaned close to Terrence and whispered:

"What were you doing holding hands with her?"

"Oh that," Terrence laughed, "It was nothing."

"She's not your wife," Pell hissed.

"My wife's not here," Glover said coldly.

"I can see that," Pell said.

"She's not around at all anymore," Terrence added.

"If you want to be around her, go to Earth," Pell replied.

"We're in the middle of a war, I have duties to my ship and crew," Glover shot back.

"Resign," Pell challenged. "What's more important to you? The *Cuffe* or your marriage?"

"I'm not in the mood for this right now," The captain said.

"I know," Pell relented slightly, "I just don't want you just blaming Jasmine for whatever's going on or not going on between you. You're playing a role in it too."

"Don't you think I know that?" Terrence said, his face flushing hot with anger. "But I've been trying...trying. I've been trying a lot lately, for a lot of things and not making headway on any damn thing."

"Now's not the time to wallow," Pell admonished.

"Did you come here just to make me feel worse?" An exasperated Glover asked.

"No, I came because I thought you needed a friend," the Bajoran answered, "But I'm not an enabler."

"Message received," Glover said. "Now, how are you?"

"Okay, all things considered," Pell said, with a slight shrug. "Since we were in the neighborhood Captain Covey gave me a few days to travel out here to attend the funeral, but I didn't see you there. The *Chevalier* is escorting the Alshain Exarch to Earth to formally sign a treaty of mutual defense."

Terrence was stunned and excited by the news. "You mean they are finally getting off their hindquarters and joining the war?"

Pell gave a small, tight-lipped smile. "I wouldn't have quite used that phraseology but yes: The Alshain Exarchate is joining the Federation Alliance."

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### **Somewhere in Alshain space...**

"I urge you Highness, please listen to reason," Syndic Gedvin pleaded.

"This sounds more like treason to me!" Grand Duke Jarko O'Jinn roared at the supplicating priest, pounding the table with such fury that it brought on another coughing spell. The old duke could feel the leech worms writhing around in his chest. Soon they would consume enough of his lungs and heart to remove him from the Great Hunt. It was too late for him, but was it too late for his people? He sat back,

stroking his whitened chin. Duchess Lerin rubbed his shoulders. He glanced up at his latest and youngest wife. He tried to ignore the dull, chalky glaze in her eyes, brought on by ketracel-white. He used it to numb the pain caused by the worms. But she consumed the narcotics for pleasure and escape, which disgusted him. But what could he do? He was an old man without an heir, an imperial bloodling without power because his birthing order had allowed his older brother Jasta to assume the throne. And now Jasta's son Jedalla reigned.

Jedalla had despised, and rightly so, how the many of the Alshain nobility had fallen to ketracel-white addiction and become the pawns of Son'a drug merchants. The Son'a had snaked their way into the very corridors of power and sliced off a significant chunk of Alshain territory, and larger portion of his people's more precious pride in the process. And he had stood by and let it happen, resigning himself, no, hiding under the excuse that because he had no real power that he was powerless to change things.

But Gedvin thought he did have power, or soon would have if he agreed to their insane plan, and succeeded Jedalla to the throne. "But what of Jang, Jedalla's eldest?"

"I'm sure he can be reasoned with," the ghostly Vorta finally spoke. Despite her pallid complexion, the woman held an icy beauty. "If not, then I'm sure we can arrange some other fate for him." The conspirators had been wise to bring a Vorta to him to prove the Dominion backed this plan. Jedalla had spent the early years of his reign fighting against those who wanted to maintain the old ties to the Son'a Imperium that the new Exarch had been determined to sever. The Vorta's presence told him that what these conspirators offered was true. His people would never allow the Son'a such prominence again, especially after Jedalla had so thoroughly tarnished them.

"I don't want my nephew harmed Keilan," Jarko warned.

"He won't be, if he accepts the new order," Gedvin said. "How can he dispute the will of the gods?"

"Who says it isn't the will of the gods, or Garrm, the greatest of our gods that we not war against the Dominion?" Jarko asked. "Garrm is the god of war, or have you forgotten?" He laughed at his own joke, and paid the price seconds later. This time he coughed up blood. Both Gedvin and Keilan pretended not to notice.

"You've seen the news vids of our recent victory in the Chin'toka system," Keilan said, her blue eyes flashing with confidence. "With the Breen and now the Son'a in our Dominion, we are unstoppable. It is only a matter of time before the Federation Alliance falls. We're asking that you don't prolong the inevitable. If you sign a non-aggression pact with the Dominion, we will ensure your territorial boundaries and trouble you no further."

"And what of the Son'a?" Jarko asked. "Surely your new partners are thirsty for revenge against us for what Jedalla did to them, expelling them and so forth?"

"I assure you that the Son'a want nothing more than Exarch Jedalla's head on pike," Keilan promised, "and once that occurs, they will have no designs on the Exarchate."

"How can you be certain of that?" Jarko asked, with obvious disbelief. Vengeance was a constant of the universe. He couldn't believe that the Son'a wouldn't want revenge for the way Jedalla drove them from their perch.

"The Son'a are part of the Dominion now," Keilan said. "They will obey or be dealt with." The woman's coldness frightened Jarko but he tried not to show it. He shivered regardless. The Dominion war machine was relentless and it had swept across the galaxy like a plague of locusts. He owed it to his people to avoid the plague as long as possible, until he could devise a plan to stop the Dominion. The only way he could do that was if he was Exarch and for that to happen....

"Okay," Jarko barked. "I will assist you."

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## **Rojas Residence**

### **Allensworth Colony**

"I've got this captain!" Ensign Juanita Rojas said through clenched teeth. She held the two fuming women at bay. A hushed throng circled them. Terrence saw that Pedro's parents were mortified. This definitely was the last thing they needed. He stepped forward anyway, stopping only after Pell wrapped a hand around his bicep and squeezed.

"Let her do this," she whispered. The captain reluctantly stopped his advance.

"You both should be ashamed of yourselves," Juanita glared from Lt. Verda to a large-boned, grayish skinned Rigelian female. Glover didn't know her, but the pips on her collar, and its color, told him she held a lieutenant commander's rank in the Sciences division. Terrence assessed immediately that the Rigelian had been one of Pedro's paramours, and Verda had been his last, and from what Pedro had both told him and not told him, she had been the most special. Most of the time his old friend couldn't even spell commitment, but Verda had been different. He didn't talk much about their relationship. In times past both men had bragged about their conquests as if it were sport, but Glover had stopped such callow behavior when he began dating Jasmine and Pedro had done likewise after his first date with Verda.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Glover glanced around the circle and easily picked out several other exes, including Lt. Commander Raeger. He chuckled, drawing everyone's attention to him. "What's so funny?" The Rigelian demanded.

"I would watch my tone if I were you," Glover snapped. The Rigelian's eyes shifted to his captain's pips and she immediately stood at attention.

"I'm sorry sir," the woman said quickly. Juanita raked her eyes at him, and Terrence realized he needed to back out of this.

He nodded in her direction and moved away from the scene. Pell followed him outside. They walked in silence into the woods behind the house. The commotion inside the house was subsumed under the gentler sounds of swaying trees. "You really think she can handle it?" He eventually asked.

"Do you?" The Bajoran asked. Terrence didn't take the question lightly. After a few moments, he answered.

"Yeah, I do. She's a bit of a wild child, but I sense she has command potential. Pedro was very proud of her, and he would be doubly proud to see her running interference for him."

"I bet he would," Pell chortled. "He was a card wasn't he?"

"A cad too," Terrence smiled, and realized he hadn't made such a gesture in weeks.

"Look who's talking," Pell said with a smile, but Glover sensed an accusation behind it.

"Back to accusing me of something untoward with Dr. Cole again?" Terrence sighed.

"Those are your words, not mine," Pell countered. "I think you need your wife right now."

"I wish she felt the same way," Terrence muttered.

"Maybe she does, but doesn't know how to verbalize it," Pell offered. "She's been through a trying experience too."

"I know," Glover whipped around on Pell, startling her. "I'm tired of hearing her and everyone use that as an excuse! I wanted to be there, I wanted to help her recover, but she shut me out. And she's shutting me out again."

"So, what are you going to do about it?" Pell challenged. "It's not like you to sit back and let anyone have control over you. The Terrence I know drives events, not the other way around."

"You know marriages don't work like that," Terrence shot back. "There's a lot of give and take."

"How can you expect Jasmine to give when you're not?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were trying to force yourself into her life during a tragic period, and then you're damn near demanding that she attend to your sorrows right now, but what are you giving her?"

Terrence was appalled by Pell's assessment. "How can you say that? Jasmine is my wife. Her life is my life. I've never forced myself on her or anyone else."

"Terrence, perhaps I used the wrong words, but it goes back to ego. It can't always be about you and your needs all the time. Jasmine didn't need that, nor did

she need to ask you to be there. You should just be there whether she wants you to or not, and she'll come around. She didn't want to leave Earth, fine, go see her."

"But...she said she's busy, I don't want to intrude," Glover mumbled.

"Are you scared to see your wife?"

"Of course not, that's silly," But Terrence sounded less than convincing, even to himself. So much time had passed since they last had been together. *Did the bond that brought them together still exist?* Glover had to admit that he was reluctant to test it, afraid it might unravel. And he needed at least the illusion of someone to come home to get through the rest of the war.

Pell leaned close to him, and touched his shoulder. "It's okay to be scared Terrence," she said softly into his ear. "It's okay to have doubts. I know things between you and Jasmine have been strained, but I promise you, avoiding the rift will only make it grow. Perhaps its sealable, perhaps it isn't, but wouldn't you rather find out sooner rather than later?"

"I...guess so," Terrence nodded, "but I...just don't know. I don't think I could take another shock to my system right now. I couldn't stand to lose her."

"I don't think that's going to happen. I think when you show up on Earth, she'll know that you truly love her and that nothing comes before her," Pell smiled.

"It's true, that's how I feel...though I do a piss poor job of explaining it that way sometimes," Glover admitted. "Perhaps you should write some of that down on a padd so I can whip it out on her later on. I do have some time off until the *Cuffe* is repaired, so I think I'll take on your challenge."

"Spoken like a true honorary Klingon warrior," Pell slapped him on the back so hard Terrence grunted.

"Very funny Pell," the captain replied. "I'll arrange transport as soon as the funeral ends. I've troubled the Rojas's enough."

"I'm heading toward Earth to rendezvous with the *Chevalier*. You can ride with me," the Bajoran offered. "It would give us some time to catch up."

"Sounds like a plan," Glover said, his grin turning devilish. "I've been meaning to ask you about ol' Sandy anyway."

"Oh boy," Pell rolled her eyes. "Can I rescind that offer?"

"Not for all the latinum on Ferenginar," Terrence declared.

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## ***USS Chevalier***

### **Captain's Ready Room**

"You can't be serious?" Captain Monica Covey's blood boiled. She knew her face was as red as Mars but she didn't care. "I find this action really in bad form."

"I was hoping you would take this...development more congenially," Rear Admiral Nigel Kinnock replied, an edge of warning in his voice. "The Admiralty has



looked highly on you for your efforts in normalizing relations with the Exarchate. It would be a shame if your bright star were dimmed by a display of pettiness and insubordination."

"You're calling me petty? When you're trying to replace my ship as the official escort of the Exarch's journey to Earth?"

Kinnock frowned, "The *Diadem* is a *Sovereign-class* vessel. Top of the line. It's only befitting that we show our best for the Exarch and his court."

"*Diadem* sure doesn't sound like *Enterprise* to me," Covey retorted.

"You're one quip away from insubordination," Kinnock made his warning clear. His eyes flashed, matching the sheen on his bald crown. "*Diadem* also can better defend against any potential Dominion interference. The *Chevalier* is a worthy vessel, but you know that *Novas* weren't built for combat. And we can't take a chance on the Exarch's life."

Monica couldn't escape the admiral's logic. She hated that the aggrandizing Kinnock would get the press attention for all the hard work that she and her crew, particularly Lt. Commander Pell, had done planting the seeds for Jedalla's visit. She wasn't in the service to become a media darling, but a little spotlight when it was warranted, wasn't necessarily a bad thing. She decided to play her last card. "Sir," Covey forced the word out through her closed throat, "have you considered the wishes of Exarch Jedalla and his court? I have established what the Alshain call a trust-bond with them. They won't be as willing to trust you and might be suspicious of this sudden change in plans."

"I leave it to you to explain to them why they have nothing to fear," Kinnock said breezily. Covey wanted to strangle him. "The Alshain are highly hierarchical are they not? They understand and respect the chain of command better than many of our officers," he paused, letting it sink in that he found Monica wanting, "besides, I think the Exarch would be honored that Starfleet has sent one of its flag officers and one of its most advanced starships to greet them and bring them to Earth. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I'll set up a meeting with the Exarch's vizier," Covey said instead of answering. "One more thing, I dispatched my First Officer on a personal assignment ahead of me. She's supposed to rendezvous with us while we were en route to Earth."

"Don't worry, *Diadem's* a spacious ship. We'll pick her up," Kinnock nodded.

"What about us? Do we have a new assignment?"

"You'll have one by the time you arrive at Starbase 116 for the hand off. Don't be late," the rear admiral said.

"I can't wait," Covey said with such frost that she shivered.

"Likewise. Kinnock out."

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## **Rojas Residence Allensworth Colony**

There was a light rapping on the door. Terrence placed his neatly folded black and gray service jacket on top of the pile and zipped his duffel bag. After most of the mourners had dispersed, the captain had doffed his uniform with warp speed. Normally he was proud to wear it, but for the last several days its burdens had weighed him down. At the funeral, his red turtleneck had felt more like a noose. He felt far more comfortable in a dark brown sleeveless tunic, khaki cargo pants, and black leather sandals "When did you become so impatient?" He half-joked, his back to the door.

"Excuse me sir?" Ensign Rojas asked. The captain turned around, his grin morphing from devilish to sheepish. The young woman had also changed clothes, from funereal black into a bright crimson blouse covering a body fitting gray one-piece and matching shoes.

"Sorry Ensign, I thought you were Commander Pell."

"Oh, uh," Juanita said. The young woman hovered in the doorframe. "If this is a bad time?"

"Of course it isn't," Glover declared. "What can I do for you?"

"Sir, I know that you've decided to go to Earth with Commander Pell. Lt. Uhnari is taking Rising States back to the *Cuffe*. I...umm...was wondering if I could tag along with you."

"You don't want to stay home for a few days?"

"No," Rojas shook her head. "Too many memories. It's all too much right now, and if I go back to the *Cuffe*..."

"I understand," Terrence nodded. "But you're sure you don't want to be here with your parents. It might help you...cope."

Juanita hugged herself and shivered. Glover caught the chill as well. "My parents understand. We've discussed it already."

"Okay," Terrence said slowly. He felt there was more lying behind that statement than Juanita was revealing, but who was he to pry? It was a family affair and none of his business. "I'm sure that Pell won't mind."

"Thank you sir," Rojas rewarded him with a small smile. "I promise I won't be any trouble."

Glover looked at the younger woman askance, "Now Ensign, what did I tell you about making promises you can't keep?"

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## **Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras Stateroom**

Captain Monica Covey never tired of gazing at the opulence of the Alshain ruling class. Though she knew she should be disgusted by the wastefulness and the gauche, Covey found the Alshain nobles and their sense of fashion very baroque.

Though the *Vyras*, the Exarch's personal transport, was essentially a warship, its interior felt more like it was a flying mansion, filled with bright colors, rich fabrics, and abundant food and entertainment. Jedalla certainly knew how to travel in style. And so did his chief assistant, Vizier Topal. The heavyset man's reddish pelage was adorned with weaved gold and jewelry that clinked when he moved, and all of his fingers were stuffed into three jewel encrusted rings apiece. Draped in deep purple robes, with a hookah hanging from his lips, the Vizier cut quite a figure. Topal smiled, removing the hookah from his mouth. The sweet green smoke pouring from it tickled Monica's nostrils. "How might I assist you Captain?" He asked, good-naturedly enough.

Covey had earned the good will and trust of the Alshain when she hunted down and destroyed a Cardassian destroyer escaping from a failed attack on Starbase 116. The Cardassians had ignored the territorial integrity of the Exarchate in their frenetic retreat. They had destroyed two Alshain interceptors before the *Chevalier* had arrived. The Cardassians had begun attacking a relay station, perhaps to prevent them from alerting a larger force to their presence. *Chevalier* had gotten the jump on the already damaged destroyer, obliterating it.

Unfortunately, the damage the *Chevalier* itself had incurred had forced it to ask the relay station for assistance. When a larger Alshain taskforce arrived and the story of the *Chevalier's* actions spread, Covey had become something of a folk hero among the Alshain. It was a status Starfleet Command was determined to exploit, and Monica had let them. Both she and the Admiralty would do anything to end the war and she knew that the present Alliance was lacking new blood, and the war needed another front to open so that they could pincer their enemies, with the Alshain and Romulans on both sides while the Klingons and Starfleet held the middle.

Covey bowed before the Vizier and asked his permission to speak. Once it was given, Monica relayed Admiral Kinnock's change in plans. The Vizier's brow furrowed. "This is a most...unusual change of events. And it is one that does not appear pleasing to you, is that correct?"

Monica had never lied to the Alshain in the past, and she wasn't going to start now. So much of the Alshain-Federation summit was built on the idea of personal honor, and unfortunately, too much was based on her personal honor, on Covey's example. If her words or deeds proved untrustworthy then the Alshain might believe that the whole of Starfleet is disreputable. "It is not. However, Admiral Kinnock is correct that a *Sovereign-class* vessel will provide better protection for the Exarch in the event the Dominion attacks."

"History has taught me that size or armaments matter not," Vizier Topal said, his manner sympathetic. "It is not the ship, but the crew that steers it, that makes the difference."

Covey dipped her chin and smiled. "Thank you for saying so."

"It is the truth," Topal nodded. "I will inform the Exarch...His Excellency will not be pleased."

"That makes two of us," the captain grumbled.

"Make that three," Topal added.

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Starbase 116**

#### **Two Days Later...**

Captain Tallis stood by her viewport, half-watching two work bees zip around the space station, repairing a solar reflector. "You shouldn't have done this." She said. She felt the man behind her seconds later, and then a light touch on her cheek. He rubbed her jawbone and her insides melted, though her expression remained impassive. "It wasn't fair to Captain Covey. She did all the heavy lifting and now we swoop in at the last moment and take the glory from her."

"This *shouldn't* be about glory," Rear Admiral Kinnock said, with a mocking laugh. Tallis's antennae twitched at the obnoxious sound. The Andorian turned around and Kinnock locked her in a tight embrace. His eyes, pale blue like her complexion, bore into her. "Covey has secured a spot on the Admiralty already, so why not spread the wealth?"

"Perhaps because we....I...don't deserve it," Tallis answered. "I don't know why Starfleet even built *Sovereign-class* ships, with the most advanced weapon platforms in the Fleet..."

"Actually that would be the *Prometheus* class," Kinnock interjected. Tallis glowered at him and the man relented.

"The point I'm trying to make is why build these ships and not fully use them during the war? They've got us out projecting strength to potential member worlds instead of being in the fray where we could actually be making a difference and saving lives."

"The more allies we bring into the Federation, the quicker this war can be brought to a close. You are saving lives; you are making a difference," Kinnock countered with a well-worn answer he had used numerous times. It hadn't satisfied Tallis before and it didn't mollify her now.

"Or maybe we're just spreading the death around, instead of it being concentrated among us, the Vulcans, Tellarites, and Andorians," the captain said.

The admiral nodded. "Sacrifices have to be made, and the Dominion represents a threat to the whole quadrant, so why not have the entire quadrant share in the burdens of defeating them?"

"I'm glad you don't accompany me for most of my sale pitches," Tallis smiled. "I don't think that one would go over too well."

"Perhaps," Kinnock acknowledged. He hugged her tighter. "I've missed you."

"And I you," Tallis said before lightly kissing him. They had carried on a secret affair since Tallis had served as Kinnock's first officer on the *Novara*. Both had thought it best to keep their relationship under wraps for the benefit of their careers and the arrangement had been beneficial, if somewhat underhanded. Tallis knew Nigel had been instrumental in getting her the *Diadem*. Though her record had been exemplary, she was no Jean-Luc Picard or Rixx. Kinnock had also benefited from the arrangement, with her supplying him the latest information from the frontier which kept him one step ahead of his more sedentary colleagues. But Tallis had to wonder if their ambitions had again went too far and denied a good captain the credit she deserved.

"This doesn't sit well with me," the Andorian confessed. "Is there not some way that *Chevalier* can accompany us?"

"I wish we could do that, but with the dearth of starships after Chin'toka, the war demands every able ship be used for the war effort."

"Except ours?" Tallis scowled.

"*Diadem* isn't about to have a cakewalk," Kinnock said tightly. "She's going to be a target. The Dominion knows that opening a fourth front in the war will deplete their forces. Why do you think they brought the Breen into the conflict in the first place? They are running out of Jem'Hadar, and the Cardassians are even less easy to replace. Whatever mumbo jumbo Ben Sisko was able to coax those wormhole aliens into doing saved our bacon. Denied their Gamma Quadrant legions, the Dominion forces have effectively been cut in half. Once we find a way around this damned Breen weapon, the course of the war will swing back in our direction."

"It's a big if," Tallis remarked. Kinnock grimly smiled.

"But not in the realm of the impossible. You've been in the Fleet long enough to know that, and you've performed a few miracles yourself over the years."

"I wouldn't categorize them as that," Tallis said, rolling her eyes.

Kinnock shrugged. "I've officially entered them into the records as such." The Andorian playfully punched the admiral's arm.

"No you didn't," she said.

"Sure, I did. Fleet Admiral Shanthi was even less pleased than you, but what could she do? She's only Starfleet's commander."

Tallis laughed. "You're humoring me."

"Yes, I am. Is it working?"

"Hardly." Tallis's playful expression then turned somber. "You're not only here to bask in the glory of this summit, you're worried about me aren't you?"

"There are reports, nothing substantiated, that Dominion forces or internal enemies of Exarch Jedalla might try to assassinate him or disrupt the summit in some way. I wouldn't want anyone on escort duty that I don't trust one thousand percent. I have nothing against Captain Covey, but I don't know her. Plus, her closeness to the Alshain might impair her judgment."

"Well, you can be certain that I won't go native," Tallis pursed her lips. "In fact, I had misgivings about this alliance. The Alshain's values seem antithetical to ours. They still practice slavery do they not?"

"Technically it's not slavery, but they do have a serf class, primarily filled by the Itrob species, a race that shared their homeworld Alshain Proper, but got the short end of the stick over the fight for planetary dominance."

"From what I've read of how they've treated others over the years, it makes my own peoples' treatment of the Aenar tame in comparison."

"Earth history is replete with barbarity, so I can't be one to judge the Alshain. Their society developed along different lines than either of ours. Perhaps this alliance might lead them to reassess how they have organized their society."

Tallis smiled. "You always find a way to put the best spin on things." She hugged him, patting his backside.

"It is a gift," Kinnock chuckled.

"I just hope you haven't talked us both into something we'll come to regret," Tallis said, an icicle of truth dispelled the growing warmth between them.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Pellinore***

#### **One Week Later...**

"I'll relieve you," Terrence offered, but Pell didn't respond. His friend had been moody for days, ever since talking to Captain Covey. At first she had kept whatever was bothering her bottled inside, but the captain had eventually coaxed it out of her. *Diadem* horning in on the mission at the last minute would've peeved him as well, but Glover understood the need to ensure the safety of the Exarch and his entourage. Plus, the Alshain looking out their viewports at a *Sovereign* provided a far more majestic sight than if the *Nova-class Chevalier* had been allowed to continue their escort duty, Terrence thought, but he didn't voice that observation.

Pell no doubt was also worried about the *Chevalier* being reordered to the front. Here she was shuttling him and Juanita back to Earth while her ship was going back into harm's way. Covey had told Pell to continue to Earth, and make the rendezvous with the *Diadem* which hadn't gone over well with the Bajoran.

Terrence had offered to intercede, but Pell had dissuaded him. Instead she had settled into a mercurial cycle of behavior that was driving Terrence nuts.

"Commander Pell," Glover put on his command voice. That got her response.

"Yes," Her voice felt faraway, even inside the shuttle's small cockpit.

"You're relieved," Terrence said, in a voice that brooked no debate. "Go get some rest."

Pell nodded and got up from her seat without protest. Now Terrence was really worried. He wasn't in the best state of mind himself, neither was Juanita, and now Pell appeared to be cracking. He reached out to her but she walked past him. Terrence watched her go.

He took over her seat. He shut down the autopilot. He liked to steer the shuttle manually. It would keep his mind from completely wandering, especially into dark places he didn't want to visit. To help hold back the doldrums, he called out, "Computer...Scott Joplin...*Maple Leaf Rag*." The cabin filled with the jaunty piano melodies of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Earth music.

Ragtime was one of his father's favorite musical genres. Samson had even taken him to the home of Joplin, the style's most famous composer. Those happier times felt like they had been lived by someone else, they seemed so alien to the hell him and everyone he knew was now caught up in. "Full complement of ragtime songs," Glover ordered after *Maple Leaf Rag* had finished.

"*The Entertainer*?" Juanita asked sometime later. Glover swiveled half-around in his seat. Juanita was rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "My father loves that song. He had an old vid...The *Sting* that had that song in it, and he showed that movie to us a lot, so much so that Pedro..." she stopped, her voice hitching in her throat.

"It's okay," Terrence said.

"It's not, and it never will be again," Juanita responded.

"But we'll endure. We have no other choice...no other brave choice anyway, and you're no coward Juanita. Pedro wouldn't want you to shrivel up and die. He would want you to continue making an impact."

"I know sir," Juanita replied, but the mewling in her voice didn't sound like she did. She took the empty seat beside him. "Care if I drive?"

"Actually yes," Glover answered. Juanita smiled, and he hadn't seen a more pleasant sight in a long time.

"Okay, I guess I'll just ride shotgun."

"I have no problem with that," Terrence replied. The two sat in an easy silence, listening to various songs, of myriad types, piping from the shipboard computer. After a while Terrence's stomach grumbled. "Hungry?"

"No sir," Juanita said.

"You haven't had anything to eat in a while," Glover replied. "You need sustenance."

"Have you been checking up on me sir?"

"Yes I have," Terrence admitted. "I'm going to the back to fix something. What do you want and I'm not taking no for an answer."

Juanita stuck to her phasers for a few more seconds before relenting. "I'll take a Catullan salad and a glass of Altair water."

"All right, I'll be back in a few minutes. I guess you can have the yoke until I return."

Juanita's eyes lit up as Glover relinquished control of the *Pellinore* to her. Glover was inputting into the replicator the recipe for chili bean soup when Juanita yelled for him. The captain bounded back into the cockpit. "What's wrong?"

The woman looked pale. "Sir, we've a distress call. The *Diadem* has been attacked."

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

"Where the hell did they get cloaking devices from?" Lt. Thomas Reeves spat, coughing violently seconds later as the smoke suffusing the bridge got into his mouth. The man's body shook with hacking, and he gripped the edges of his console to stay upright as another plasma beam slammed into the ship. He imagined he could feel the searing golden beam slicing through duranium and flesh like a knife through hot butter. *Why haven't they deployed their energy weapon yet?* He thought darkly of the Breen ships that had ambushed them, *and finished us off properly?*

"Mr. Reeves," the captain's voice sounded hoarse and far away, "status of our weapons systems?"

He squinted, rubbing the tears from his eyes, as he gazed down at the console again to make certain. "Quantum and photon torpedoes offline," he said. "Our phaser banks are half-charged."

"That's something at least," he heard Rear Admiral Kinnock say, "What about the *Vyras*?"

Reeves had routed sensor functions from the Operations console after the first attack from the Breen ships. The terminal had been demolished along with part of the main hull. Just beyond the rim of the smoke, Tom could see the stars. Force fields had prevented them all from asphyxiating, but it hadn't saved the lives of the first officer or the ops officer before they had been sucked into the void.

"Sir, the *Vyras* has broken formation and is headed back toward the border," he said, nervously licking his lips. His skin tasted like sweat and soot.

"Damn it," Kinnock cursed. "Hail them!"

"Can't sir, our communications system's down," Reeves said.



"Shit," Kinnock added.

"That's the least of our worries," Tom was relieved to hear a bit more steel in the captain's voice this time. "Evasive maneuvers."

"But we're dealing with cloaked ships," Kinnock complained.

"All the better to be on guard," Tallis replied. "Follow my orders ensign," she snapped at the Helm Officer. Tom felt the ship creaking in response to the new commands. It sounded like the *Diadem* was coming apart at the seams.

"Mr. Daf," the captain called out to the Trill standing in at the Auxiliary Engineering console. Together he and Reeves were sharing the workload from all of the redirected Ops console functions. "Prepare a tachyon beam, wide dispersal; let's see if the Breen cloaks are immune to that."

Seconds later another Breen ship decloaked, sniped at the *Diadem*, stitching its starboard flank. Tallis ordered the helm to turn hard to port, and commanded Tom to let loose on the warship, but it had faded away again before Reeves was able to get a shot off.

"Are you daft man?" The admiral shouted. Reeves heard heavy boots ringing up the metal walkway from the command well. Seconds later, a ruddy-faced Kinnock was standing over him. He jabbed a finger hard into his chest. "Are you trying to get us killed on purpose?" He pushed Reeves out of the way. "Go somewhere where you won't cause any trouble!"

"That's unnecessary," Tallis called, but she hadn't left the command well. More important things were happening than personally defending a subordinate's competence was at stake. "Come back down here Nigel. Let Mr. Reeves and the others alone."

"Need I remind you that I'm the highest ranking officer on this ship," Kinnock snarled. "I'll go anywhere, do anything I damn well please! Let me try to save you...us," he added quickly, but not fast enough for Tom not to catch on. The sensors beeped as another ship materialized. The barrage was even more devastating; spinning *Diadem* around with such force that it flung Tom into the admiral. Both men crashed against the wall, and then rolled down the walkway, a mass of limbs and battered flesh.

"Sir, are you all right?" Tom untangled himself slowly, wincing in pain. He wiped dripping blood from his nose, and carefully ran his hands over the painful places on his body, checking for broken bones. For the most part, the admiral had broken his fall. Serves you right, Tom thought, before bile burned his throat. Kinnock remained sprawled at the base of the walkway, his neck twisted at an unnatural angle. "Oh God," Tom whispered, crawling backward from the corpse. "Oh God."

"Mr. Reeves?" The captain called out. She rushed through the smoke to kneel at the fallen admiral's side. She cradled him, stroking the laurel of graying hair

around his bald pate. She leaned down and whispered into the dead man's ear. Then she stood up and gazed at Tom with a look more frigid than any Andorian winter. "Return to your post Mr. Reeves," she said, the matter-of-fact tone of her voice making her expression even more chilling. "We have Breen to kill."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Command Salon**

"Sir, I must protest!" Vizier Topal's hands fluttered over his chest. "You and the royal family should be your quarters, surrounded by Paladins."

"The last time I inquired, I was ruler of all Alshain!" Jedalla snapped. His queen, the equally imperious Symea stood silently at his side, her armor as blood red as Jedalla's. "And I belong here, in the thick of battle, to live and die with my warriors, my people!" The bridge erupted into snarls and barking that rattled the more urbane advisor. Topal quickly bowed his head and offered his throat in supplication.

"As you wish milord," he acquiesced.

"How goes the battle? And what of the Starfleet vessel?" He asked, looking around. Topal deferred to the ship's commander, Nauarch Draco L'Dac. The smallish, white-furred admiral seemed totally overwhelmed by the medals running the length of his tunic.

"Milord," L'Dac bowed. "We are still being pursued by the Breen. They are using cloaking technology that we have yet to penetrate."

"How many casualties?" Symea asked. The admiral turned stiffly to her and also bowed before responding.

"Milady, we have not incurred many casualties. It is as if the Breen don't want to destroy us, only incapacitate us."

"I believe they are seeking to capture you sire," Topal interjected. Jedalla growled and the vizier backed away.

"Is that your opinion as well Nauarch?"

"Yes milord, I concur with the Vizier," L'Dac replied.

"And what of the Starfleet vessel?" Symea asked. L'Dac paused and turned to Topal. The vizier gulped before speaking.

"To insure a greater chance of survival, I ordered the *Vyras* to separate from the *Diadem*."

"You what?" Jedalla roared, backhanding Topal with such force that the corpulent man fell to the floor. "We're supposed to be showing the Federation that we are stalwart allies, and at the first opportunity to do so you order a retreat? Now I see why you wanted me holed up in my quarters, to hide your shame...your cowardice," he spat, the fluid splashing against the still prone vizier.

"Milord, sacrificing yourself here would not serve your purposes," Queen Symea interjected, placing a restraining hand on the exarch's arm. "The Peerage was divided on joining the Federation Alliance. Your death might strengthen the hand of your enemies, and I fear that Jang is not ready to rule. Topal was only exercising caution, and looking out for your interests, as he has for your family for decades."

Jedalla stood over the man, his nostrils flaring, his fists balled. "Doesn't anyone understand that once the *Diadem* has been destroyed, the Breen will focus all of their firepower on us? We've only staved off execution, capture, or humiliation. Together, we might have been able to fend off the Breen. Even if we hadn't...the Alshain people would've risen to take up our cause out of a need to avenge our deaths."

Topal chanced a look up, "Milord, I couldn't risk that. You are too essential."

"Perhaps," the Exarch replied coldly. "Now, get up." Topal got to his feet slowly. Jedalla had already turned his back to him. He strode to the command chair at the center of the bridge. L'Dac scrambled out of it and Jedalla sat down. The admiral retreated to the bank of consoles lining both sides of the bridge. He surveyed the starfield displayed on the main viewer.

A Breen vessel wavered in front of them seconds later. "I'm detecting energy signatures commensurate with their dampening weapon," one of the sensor officers said.

"Evasive," L'Dac didn't finish his sentence before the beam hit the *Vyras*. Jedalla closed his eyes, anticipating a hailstorm of destruction. He felt embarrassed seconds later when the admiral gasped, "No effect. Their weapon has no effect on our systems!"

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### ***Shuttlecraft Pellinore***

Lt. Commander Pell rode shotgun. Ensign Rojas sat uneasily behind Glover, monitoring the ship's propulsion. Terrence's focus was solely on the battle ahead. The message had been static-filled, but unmistakable: The Dominion had attacked the *Diadem* and the *Vyras*, obviously making a move against Alshain Exarch Jedalla in an attempt to scrap the upcoming summit on Earth.

The message had been repeating on a loop, but Juanita was able to narrow down the initial time it had been sent to less than twenty minutes. They were in such relatively close proximity to the convoy that they had perhaps were the first ones to receive the message.

Glover had ordered the ensign to clean it up as best as possible and then to relay it on. He knew that the *Pellinore* would be the first responder, but Terrence wasn't under any illusions that he could hold off a Breen death squad, especially after the carnage at Chin'toka. But if he could hold them off long enough, perhaps a

Starfleet taskforce could put down the bastards as they tried to sneak back across the border.

Pell upgrading the propulsion and weapons systems on the shuttle at least gave them a few minutes to harass the Breen if they were fortunate. "Sir, long range sensors are detecting two divergent ion trails, one of them Alshain," Pell replied, her brow wrinkling as she frowned. "I think they separated from the *Diadem*."

"Have these people ever heard of divide and conquer?" Terrence grouched.

"Maybe not, they aren't human after all," Pell joked, but there was little mirth in her eyes.

"Perhaps they were trying to escape, to increase the chances of at least one ship making it," Juanita offered. Glover eventually nodded in agreement.

"I guess that makes sense, but it doesn't make our job any easier."

"Nothing ever seems to sir," Rojas added darkly.

"We've got a decision to make," Terrence surmised. "We can only follow one trail, so do we go with our comrades or the Alshain."

"Is there any real question sir?" Pell asked. "The outcome of the war is riding on Jedalla making it to the summit."

"She's right," Juanita said. "I hate what's probably going to happen to the *Diadem* and its crew, if it hasn't happened already, but we've got to save the Alshain."

"I know," Glover said. "I just wanted to be sure you both understood the stakes. Pell, set a course based on the Alshain's ion trail. I pray we aren't too late."

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

"Sir, the tachyon beam is working," Lt. Daf said with obvious relief. "We can track them captain."

*Thank God*, Lt. Reeves thought, wiping a hand across his sweaty forehead. The fire suppressant system had wheezed back on, and had laboriously removed a great deal of the smoke from the bridge, though Tom didn't think he would ever get the smell out of his nose or the rasp out of his throat.

"Mr. Reeves, target the Breen and fire," Captain Tallis stood tall in front of her seat, her gaze unwavering at the flickering viewscreen.

"My pleasure," Reeves said, activating the ship's phaser banks. A fan of energy erupted from the *Diadem* impacting the shields of the cloaked vessels.

"Hit them harder!" Tallis snapped. Reeves complied, and the two T-winged battle cruisers flickered into existence. The two warships took up positions along the *Diadem's* flanks, and began slugging away.

"Helm," Tallis said, holding onto the armrests of her chair in a vain attempt to remain on her feet. "Get us the Hells out of here!"

"Aye sir!" The flight controller shouted. Tom now held on to his terminal again as the ship came about abruptly and shot away from the Breen at full impulse.

"At least we've knocked out both cloaks," Reeves said, trying to cheer up the crew. "Well, I think." Daf gave him a nervous grin in response.

"Now we have a semi-fair fight," Tallis said. "I just wish we had a couple quantum torpedoes."

"We do, we just can't deliver them," Reeves said.

"Sure we can," Tallis turned to him, her eyes alight. "Not in the conventional way perhaps."

"What do you have in mind sir?"

"Transport them off the ship, into the path of the Breen, and then we activate them."

Not a bad plan, Reeves shrugged. He had to voice though, "Sir, we'll have to deactivate our shields to beam them into the path of the Breen."

"Risk is part of the game," the Andorian replied.

Tom couldn't really argue with that logic, especially with the feral look on the captain's face. "Okay, sir, how many torpedoes should I prepare for transport?"

"All of them," Tallis said. "The photons too. Let's give those bastards the greatest fireworks display in their shortened lives."

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### ***Shuttlecraft Pellinore***

Captain Glover stroked the *mek'leth* resting in his lap. In the interminable stretch of time since they had received the *Diadem's* distress call, the trio had taken turns changing into their uniforms, the black and gray outfits perfectly reflecting the somber mood in the cabin. Terrence had also taken the gleaming, Klingon blade from his duffel bag. It had been a gift for his service aboard the *I.K.S. Dorna* as part of the officer exchange program years ago.

Something of a good look charm of sorts, Terrence was glad he had followed his gut and threw it in his bag. Though he might not get a chance to cleave through any Jem'Hadar or Breen with it, he could at least wield it as he entered the gates of *Sto-Vo-Kor*. Glover knew he would be at those gates soon. Terrence had escaped death quite a few times, and even before he joined Starfleet, but he didn't see a way that he could alter the game in a poorly armed and shielded shuttle. It wouldn't stop him from trying, but even he had to bow to the gravity of what they were facing. Even as part of him did, the captain felt no fear. All he allowed himself to feel was rage. The black, oily sludge of hatred that had coated his insides since he had first learned of his wife's injuries, ignited memories of Jasmine's suffering mingled with

thoughts of the last stands of Lt. Dryer and Commander Bheto, and Pedro's final miracle. He burned with vengeance for what the Dominion had done to him and millions of others and if he had to die today, he promised his wrath would be felt by his enemies.

"I don't know if the Prophets' sense of humor could be so bleak," Pell remarked, "Take a look out of the viewports." Pell's voice loosened the grip vengeance had on him, and Glover quickly looked out of the viewport facing him. The Alshain ship was listing to its starboard side with a Breen destroyer roosted above it like a scavenger trying to pick its bones. The captain could barely detect a lattice of cabling running from the Breen vessel to the Alshain cruiser. The Breen were also holding the ship with the use of a tractor beam. Both ships were surrounded in a cloud of debris.

"I'll take over the flying duties now," he said simply, tapping in the changeover commands before Pell could respond. Dutifully, the Bajoran activated the shuttle's tactical systems. "What are they doing Lt. Commander?"

"Sir," Pell just as easily assumed her military posture, "It appears the Breen have latched onto the ship."

"I can see that," Glover replied. "I wonder why?"

"They want the Exarch," Pell said after a few seconds. "They either want to kill him, humiliate him, or turn him against us."

"We can't let that happen," Terrence glanced at her, his eyes as hard as stones. "We won't let that happen."

"Sir, sensors are detecting that the debris cloud is made of Breen detritus," Ensign Rojas broke into the conversation.

Captain Glover grunted his approval. "The fur balls gave them hell huh? But there was one too many Breen warships I suppose. Let's rectify that."

"What do you suggest sir?" Pell asked.

"When will we be in firing range?"

"At current speed, ten seconds sir," the Bajoran replied. Glover briefly looked back at Rojas.

"Ensign, what's that debris field composed of?"

Juanita quickly rattled off the sensor's findings, until Glover made her pause. "Say that again Ensign?" He asked.

"There is trilitium resin seepage from the wreckage," She repeated.

"Enough to light a ring of fire around the vessels?" Glover asked Pell. The Bajoran took a look at the data on Juanita's screen.

"I think so," She nodded, her brown furrowing with concern. "But sir, whatever you're thinking could imperil the *Vyras* as well."

"No," Terrence shook his head with certainty. "That will merely burn off those cables and perhaps disrupt the tractor beam. Now, my next idea, now that could

endanger the *Vyras*," Glover said, his lips pulled back to reveal a feral grin. "Just be glad you ate a light lunch."

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

From a safe distance, Captain Tallis watched the ship's bevy of quantum and photon torpedoes shredded the Breen warships and the space around them. The remaining crew stood silently, many of them in shock and horror at terrible energies that consumed the enemy vessels. All Tallis felt was emptiness. Only more Breen corpses would fill the void inside her, the Andorian told herself. Thoughts of Nigel crashed against her veneer like angry waves smashing against a cliff's rock face. And it made her wonder if there would ever be anything that could make her feel as whole as he did? And if not, what would killing more Breen accomplish?

The captain stared at the aftermath of the destruction. The light and fury had long dissipated and now the specks of the remaining ships littered the space behind them. "Captain," Tom's voice was as light as his touch. "Are you okay?"

Tallis laughed at the absurdity of the question. Then the tears began to flow and they never stopped.

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## ***Shuttlecraft Pellinore***

Even though Ensign Rojas had a solid grip on her console, her stomach still twisted in knots as Glover pushed the tiny craft toward the Breen destroyer.

She knew it was selfish to think of at a time like this, especially after Pedro, but Juanita didn't want to die. Not for the Federation, not for duty, or honor, or any of those other abstract concepts her instructors told her were so worthy to die for at the Academy. For the most part she had slept or doodled during most of those speeches and lectures. For the ones that she had actually been awake for, she had disagreed with. Even after graduating on the eve of war, she had always known that serving with Pedro and Captain Glover, that they would protect her. The two men were invincible, or so she had thought. But now her big brother was dead, and she didn't feel ennobled at all by his sacrifice, just hurt, lonely, vulnerable, and scared.

She felt bad for feeling that way, but Juanita also knew that Pedro would understand. He saw behind the bull, one of the reasons why he probably hadn't made it to captain. That made Juanita wonder how Captain Glover had made it, since he didn't seem too fond of eggshell walking or kissing ass either. Being an admiral's son carried you far, but not to the captain's chair always, especially with Captain Glover's penchant for speaking his mind.

Juanita wondered if crazy plans like the one Glover had concocted, showing off the prized original thinking her instructors had always been crowing about, was the special ingredient. Pedro had told her enough stories about the scrapes he and the captain had gotten through to give her the confidence than even this plan might work, and maybe it was that kind of assurance, in the face of all doubt, that got Captain Glover the center seat. She hoped she lived long enough to confirm her theory.

"We are now in weapons range," Lt. Commander Pell replied, both her voice and face the picture of serenity.

"Target the debris field, any patch of fuel you can find," Glover said. "Ensign, I want you to transfer all shielding to the forward shields."

"Aye sir," Juanita replied, as the shuttle hurtled forward.

"Done," Pell said tightly.

"Fire," the captain ordered. Twin streaks shot from the *Pellinore's* flanks in staccato bursts. The beams contacted the pools of trilithium resin sparking river of fire around both vessels. Glover chuckled. "We got them."

"Tractor beam has been disabled," Pell said with satisfaction. "Damn," she muttered seconds later, "There were several transports from the Breen ship onto the *Vyras*."

"Breen vessel is disconnecting from the *Vyras*," Juanita called out. "They are angling in our direction."

"Full warp for ramming speed, full power to forward shields," Glover commanded. "Those assholes aren't getting away!"

Juanita input the captain's commands and closed her eyes to pray as the *Pellinore* shot forward, through the ring of fire. The corrugated ventral hull of the Breen vessel filled the screen, and then in a rush of images and the scream of metal and proximity alerts, everything quickly faded to nothing.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Command Salon**

Paladin Nadfar Durgo bodied the Exarch, knocking him to the floor as the ship shook with such force that cracks spread across the ceiling and the main viewer shattered, impaling several officers. "What was that?" Queen Symea said after a few seconds, her bodyguard gingerly helping the woman to her feet. She glanced at the viewer, but only saw wires, smoke, and blackness. She tried to ignore the bodies strewn at the feet of the ruined screen, but the smell of fresh blood and cooked flesh was damnably alluring.

Durgo tried to assist Jedalla, but the monarch pushed the man away. He rushed to his mate. "Are you well?" He asked.



The queen sniffed, "Of course." She tapped the breastplate of her armor. "Almost nothing can pierce this."

"The armor or your heart?" Jedalla quietly joked.

"Neither," Symea deadpanned.

The Exarch shared a quiet chuckle with her before he whipped his head around, his mien becoming lethally serious. "Status report!" He thundered, "L'Dac, what just happened?" It took a few moments for the admiral to look up. He had been transfixed by the data scrolling across the screen inset into his chair. The skittish Topal nudged the man, and the diminutive Nauarch finally complied with her husband's orders. Symea growled low in her throat at the affront.

"My apologies Highness," L'Dac said quickly. "It appears that the Breen vessel...has been destroyed."

"Destroyed?" Jedalla asked, confusion evident on his face.

"How?" Symea demanded.

"We...don't know," the Nauarch answered truthfully. The stillness in the salon was split with a sharp whine and three shafts of light appeared on the bridge.

"I think we are about to get our answer," Topal said drolly. Durgo and his Paladin squadron encircled the royal couple. Symea had to peek through the massive bodies of the imperial guard to see what was going on. The elite soldiers angled their weapons at the three beams. She heard the rustling and the setting of arms across the bridge. Even her beloved had pulled his disruptor and a blade. She rested her hand on the hilt of her dagger. Symea preferred close-in kills, and she was certain she was about to get her wish.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Command Salon**

Captain Terrence Glover held up his hands. "Yes, our move was brilliant but even I think an honor guard is a bit too much."

"Not the time sir," Pell said through gritted teeth, but Juanita chuckled. She didn't think the last-minute beam out idea would work, but she was damn near giddy that it had. Unfortunately, staring into the snarling mugs of a bridge-full of Alshain warriors, didn't give her much hope that she would be drawing breath much longer. Though she could faintly hear thudding, wailing, and disruptor blasts beyond the salon, Juanita was far more concerned about with what was going on inside it.

"Who are you human and what are you doing here?" A fat, red-furred lupine garishly dressed stepped forward, parting the phalanx of soldiers that had surrounded them. Before Glover answered, Juanita heard a weird noise that sounded like someone taking a deep whiff. Behind the phalanx, someone called out:

"Lt. Commander Pell?" Both Juanita and looked at their Bajoran counterpart. The auburn-haired woman shrugged.

"Alshain have a powerful sense of smell," she quietly explained before speaking louder, "Exarch Jedalla, is that you?"

"Lower your weapons," the disembodied voice thundered. The soldiers rapidly complied with the order. A large, muscular man, dressed in red armor pushed through the phalanx. His fur coat was thick, rich, and black as night. His eyes burned like charcoal. Pell lowered her head in a show of respect. Juanita caught on and followed suit. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Captain Glover was reluctant to do so, and gave the shortest and fastest head bow.

"Pell, what are you doing here? And who are your compatriots?" The Alshain ruler asked, his tone more curious than demanding.

"Sir, we were scheduled to rendezvous with the *Vyras* en route to Earth, but we accelerated our schedule after receiving *Diadem's* distress call."

"Yes I recall that now," Jedalla stroked his chin.

"Exarch Jedalla, do you know what happened to the *Diadem*?" Captain Glover asked. The monarch bared his teeth at what Juanita figured was some sort of breach in protocol, but the captain was unfazed. Both men stared at each other for tense seconds and the phalanx of guards began inching their weapons back up. The hefty Alshain thankfully broke the impasse:

"During the ambush we were separated from the *Diadem*. I pray to the gods that it survived."

"Vizier, would it be possible to try to send them a communiqué?" Pell asked.

"No Commander Pell, we've lost communications capability, along with many other functions," Topal replied with sadness. "I'm sure you can hear the sounds of battle outside our blast doors. Dominion forces have boarded our vessel and are trying to reach our sovereign."

"Then why do you have him sitting in one spot like a gift-wrapped target?" Glover asked in exasperation. "He should be on the move, and so should we. We've got to take it to the enemy."

"No," Topal violently shook his head, the hoop earrings he wore jingled at the frantic movement. "Our first duty is to protect the Exarch. The Dominion forces can't penetrate our blast doors." The man finished with pride in his voice.

"They don't need to," Glover retorted. "If they take command of the ship, from say engineering, they can destroy this vessel from there, or fly it back across the border, right into Dominion hands."

"Respectfully," Topal paused to gauge the pips on Terrence's collar, "Captain..."

"Glover," Terrence tersely replied. "Captain Terrence Glover."

“Captain Glover we have already discussed that possibility, but we have confidence that our warriors can defend our vessel. The Exarchal Guard chosen to serve this ship was culled from the finest soldiers in the Exarchate.”

“Perhaps if they saw the man they were defending helping lead the charge, it might give them more incentive,” Glover said pointedly. There was a collective gasp followed by a low snarling across the bridge. Jedalla stepped forward, a disruptor and a wicked looking dagger rooted in both of his large paws. Juanita saw the captain subtly reaching back for the *mek’leth* resting against the small of his back, kept in place by his belt.

Jedalla stopped before Glover and looked down at him, his glistening snout twitching. Terrence looked up, not backing away. “You are an arrogant one human,” Jedalla said. “But that doesn’t make your words any less true, nor the sting of our inaction any less painful.”

“Your Highness,” Topal began.

“Silence,” Jedalla said quietly. The fat man stopped in mid-sentence, his jowls quivering. “I allowed others to speak for me, to make decisions for me in this matter,” he paused, glancing at Topal and then his mate. “But no longer! Remove that vile Klingon blade behind your back and join me.” The Alshain ruler lifted his blade. Glover’s stone-face cracked, but he complied with Jedalla’s request. The other Alshain, including Topal, pulled daggers from their persons to and raised them toward the ceiling. Jedalla took in the room, his eyes settling disappointedly on Pell and Juanita. Everyone else did too, including a more bemused Captain Glover. Pell shrugged, unclipped the phaser from her belt and raised it. Juanita followed suit. Jedalla grinned. “Let the hunt begin,” he ordered.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Outside Main Propulsion Chamber**

Thot Pram almost fell to his knees. One arm shot out, punching in one of the smooth plastic panels along the wall for purchase. His legs trembled, but he remained standing. Due to the psionic tie he held with the organic parts of his battle cruiser, he felt it die in a searing conflagration. A dagger had pierced its heart, followed by an intense heat that he felt even inside his refrigerated suit. Then, there was oblivion.

Many of his kinsmen had perished, some from the psychic feedback caused by their ship’s passing. But he didn’t need them to take this vessel. Claiming it as a trophy would assuage some of his pain and hurt pride. He would have to survive the battle waging around him first. They had fought at times hand-to-hand to make it to the threshold of the ship’s engine room. Once they secured it, Pram could take

command of the *Vyras* and drive it back to Dominion-occupied space. Barring that, he could sabotage the propulsion system and simply wait to rendezvous with the Breen that had pursued the *Diadem*.

The door to the main prize lay right around the corner, but the Alshain had activated blast doors sealing off the engine room. And a line of Alshain warriors stood in front of the door. For the last few moments, they had been exchanging volleys with the Alshain, to no avail. But somehow the lupines had assessed the momentary break, caused by the warship's destruction, as a prime opportunity to attack. And they had.

The timing made Pram suspect that the Alshain had cleverly led them into a trap. But he hadn't had much time to dwell on that before the first wave of fur and claws sliced into the boarding party. Though still in agony, Pram mowed down as many of the creatures as he could before his disruptor was swiped from his hand, an Alshain clamping down on the wrist of his gun hand with powerful jaws. The lupine bit down, and Pram heard a crack. He didn't hear the gun hitting the ground. He didn't hear anything at all for a few moments. He was consumed by a white hot pain greater than the ship's oblivion.

Staggering back, holding the stump of his hand close to his chest, Pram frantically reached for the dagger at his side while the Alshain advanced. The large, brown-furred beast was on all fours. It chewed on his hand for a few seconds, spitting it out. "No blood?" The Alshain asked, "How disgusting."

"You'll suffer for what you took from me," Pram promised. "Once I am through with you, I will have my vengeance upon your homeworld."

"You won't survive the next few seconds to ever make good on that threat," the Alshain said before leaping. The creature slammed into him, knocking him back against a wall. The Alshain slashed and bit, his claws goring Pram's mask. The Alshain's claws had ripped his armor and torn into his flesh. "Pathetic," the Alshain remarked, breathing heavily above him. "I'll make this quick and move on to real prey." The creature batted away Pram's knife hand and roughly nudged his head back, exposing his neck. The Alshain dove quickly for Pram's neck, but stopped suddenly and then began screaming. Blood spurted across Pram's visor, blinding him. But the helmet's other sensors showed the heat radiating off the Alshain cooling rapidly, and it already felt like the creature's muscles had relaxed and it had become dead weight. He struggled to push the warrior off him, but being one-handed made it difficult.

"Are you well?" The Jem'Hadar First asked, the request sounding strange coming from his cracked, scaled lips. Pram wiped the blood away from his visor. The fearsome warrior stood over him, a bloody kar'takin dripping from one of his fists. Through his visor, Pram could see that the look of disgust on the First's face. It was reflected on the visages of the other Jem'Hadar soldiers. The Jem'Hadars' recent

arrival had turned the tide of the attack back in their favor. Now the way to the propulsion chamber had been cleared, the floor covered mainly by furry corpses.

Pram had ordered the Jem'Hadar squadron to remain aboard his ship until he called upon them. The Thot had intended to use them sparingly, if at all. He wanted the glory of bringing the Exarch to the Founder. Thot Gor had already showed the Cardassians their place in the Dominion. Now Pram wished to do the same. If the Jem'Hadar had followed orders they would've been caught in the warship's explosion. Their disobeying orders had saved Pram's life, but he could not allow such willfulness to go unpunished.

Even now, the smug look on the First's face was proof enough that the Jem'Hadar thought the Breen were weak. Pram would prove them wrong.

He stood upright and glanced at his kinsmen, ignoring the Breen. He was in command of this mission and he would respond to the First when he felt like it, if at all. He jabbed a gloved finger at his second-in-command, Subthot Tonfa. "Subthot Tonfa, execute the Jem'Hadar First for disobeying my orders."

Tonfa drew his weapon. The Jem'Hadar moved to protect their squadron leader. But the First bellowed for them to stop. He stood his ground and looked up at the Breen warrior. "Thot Pram is correct. The consequences of my actions do not excuse them."

Pram turned to Tonfa. "Carry out my order."

"At once sir," Tonfa replied. He shot the Jem'Hadar cleanly through the forehead. Pram eyed the Jem'Hadar Second.

"You are now First," He said brusquely.

"What are your orders?" The Jem'Hadar replied, standing rigidly at attention. The other Jem'Hadar also stood ready for battle. The disgust and smugness had been replaced by impassive expressions so frosty that it reminded Pram of home.

"Penetrate those blast doors," Pram commanded.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

#### **Central Corridor Leading to Command Salon**

The Alshain didn't believe in subtlety and Captain Glover liked that. Exarch Jedalla led the war host and Terrence did his best to keep up with them. The Alshain thundered down the latinum-inlaid hallway, portentous Rigelian opera music pouring from bulkhead speakers.

The sheer audacity of the full on attack had taken the Breen invaders by surprise. But Terrence sensed something else was wrong with the Breen. They weren't quite as fast or fierce as he expected. They seemed groggy, but that didn't stop Glover's attack. Whom he couldn't shoot with his phaser he cut down with his

*mek'leth*; each Breen that fell before him was payback for Earth and Chin'toka, for Jasmine, Pedro, Nyota, and Dhalamanisha.

The whole of the Breen Confederacy couldn't sate his bloodlust right now. Soon his body was slick with his sweat and blood. His muscles ached and his entire body shook from exhaustion. In the midst of such carnage, he had never felt so alive. And he didn't know whether to laugh, cry, do neither, or do both.

"Their flesh is as rancid as I thought," Jedalla said. The monarch sat upon a pile of Breen corpses, all pretensions gone. He threw a severed Breen arm onto the bloodstained floor. Some of the other surviving Alshain continued to gnaw on their prey, some of whom were still alive.

"Completely unappetizing," remarked another Alshain soldier.

Pell made her way over to him. She was also covered in thick, red blood. He reached for her, concerned, but she said, "It's not mine...mostly not mine."

"Are you hurt?" Glover asked. He had been so consumed by his rage that he had forgotten about Pell. He was glad that he had ordered Juanita to remain on the bridge. Pell had survived the Cardassian occupation of Bajor and had seen countless horrors. She could stomach what they had done against the Breen, but he wanted to shield Juanita from that brutal reality as long as he could. It was the least he could do for Pedro, to keep his sister's hands as free of blood as possible. He brushed back the Bajoran's matted hair, checking for wounds. He thankfully only found a few scratches and bruises.

"You look the worst for wear," Pell cracked. Then she looked around her, and the crooked grin fell away. "Dear Prophets....what have we done?"

"Not enough," Jedalla declared. "Breen have infested this entire vessel. We must root them out and eliminate them. This was only the beginning."

"I was afraid you were going to say that," Pell replied.

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Chief Medical Officer's Office**

"Give it to me straight Doctor?" Lt. Tom Reeves asked though Dr. Heine's grim expression already told him what he needed to know.

Gretchen Heine spelled it out for him. "The captain has experienced a nervous breakdown." She paused to glance at Lt. Morales, the ship's counselor. Roberto gave a terse, solemn nod. "She's in no condition to command."

"I see," Reeves replied, forcing himself to breathe.

"As the highest ranking bridge officer left, you're in command now," Gretchen replied. She placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Tom needed all the support he could get, and it still wouldn't be enough.

"Tom, I'm here if you need me too," Lt. Morales said, his somber expression now sympathetic.

"Thank you both," Reeves said. "I'm going to need it especially in the coming hours. We've got to go back and find out what happened to the *Vyras*."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Main Propulsion Chamber**

Captain Glover had long discarded his phaser for an Alshain rifle. He held the long firearm against his shoulder as he crouched down and placed his back against the wall. Nadfar Durgo released a hoverfly from his large palm. The small, mechanical spying device zipped around the corner. The video display on Terrence's rifle revealed the large, molten hole through the blast doors leading to the ship's Main Propulsion chamber.

"Damn it, they've gotten through," Terrence growled. "We were too late." The remaining members of Jedalla's team had encountered stiff resistance at the Armory, but had prevailed against the Prethot that had taken up position there. Securing a transporter pad, the exarch had then ordered for them to be beamed near Main Propulsion afterward.

Terrence was glad that Pell was among the living. She took up position beside him, doing her best to modulate her ragged breathing. "Haven't been working out lately have you?" Glover teased.

"You're way too chipper about this," Pell admonished.

"Doling out a little payback for Chin'toka, what's not to like about that?" The Bajoran's mouth drew into a tight line.

"Don't let your vengeance consume you," She said more softly. "You won't like what you turn into."

"Too late," Glover admitted.

"Enough chatter," Exarch Jedalla strode past them. "We take back our ship completely, now!"

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### ***USS Diadem*** **Main Bridge**

Lt. Thomas Reeves hated the feel of the cold leather. The captain's chair felt too big for him. He had dreamed about perhaps taking command of a vessel someday, but it was far too soon. He turned to Lt. Daf, who he had taken over Executive Officer duties. The Trill looked just as daunted as Tom felt. He didn't know whether to feel relieved or concerned about that.

"Sir, we're detecting a vessel on long range sensors," Daf said. The Trill has also assumed control over the operations console. Tom's throat seized his breath. The entire bridge grew deathly silent. "It's Romulan," Daf said, letting them off the hook seconds later. "They're hailing us."

"Whoever would've imagined the day when hearing that would be a relief?" Warrant Officer Zoll, at the tactical console, asked.

"What are they doing here, so deep in Federation space?" Ensign Baker darkly pondered. Tom shared the young flight controller's concerns. The Romulan Neutral Zone was too far away for a vessel to traverse so quickly to respond to their hails. Despite the wartime alliance, both the Federation and the Star Empire were still wary of each other, and no Romulan warship would be allowed access this far into Federation territory without an escort. So, it begged the question, what happened to the escort?

"Perhaps they encountered some Breen trouble too?" Zoll offered.

"Maybe," Tom rubbed his chin. He wished he could consult the captain, but Dr. Heine had placed her under heavy sedation. "Let's answer their hail."

The main viewer filled with static before it resolved around a figure plucked from Tom's nightmares. A pallid monstrous visage stared back at him, its black eyes as deep and pitiless as two singularities. Tom forced himself not to recoil. "I'm....Lieutenant Thomas Reeves, *USS Diadem*."

"Where is your captain?" The creature's voice was gravelly.

"I am in command of this vessel," Reeves said simply. The creature cocked his head, regarding Tom for a few seconds before replying.

"I understand," he replied. "I am Iako, master of the *Acastus*. I am Reman," he added, sensing Tom's confusion. He had never seen an actual Reman before, though he had heard about them. One of the major servitor races of the Star Empire, they inhabited the sister world of Romulus. He had sort of thought they were an urban myth more than real. "We also encountered a Dominion ambush. Our Starfleet escort was destroyed, and most of the Romulan bridge officers were killed."

"Oh my," one of the bridge crew behind Tom gasped, but he didn't look around.

"After destroying the remaining attackers, we received your distress call and laid a course immediately to render assistance."

"Thank you," Tom said. "But perhaps we could provide assistance to you as well."

Iako nodded. "We will discuss it further when we rendezvous with your ship."

"Agreed," Reeves said. Once the *Acastus* had cut off the communications link, Tom turned to his bridge crew. "So guys, what do you think?"

"The story sounds plausible," Zoll said, folding his arms across his massive chest. "But something about it is amiss."



"I agree," Tom said. "Daf, I want you to find out everything you can about the *Acastus* and the Starfleet ship that was escorting her. Then cull the database for anything you can find about the Remans."

"I'm on it," The Trill replied. Reeves next turned to Zoll.

"I know the crew is tired, but I want to maintain yellow alert." The Zaldan nodded in agreement. "Keep everybody on their toes Mr. Zoll."

"I will," he said tersely.

"Eloise," Reeves directed his comment to the helm officer. "All stop."

"Aye sir," Ensign Baker complied. The ship slowed to a stop and hung in space.

"The *Acastus* will arrive in less than a half-hour," Daf said, without being prompted.

"So, what do we do now?" Baker asked.

"Anybody got a deck of cards?" Reeves joked.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Command Salon**

"I'm tired of just sitting here, ringing my hands," Ensign Juanita Rojas complained.

"Actually you are standing young cub," Vizier Topal replied. The heavysset man stood beside the medal-bedecked admiral lounging in his throne-like command chair.

"You know what I mean," Rojas shot back.

"Patience Ensign," Queen Symea said with surprising charity. "Your captain ordered you to remain on the bridge for your protection."

"I don't need protecting...your Highness," Juanita added quickly. She didn't want to disrespect the co-ruler of the Alshain, particularly when she was the only human still on the bridge. "I can take care of myself."

"I see that you can," Symea's voice and tone were matronly. "But it is not what your commander wished, and you must obey the orders of a superior. That is the way of things."

Juanita wanted to argue, but thought better of it, and shut her mouth. The bridge filled with the sounds of the pitched battle being waged for the engine room. The blurred sights and muted sounds were being filtered through the hoverflies zipping about. It was disjointed, disconcerting and all too similar to the jerky, abrupt nature of real combat. Deep down, Juanita wasn't so sure that she really wanted to be at the captain's side right now or not. She couldn't say the same for the queen. Symea had walked to the front of the salon. Her ears stood straight on her head and

her lips were pulled back, baring fangs as she took in the battle. Juanita wished she had an ounce of the queen's strength.

A loud scream rent the speakers, and Symea buckled. Topal and several Alshain rushed to her side, and helped her to her feet. "It was Jedalla," she said, "He has been struck down!" The queen yanked away from the Vizier and dashed to the lift doors. Several guards rushed to accompany her. Juanita was right on their heels. Symea turned abruptly, startling Juanita.

"Little one, are you prepared for what might await us?"

Juanita struggled with the lie on her lips. "No," she admitted. A smile threatened to break through Symea's sad demeanor.

"Stay with me and you will survive this day," Symea promised. "But no one who touched the Exarch will live one second beyond our arrival."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

#### **Main Propulsion**

*How did it come to this?* Terrence thought as the Jem'Hadar warrior bent him over the railing. Below him, he felt the heat radiating from the warp coils brushing against his neck. The sharp, cold metal of the Jem'Hadar's pole arm pressed against flesh, pricking him. The fresh smell of coppery blood filled his nostrils. And it brought on another rush of adrenaline. He kicked the kneecap of the Jem'Hadar and the soldier stumbled, falling backward. Glover, holding onto the *kar'takin*, pushed forward, throwing the Jem'Hadar to the ground. He fell on top of the man. He began choking the man with the staff of his own weapon. The Jem'Hadar's eyes bulged as he gasped for air. He pounded against Terrence's back, but Glover put his full weight onto the weapon until the Jem'Hadar began twitching spasmodically.

Terrence pressed harder until the soldier expelled his last breath. Shivering, Terrence unsteadily got to his feet. Realizing the *kar'takin* was still in his hands, he stabbed the Jem'Hadar several times to make sure he was dead.

"Head's up Captain!" Pell shouted. Glover jerked his head around just in time to see a Jem'Hadar rushing toward him, the shimmering from its shrouding affect still surrounding him. Terrence rushed the man, swinging the *kar'takin* low and raking it across the warrior's stomach. Blood splattered everywhere. Glover pushed the disemboweled man to the side and charged at a Breen who was hunched over a terminal.

Terrence had led a small team up the stairwell to the platform above the warp coils powering the ship. It had been rough going, but they had almost cleared the platform. Terrence was a bit surprised at how well Pell was doing, though he was glad he hadn't lost her too. The Bajoran used her smaller frame and her quickness to

outmaneuver around the Breen and Jem'Hadar, finding purchase with an ornate Alshain dagger when she wasn't able to use her disruptor.

The captain slammed into the Breen. The armored alien didn't budge. He turned and looked down at Glover, strong arming him with a sharp elbow. Terrence's teeth cracked and his head exploded in agony. He fell back onto a cold body, his mind struggling to stay conscious. He blinked back black waves as the Breen stood over him, a disruptor in his hand. He aimed the weapon at Glover.

The captain tried to rise, but fell back. The whine of the disruptor's activation filled his ears. The emitter cone filled with green death. "No!" Pell screamed. The Breen turned his head. Glover remembered the pole arm still clutched in his hand. He drove it straight up into the soldier's crotch and twisted, breaking off the metal tip. The Breen's scream was muffled by his mask, but the warrior keeled over all the same. Terrence plucked the disruptor from him and put a whole in the soldier's chest.

Pell ran to his side. She wrapped an arm underneath his and helped him to his feet. "Are you all right sir?" She asked.

"Yeah, thanks to you."

"The best way to thank me is to put an end to this nightmare," Pell remarked. Glover looked around. Breen, Jem'Hadar, and Alshain corpses littered the platform like trash.

"Your wish is granted," he replied. "The platform is secure."

"The floor isn't," Pell said. Below them the sounds of battle raged on.

"Let's do something about that then," Glover said. He pulled away from Pell and turned to the three battered Alshain warriors left. "Time to return below."

He took a step forward and his knees buckled. His head pulsed in agony. "Terrence," Pell called out, rushing to prevent his fall. He felt embarrassed that he needed her assistance. "You're not going anywhere sir," she said with authority. "You've just incurred a major head trauma." She helped prop him against a console. "Stay there until I return."

"I'm the captain remember," He said weakly, his strength fading.

"Being your friend trumps that right now," Pell remarked. "And if you don't like it, report me."

"Once we finish helping mop up the other invaders, I'll come back with a doctor," Pell said.

An anguished roar cut through Glover's head like a buzz saw. Pell tensed. Durgo cried from below, "The Exarch has fallen!"

"Oh Prophets," Pell whispered. "Can it get any worse?"

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***USS Diadem***

**Captain's Ready Room**

Lt. Thomas Reeves perched at the edge of the captain's ice desk. He had become used to the chilled temperature of the room over the past several months since he had first boarded Diadem, but sitting on a hunk of ice, maintained by a stasis field, numbed his backside. However, he was hesitant to take the captain's more comfortable Tellarite leather seat. Tom felt that if he sat in it, Captain Tallis might never return.

He folded his arm and nodded his head, using his movement to try to mask his shivering. "So, you weren't able to dig up much on the Remans huh?"

"No sir," Lt. Kurman Daf said, a dejected look on his swarthy face. "All the databanks had on them were that the Remans were a slave/servant caste within the Star Empire, and they had principally been used as fodder for some of the toughest engagements in the war thus far."

Tom rubbed his chin, partly in thought, and partly to warm his fingers. "Okay, what about the Starfleet escort?"

Daf brightened slightly, before sadness overcast his features again, "The *Alphard*," the Trill answered. He turned to Warrant Officer Zoll. "Mr. Zoll can fill you in better than I can."

"Not really," the blunt spoken Zaldan replied with a shrug. "I checked with one of my contacts in Starfleet Intelligence."

"Wow, that was quick," Tom remarked. "How did you do that?"

Zoll unnerved Reeves by smiling. "An old Zaldan secret," he intoned. "I've been in the Fleet for a long time and built up a lot of favors along the way. I don't like cashing in my chips unless it's absolutely necessary, and I felt this fit under that description."

"I would concur," Tom said, "But go on."

"Unfortunately, my contact didn't provide me. They only said the *Alphard* was escorting the *Acastus* away from Starbase 21."

"Why would that be a state secret?" Daf asked. "SB 21 is near the Romulan Neutral Zone and has been a hub for cross border activity during the war."

"I know," Zoll scowled, "which makes the fact that the journey was hush, hush very interesting."

"Yeah, it does," Tom said, adopting Zoll's scowl. He pushed off from the frigid desk. "Any chance the Remans will provide more information?"

Zoll grunted and Daf shook his head in the negative. "You guys must be reading my mind," Reeves replied, "but it won't us to ask."

"You sure about that?" Zoll countered.

"Time will tell Mr. Zoll," Reeves answered, "time will tell."

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***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

## Main Propulsion

Ensign Juanita Rojas stared blankly at the blood soaked scene before her, her mind unable to process the carnage for several seconds. Realization and the horror she had rushed into hit her all at once, driven by Symea's fierce wail.

The Exarch, the ruler of all Alshain, was prone on the deck, the shaft of a Jem'Hadar blade sticking out of his midsection. Surprisingly he was groaning and his limbs twitched, but Juanita didn't know how much life he had left in him. What looked like Durgo, or at least half of him was beside the fallen monarch. Around him the battle still raged. Juanita looked frantically for Captain Glover or Pell. She heard a whistle above the din and looked up to see Commander Pell wave briefly at her before she pulled her firearm and aimed it at Juanita. The young woman ducked as a beam sizzled just above her head. She heard a grunt, was assaulted by the smell of burning duraweave and flesh, and then heard a loud thud. Juanita glanced backward to see a Jem'Hadar warrior dead behind her, missing a large portion of his chest. That's when she realized that she was in the middle of a war zone and would have to fight if she was going to survive. Pell, and several other Alshain warriors began picking off invaders from an upraised platform. Juanita was alarmed that she still didn't see the captain, but she couldn't find out what happened to him until they had retaken the engine room.

Queen Symea, enraged with grief had charged off, as had her retinue of soldiers. The queen had used her claws to behead the first Breen that she encountered. Juanita quickly got into the act, arcing her disruptor around to protect the queen's back. Her first shot dissolved a rampaging Jem'Hadar's shoulder. The fierce warrior kept coming. Her third shot took him out permanently.

Shaking violently, and trying to get her nerves under control, Juanita got as close to Symea as possible, though she was cognizant not to get too close. She didn't want to woman to lop off her head or any other body part in her battle frenzy. Juanita pushed down her gorge, and found a corner of her mind to place her fear. She allowed her training and her sense of self-preservation to guide her hand. She didn't enjoy what she was doing, the pain she inflicted on sentient beings, and she knew the faces and voices, the smells of death would haunt her dreams for the rest of her life, but she pressed on. She had to live, Pedro would want that, and she wouldn't let the Dominion take away her parents' last surviving child.

Her muscles ached and her soul shriveled, but Juanita wouldn't quit until her disruptor battery died. Even then, she turned the weapon around and used its handle as a bludgeon. Thankfully the fighting didn't last long. The new influx of Alshain proved too much for the Dominion invaders, though the Jem'Hadar and most of the Breen fought until they were killed.

The Alshain spared one Breen. After the battle was won, Symea called for a medical team to attend to the Exarch. They brought a mobile stasis unit and carefully placed the wounded man inside it. He weakly grasped Symea's hand and tried to speak, but blood bubbled from his lips. Symea untangled her hand from his and bade the medics to speed the sovereign to their medical chamber. The queen then regarded her prisoner.

Two burly, blood drenched guards held the sole Breen by his arms, and pinned to the floor. Queen Symea stood over him. She spat on his snout-like mask. "What is your name and rank?" She asked. The Breen mumbled something, the language garbled to Juanita's ears. She wished she had paid more attention in her xeno-linguistics class.

"His rank...He is Subthot Tonfa." By this time, Commander Pell had descended the platform. She walked gingerly over to the assembled group, one hand pressed against her side.

"You know Breen?" Queen Symea asked, both skeptical and impressed.

"Only a little," Pell said.

"Tell him that if the Exarch dies, I will personally eliminate his entire crèche," Symea commanded. Pell haltingly repeated the message. Juanita heard a scraping sound from the masked warrior, and his chest rose and fell. The Alshain guards twisted his arms and what must have been laughter stopped.

The Breen spoke again, more slowly, his voice sounding labored. "I will be sure to find you once this war is over. You will make an excellent hunting dog."

Symea snarled, drawing her blade. Pell placed a hand on the woman's forearm and then quickly withdrew it. The queen stared at the Bajoran with a gaze that could melt duranium. "Never touch my person again," she said with lethal softness.

Pell looked down and away, "My apologies," she said, her voice strained.

"I'll excuse the breach," Symea said before turning back to the Breen. "You will live. For now. Perhaps the secrets we pull from that four-lobe brain of yours what we need to rid the Alpha Quadrant of the Dominion." She motioned and the two guards began pummeling the Breen until he was unconscious. Then they dragged him away. The queen then looked around at the remaining Alshain, her glare cutting. "You could have at least spared the Thot or Prethot, we might glean little from that one...but at least the process shall be enjoyable."

The Queen followed the two guards out of the room, and a battered entourage followed them. Pell and Juanita were alone. "Where's the captain?" Juanita tried to keep the fear out of his voice.

"Up there," Pell wearily pointed. "He suffered some head trauma, a few lost teeth, and some cuts and bruises...the usual," the Bajoran tried to smile, but winced instead. She patted Juanita on the shoulder, "You did well Ensign."

“Uh...thank you sir,” Juanita stood up a little taller at the compliment. She had been just been trying to survive, and hadn’t done anything exemplary, but she would take the accolade all the same.

“Let’s see if we can get that lift working,” Pell nodded in the direction of a turbolift alcove. She had carefully used a ladder to reach the lower deck before. “We’ll have to take the captain to the Medical Salon ourselves it seems.”

“Yeah, no all star treatment for Starfleet officers on this barge, even captains,” Juanita said.

“I’m just glad that Terrence is unconscious. Learning that he’s not the alpha male on this ship would be terribly upsetting to him,” Pell cracked.

“It’s our secret then,” Juanita smiled.

“Deal.”

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Vizier’s Chambers**

“I can’t believe we were denied entrance into the Medical Salon!” thundered Lord Narl D’Noth. The venerable D’Noth represented the Peerage; the clique of nobles that ruled served as Exarch’s chief advisors.

“I stand by the medic’s decision,” Vizier Topal said excitedly, his jowls quivering in exasperation. “The risk of infection might be too great. Besides, I’m sure that Lord Burim would also not like his medical procedures critiqued.” D’Noth growled and folded his spindly gray-furred arms across his emaciated chest. The old man appeared weighted down by the heavy, fine-woven garments he wore, but his eyes radiated with a willful fire that denied his age.

“But even the humans were granted entry into the chamber,” the old man said in protest.

“Of course, their colleague was wounded too, and he required medical assistance,” Topal replied, shaking his head as if it were obvious. “And you are already aware that they are in a separate healing chamber.”

“I know that Sept D’Noth likes to place itself as closest in proximity to the Exarch’s hindquarters as possible, but for security’s sake only the Queen and the new Nadfar were allowed in the operation suite,” Nauarch L’Dac said, smiling at Lord Narl’s withering gaze.

“Enough you two,” War Minister Ardit replied sternly. “Save the running rivalry between your septs for the Dueling Pits. The very fate of our empire is hanging in Lord Burim’s hands. I hope they are skillful enough.”

“If anything happens to the Exarch that is not the will of the gods, I will find out,” Lady Diellza, head of the dreaded Unguis secret police, said quietly.

"I didn't call you all here to snipe at each other or make threats," Topal admonished the group. "I called you here to discuss our options in light of the Exarch's incapacitation. After surgery, it might take him days to recover, and barring any more unpleasantness from the Dominion, I want to make sure we present a unified front to the Federation Alliance."

"Despite the concerns many in the Peerage had over the Exarch's decision to join the war," D'Noth said, "They are now moot due to the Dominion's perfidious assault. Alshain honor demands a harsh response."

"I agree," War Minister Ardit said slowly, "though this attack might just prove to some that we shouldn't get involved. If the Exarch had not embarked on this summit, the Dominion would've had no reason to attack us."

"The Dominion doesn't need a reason to attack, they are conquerors, it is their nature," L'Dac replied. Ardit bared his teeth, not liking being upstaged by his subordinate.

Ardit shook his snow-white head. "There is no proof to support your assertion. The Dominion has not conquered anyone. The Cardassians, and now the Breen have joined them willingly."

"Don't forget the Son'a," Diellza smirked, but the war minister ignored the taunt.

"The Dominion signed non-aggression pacts with the Bajorans, the Tholians, and the Miradorn. Some might argue that if the Exarch hadn't rejected a similar offer earlier in the conflict, the Dominion might not have turned to the Son'a in the first place. And the Exarchate would be the beneficiary of Dominion technology while avoiding the conflict."

"*'Some'*, or just you?" Diellza asked sweetly, but there was nothing saccharine in her hard gaze.

"I'll admit that I had doubts about the capacity of the Starforce to wage war against the Dominion, with their endless supply of Jem'Hadar."

"That supply isn't endless," Diellza countered. "Starfleet cut off the Dominion's link to the Gamma Quadrant quite some time ago."

"And this proposed plan to attack the ketracel white facility in the Maw will hamper the Dominion's ability to replenish their ranks even more," L'Dac said. Ardit growled just loud enough for L'Dac to get the hint.

"If it is successful," D'Noth replied, with obvious skepticism. "The Maw is not a trapse across the savannah, like the Briar Patch." He rubbed the long, straggly tuft hanging from his chin. "The ship I served on barely survived the Maw when our Sutahr once ordered us to pursue some Orion pirates into it. I saw a wormhole open up like the mouth of heaven and swallow the Orions whole," the man recalled in grim wonder.



"The wormholes that form within the Maw are another reason the mission is critical," L'Dac said. "What if the singularities are not as unstable as we have been led to believe? What if the Dominion is doing more in the Maw than producing ketracel white? What if they are trying to find another route home so they can bring this war to a conclusion?"

Ardit interjected, "It is best not to ask such inquiries." The admiral finally retreated, hunching his shoulders and tucking his chin against his neck.

"We're all privy to state secrets here," D'Noth huffed. "We all know what was said at Starbase 21."

"Yes, but how can we know if there are not spies or saboteurs still on this ship?" Diellza asked, looking at each of the assembled. "The Jem'Hadar have a shrouding technique that makes them virtually unable to detect. We don't even know how many beamed over from the Breen vessel so we don't know if any survived. Shrouded Jem'Hadar could be walking among us, maybe even in this room." Everyone was taken aback by the spymaster's ominous words.

"By the concerned expressions on your faces Lady Diezlla's words have struck true with you as well," Vizier Topal said dolefully, "and it for that reason, pursuant with our laws and customs that I give over command of this vessel to the Unguis."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Healing Chamber**

The semi-transparent egg holding Terrence Glover separated with a soft hiss. He blinked several times before he could make out the two blobs standing before him. The calming sounds of Andorian Blues were being piped in through hidden speakers.

"Are you okay sir?" Ensign Rojas asked, wringing her hands while she waited for an answer. Glover smiled reassuringly at the young woman and reached out for her hand, but coming up short due to the mass of wires attached to his arms, head, and chest.

"Lord Burim gave us permission to remove these, let us help," Lt. Commander Pell said, getting to work before Terrence could protest. First she handed him a shift to put on. He used it to cover his private parts while they unlatched him from the monitoring equipment.

"Care to turn around for a second," he said with less embarrassment than the situation called for. He donned the shift quickly, the cool air in the room prickling his naked arms and legs. A wind tickled his backside until he was able to tie the back of the shift together.

"All right, I'm clothed," the captain said. He then stretched his legs and yawned, stretching the muscles in his arm and back. "You know I sort of feel like I've been in a spa more than being treated."

"You need to be more careful to protect that noggin of yours sir," Pell admonished.

"The same could be said for you," Terrence pointed at the jagged, bloodstained hole in the side of Pell's uniform. "Are you okay?"

"Yes sir," Pell nodded. "My injuries were less severe. The Alshain offered me clothing, but surprisingly they had nothing in my size." All three shared a laugh before Glover looked at Juanita.

"How are you doing?"

Juanita gulped before answering. "I'm doing fine sir."

"Better than fine," Glover patted the woman's shoulder. "You handled yourself well back there."

"Thanks sir," Juanita blushed, "but how would you know?"

"You're here, and in much better shape than Pell or me," Glover grinned, "That's good enough confirmation that you did an amazing job."

"He's right, and I did see you in action," Pell replied. "Any fight you can walk away from is a good fight for you."

"Okay, I guess," Juanita said nervously. Terrence realized the young officer didn't like being the focus of attention so he shifted the focus.

"Pell, what's been going on aboard the ship?"

"Lady Diellza, of the Unguis, has taken command of the ship," the Bajoran said darkly.

"The Unguis?" Glover asked.

"The Alshain secret police," Pell explained. "And she's had her agents and the security staff set up both mandatory and random blood screenings for Changeling infiltrators. She's had non-essential personnel restricted to quarters and she's ordered patrols throughout the ship, hunting for any Jem'Hadar who might've escaped."

Terrence rubbed his chin, "Well, that sounds reasonable," he replied. "But I'm a little surprised that the secret police hold such sway in the Exarchate. That fact is not one that will go over well once it becomes more widely known in the Federation."

"Alshain culture is different. The Unguis is seen as another extension of the Exarch, to root out spies and other subversive elements. Jedalla greatly expanded their powers during his push to root out the Son'a and their sympathizers. He has built them up as a separate army to the Exarchal Guard, in part to check the ambitions of the Peerage."

"In addition to his Paladin elite guard?" Glover asked, amazed.

"Jedalla was the target of a concerted assassination campaign by the Son'a early in his reign. He developed a healthy suspicion that has almost become paranoia at times over the years, if the accounts of dissidents are to be believed," Pell said.

"Are they?" The captain asked.

"It's hard to say," The Bajoran shrugged. "There is probably some truth in that. But at the same time, many of those opposed to Jedalla are being funded by the Son'a."

"I see," Glover said. "So, how is Jedalla?"

Pell shook her head, her brow furrowing, "I don't know. They won't tell us."

"Perhaps they'll tell me," Glover said. "I can be a bit more persuasive."

"I'm sure you can, but for the time being, none of us are going anywhere," Ensign Rojas said.

"What do you mean by that?" Terrence asked.

"We've been sealed in this room," Pell sighed. "By order of Lady Diellza."

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

"I don't think you're going to like this," Lt. Daf replied, his face nearly pressed against the flatted surface of his terminal.

"What is it now?" Lt. Tom Reeves groaned. All too eager to vacate the captain's daunting chair, Tom bounded out of the command well to the encircling aft deck.

The Trill looked up, his dark complexion drained of color. "Short range sensors have picked up Starfleet phaser burns along the *Acastus's* secondary hull."

"Oh God," Tom remarked, the realization hitting him in the gut like a punch. "They attacked the *Alphard* didn't they?"

"I can't say for certain sir," Daf replied solemnly, "But my best guess is that they did."

"What's the status of that ship's weapons?" Tom asked hurriedly, aware that it was inexorably coming their way, like a slow moving lava flow.

"They don't have operative port weapon's banks, but aft, starboard, and prow weapons systems are operational."

"Raise shields, and charge weapons," Tom called out as he rushed back to his seat, "Red alert!"

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### **Somewhere in Alshain Space....**

Keilan did her best to hide her displeasure. "All we know is that convoy was attacked and has deviated from its flight plan," she repeated.

"And what of my nephew, is Jedalla dead?" Grand Duke Jarko asked, with a mixed expression of hopefulness and dread. "Can we finally get on with this terrible business?"

"At present, the destruction of the *Vyras* nor Jedalla's status has not been confirmed," Keilan replied. "We...have lost contact with Thot Pram, the mission's commander."

Jarko grunted. "Perhaps the Breen bit off more than he could chew, if they even eat. Do they eat Vorta?"

"I...would not know," Keilan admitted. "Weyoun visited their home planet. I did not."

"What does it matter?" Jarko harrumphed. "Without confirmation of Jedalla's death, I can't assume power."

"I will get you confirmation," the Vorta promised.

"Not if your Thot Pram has failed," Jarko countered.

"I...have a contingency plan," Keilan revealed.

"And that would be?" The Grand Duke prodded, but the Vorta merely smiled.

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

"The *Acastus* is hailing us," Warrant Officer Zoll said.

"Put them on screen," Lt. Reeves said tightly. He squeezed the armrests on the command chair, his knuckles white as snow.

Iako glowered at him seconds later. "What is the meaning of this? We are your allies!"

No, the Romulans are our allies, Tom thought, but stopped himself from blurting that out. "Our sensors have detected burn markings consistent with Starfleet energy weapons on your hull. Care to explain that, and why you didn't inform us of it when you contacted us?"

Iako's fierce expression took on a grimmer cast. After a few tortured seconds, the Reman admitted, "We...destroyed them."

There were audible gasps across the bridge, but Tom kept his revulsion in check. "Why?" He asked coldly.

"We weren't coming to assist you, we were coming to aid the Dominion," Iako admitted. "We were seeking an alliance with the Founders, and offering this vessel and Romulan prisoners would've proved our trustworthiness to the Dominion, but you ruined that by destroying the Breen vessels. Now, we will have to destroy you to prove ourselves."

Tom sat back in his seat, throttled by the Reman's cold appraisal of what had really happened to the *Alphard* and the Romulan crew on the *Acastus*. His stomach roiled with fear and disgust over the savagery of the Remans and the fight that was to come. He struggled for the appropriate response to Iako's casual brutality, something that would give making the Reman as afraid as he felt, or at the least give the murdering bastard pause. He searched his memory for something that pithy that Captain Tallis had said when confronted by Dominion forces before, but he found nothing adequate. So, he just went with his gut. "You can try," he boasted.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Incarceration Chamber**

"How many Jem'Hadar soldiers transported onto this ship? Were all they all accounted for among the corpses?" Lady Diellza asked.

Subthot Tonfa, strapped in chair merely laughed, but coughing fits. The man's armor had been lacerated during the fight and during his interrogation, claw marks scoring deeply into the armor, with patches of flesh torn out of him. Disgustingly enough there wasn't even the sweet smell of blood to at least compensate for the Breen's intransigence. "Remove his mask," the Unguis chief ordered.

Igar, the Paladin assigned to her by Nadfar Renz, the new commander of the elite guard, rushed to obey her orders. Tonfa pulled away, thrashing and bucking against his restraints. Igar latched his large paws on either side of the mask and twisted the mask upward as if were a screw.

"Be careful not to break his neck," Diellza ordered.

"No, no," Tonfa said, almost pleading.

"Halt," Diellza commanded and Igar reluctantly stopped. But he hovered over the Breen, his hands still clamped on the sides of the mask. "Tell us what we want to know and I will not remove your mask."

"I...will only tell you this," Tonfa said slowly, barely whispering. Diellza moved forward, leaning down slightly to hear him fully.

"Go on," she prodded.

"You...you're all going to die," Tonfa's laughter sounded like metal scraping, painful to the Alshains' sensitive hearing.

Despite her pain, Diellza reached forward, grabbed underneath the edge of the Breen's mask and ripped it from his head. As he gasped, steam rising from the collar of his suit, the noxious mix of chemicals covering his face, it was now Diellza that had the last laugh.

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### ***USS Diadem*** **Main Bridge**

"I don't think I'll ever get over how big warbirds are," Ensign Baker remarked, her eyes as big as moons as she took in the large, predatory green ship hurtling towards them.

"They're size isn't what I'm worried about at the moment," Lt. Reeves replied.

"*Acastus* is powering forward disruptor arrays," Mr. Zoll called out.

"Evasive maneuvers Eloise," Tom informed the flight controller. The *Diadem* moved to avoid the shafts of disruptor energy unleashed from the *Acastus*, but they hadn't reacted fast enough. To everyone Tom called out, "Brace for incoming!"

Fortunately *Diadem* missed most of the volley, Ensign Baker jerking the ship hard to starboard. The underside of the ship was clipped however, rattling the bridge so hard that Tom's teeth clattered. "Damage report!" He ordered.

"We've lost the main sensor array," Daf said, "And the engineering hull launcher."

"Casualties?"

"I don't have that information yet," The Trill replied.

"Okay," Tom said, turning his focus back to the battle at hand. "Let's give them a little payback."

"Aye , aye sir," Zoll said with relish. Tom felt the thrumming beneath his feet as the Warrant Officer let loose a salvo. Several golden beams smashed into the *Acastus's* shields.

"No direct impacts," the Zaldan griped before Tom could ask, "But there shields have been weakened twenty percent."

"Hit them again," Tom commanded before the ship lurched. The lighting dimmed, before returning to normal. "How bad?"

"Several portside hull breaches, on Decks Seven through Twelve," Lt. Daf said. "Emergency measures have already been enacted."

"Hit them Mr. Zoll," Tom ordered, "And try striking blood this time."

"I will," the Zaldan promised. A fusillade of phaser blasts pummeled the *Acastus*. The bubble around the ship wavered and then disappeared. The next round stitched across the warbird's bow.

"Direct hits to the main hull, weapons and propulsion systems," Zoll said with obvious satisfaction.

"But not enough to make those systems inoperative," Daf noted.

"I was getting to that," the Zaldan grouched.

"Why aren't they moving?" Baker asked.

"Why aren't we?" Tom snapped. The human woman quickly put in a new course and the ship dipped just before the *Acastus* returned fire. The *Diadem* came up behind the warbird and began firing at its aft section. "Damn I wish we had photon or quantum torpedoes."

"Yeah, these Remans aren't very astute when it comes to starship combat," Zoll remarked. "I wonder how they got the jump on the *Alphard*?"

"I really don't want to find out," Tom said. "Take out their aft shields and then their engines." Zoll responded, unloosing a quiver of phaser bolts at the backside of the warbird. Before they hit pay dirt, the Remans began firing back, with a ferocious mix of disruptor beams and photon torpedoes. "Break off, break off!" Tom ordered.

The *Diadem* pulled back, out of the range of fire. "Hail them," Tom ordered.

"Hailing frequencies are open, though the Remans have not established a visual link," Lt. Daf said.

"All right," Tom muttered, before saying more loudly, "Iako, this is getting us nowhere. We are pretty evenly matched. Even if you somehow succeed in destroying our vessel yours will be so crippled that you won't make it to Dominion territory before you encounter another Starfleet ship or a fleet of them. Surrender now and I will consider granting any asylum requests you might wish propose."

"*Acastus* is coming about," Lt. Daf said.

"But they are powering down their weapons," Zoll said, disappointed. The main viewer shifted to an image of Iako.

"You would do such a thing?" The Reman asked, with obvious skepticism. "How can I trust you?"

*Good point*, Tom thought. He looked around the bridge, seeing if anyone else had an idea. *All right*, he decided after a few moments, after an insane idea popped into his head. "Okay, how about I request your asylum from the bridge of your ship?"

"You would do that?" A shocked Iako asked.

"Yeah, you would do that?" Zoll muttered.

"Sir, I protest," Daf said.

"So do I," Tom whispered, "But it's the best way we can prevent more bloodshed."

"If you lower your shields I'll be aboard," Tom began. Iako chuckled.

"I see your aim now, an almost brilliant ruse," the Reman said. "But we will not give you an opening to land a death blow."

"*Acastus* is powering weapons again," Zoll said tightly.

"Damn," Tom muttered. "Fire now! Hit them before they can get a shot off at us!" Zoll was quicker on the draw. The *Diadem's* volley smashed into the *Acastus's* still weakened shields, demolishing large sections of the warbird. "Move," Tom ordered, "Stick and move, we've still got maneuverability on our side." The *Diadem* danced around the warbird, firing and moving on, striking on all sides. Eloise's moves made Tom dizzy, but as long as it was keeping them alive he wasn't complaining. The Remans tried to compensate against the pinwheel assault, but Tom guessed their lack of space combat worked against them the longer the battle progressed.

"The *Acastus's* shields are down!" Zoll shouted in triumph.

"Hail them again," Tom commanded. A bloodied Iako reappeared, his features distorted by a static filled screen.

"You will not defeat us," he rasped. "We would rather die free than live enslaved...either as vassals of the Star Empire...or the Federation."

"Detecting a buildup in the warbird's singularity drive," Daf said. "Oh gods, they are overcharging their propulsion system!"

"Beam off as many as you can!" Tom said.

"What?" Zoll asked.

"You heard me!" Tom snapped. "Do it, now!"

"Aye sir," Lt. Daf replied.

"Put them in the cargo bays, behind forcefields," Tom said, "And alert security to take position at the entrance to each beam-in site."

"Yes sir," The Trill responded.

"No, don't deny us an honorable death!" Iako thundered before he disappeared in a shaft of light.

"The *Acastus* will reach critical mass in ten seconds," Lt. Daf said. "We have to get out of here, now."

"How many people are still on the warbird?" Tom asked.

"You really don't want to know," The Trill said with an empathetic look.

"You're probably right," Tom admitted. "Eloise, get us out of here." Ensign Baker had just taken the *Diadem* to full impulse when the *Acastus* exploded, catching them in the shockwave.

*Not again*, Tom thought as he was thrown from his seat, consoles exploding around him.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

#### **Healing Chamber**

Darkness enshrouded them. "What happened?" Ensign Rojas said.

"Don't know," Glover said tersely. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yes sir," both Pell and Juanita answered back. The quietness was disturbed with soft grunting.

"Pell, are you alright?" Glover asked.

"Yes sir, could you help me with the door?"

"Of course," the captain said, slowly making his way carefully through the pitch. He reached out, his fingertips brushing against unyielding metal. "I'm here," he said.



"Good sir," Pell's hand reached out and grasped his. Terrence felt a small spark and immediately felt embarrassed. He was glad the Bajoran couldn't see him. Pell guided his hand to a seam in the door. "Start here sir," she instructed.

"You got it," Glover said, latching both hand onto the seam. He began pulling with all of his strength.

"I want to help too," Rojas said, sounding a bit petulant. Seconds later, she bumped into him before navigating to the other side of Lt. Commander Pell. "Sorry sir," she said.

"Don't worry about it," Glover said through clenched teeth, his focus almost completely on opening the uncooperative door. Though it seemed to take an eternity, the servos gave and the door slowly parted. Terrence blinked, his eyes adjusting to the emergency lighting shining up from the length of the hallway's floor. He noticed Pell on her knees and Rojas to the side of her. Both women were drenched with sweat and Glover was damp himself. The captain led the way out into the corridor.

"What do we do now?" Juanita asked. Glover didn't like deferring but he turned to Lt. Commander Pell.

"Ojana, you know this ship better than we do, where should we go next?"

In the wan light, Terrence could see the pinched expression on the woman's face as she considered her options. Seconds later, the corridor filled with a terrible racket, and several heavily armored guards ran by them, seemingly oblivious to their presence. "Umm, how about we follow them?" The Bajoran suggested.

"Sounds good to me," Glover wryly remarked.

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

Strong hands shook Tom awake. "Lt. Reeves, Lieutenant...Tom," Lt. Daf called, shaking him again.

"What?" Reeves said, his voice sounding slurred and unfamiliar to his own ears. His head throbbed with pain. "Whas happenin'?"

"The Remans have escaped the cargo bay, that's what," Warrant Officer Zoll snarled. "I'm going down there to deal with the situation."

"Yeah, you do that," Tom said, still not fully grasping the enormity of what he had just been told. Daf helped him gently to his feet and placed him back in the central chair. Tom struggled not to slide back out of it, and into a mote of darkness. He heard Zoll's heavy footsteps behind him, moving toward the turbolift, but only turned his head when he heard the Zaldan gasp, followed by a nearly collective sound of wonder across the bridge.

Captain Tallis stood in the entrance of the lift, her uniform bloody, and a jagged, alien blade in one of her hands. "I just took care of one of them; think you can clean up the rest Mr. Zoll?"

"Yes sir," the Zaldan said with enthusiasm.

"Get to it," the Andorian commanded. She walked along the aft portion of the bridge, taking stock and allowing everyone to see her before she went down into the command well. Tom struggled to rise to relinquish command of the seat to her, but Tallis firmly pressed him back into the seat. "Don't get up on my account," she tried to smile. "You've earned it."

"But sir?"

The Andorian looked at Lt. Daf. "Call Dr. Heine and see if we can't get a medic up here for Tom and the others."

"I will sir," the Trill replied. Daf quickly moved to an unoccupied aft station. Tallis took the Executive Office seat.

"Mr. Daf, what's our status?"

"Sir, ship systems took a severe hit due to the destruction of the *Acastus*," the Trill said. "We've lost main propulsion, shields, and are running on auxiliary power. You already know about our Reman problem."

"How long will it take to get us back up and running?" The captain asked.

"I can't say for certain sir," the Trill answered honestly. "And Dr. Heine will send up a medic as soon as she's able."

"Good work," Tallis said. She turned to Tom and leaned close to him. "Thank you...for everything. You're going to get you some help as soon as we take care of the Remans."

"I was just doing my job sir," Tom said.

"I'm going to make sure you continue to do it, but with a new title, Lieutenant Commander." Tallis smiled briefly.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Surgical Chamber**

The Starfleet trio followed the Alshain guards into the crowded medical room. During the run ship's lighting had been restored. A smallish, golden downed woman whipped around, her nostrils flaring and her fangs flashing, "How did you escape?" She snapped.

"I wasn't aware we were prisoners," Glover replied. "Are we?"

"Should you be?" The woman replied. "First the Breen assault, then your convenient arrival, and now this!"

"This? What happened?" Glover moved forward, but the guards crowded around the woman. "And how are you?"

"It's Lady Diellza, one of the chiefs of the Unguis."

"The secret police," Terrence remarked with displeasure. The idea of a government employing such repressive techniques against its own populace disgusted him. And it made him even more skeptical of the feasibility of an alliance with the Exarchate, especially since he wondered how many shared Diellza's view of the Federation.

"I'm Captain Terrence Glover," he replied.

"I know who you are," she said dismissively, turning away. She nodded, and the wall of soldiers parted. The trio eased their way past the armor and coarse fur. Exarch Jedalla lie in an encased biobed, spidery cracks running the length of it.

"Prophets," Pell whispered, covering her mouth. "What happened?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Queen Symea said. She rested against the biobed, half of her facial fur burned off. A medic was running a scanner over her injuries. Both were surrounded by blood.

"Who does that blood belong to?" Terrence asked.

"Lord Burim," Diellza said.

"Where's the body?" Pell asked.

"We've already removed it."

"What happened here?" Glover asked again.

Symea snorted, pawing at the medic. "A Jem'Hadar tried to kill the Exarch. Burim and Renz gave their lives protecting my husband and me."

"A Jem'Hadar?" Terrence asked. "One survived? Has been captured or killed?"

"He escaped," Diellza said, a note of dejection in her voice. "He shrouded."

"Yes, after his cowardly attack...he...shimmered into nothingness."

"Damn," Terrence pounded his fist into his other open palm. "One of those bastards got away. He was probably behind the power outage too."

"It might be more than one," A spindly, well dressed older Alshain noted. Diellza glowered.

"Do you have any method to track them?" Pell asked.

"Our sensors are just as inadequate against the Jem'Hadar shrouds as yours have been," Glover recognized War Minister Ardit from Federation News Service clips.

"That's not what I mean. Can you pick up his scent?" The Bajoran clarified.

"No," Symea said, with a pained bewilderment. "I did not pick up his scent."

"Perhaps he has found some way to mask that as well," Vizier Topal offered.

"No matter," Lady Diellza declared, "We will find the assassin or assassins and dine on their entrails."

"See that you do," Queen Symea warned, "Or you will be the main course instead."

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Deck Three**

Zoll's security team hadn't gotten far, but the Remans had. They tore from the lower levels, a rabid horde of wraiths. Turning the corner on the officer's floor, the Zaldan warrant officer heard the Remans before he saw them. "Stop," he hissed, throwing himself backward before a hail of disruptor fire ionized the air in front of him.

"Damn, they're quick," grouched Officer M'Koma.

"Doesn't matter now," Officer Payne replied, an octagonal green sensor eyepiece covering his left eye. "The rampage ends here."

"My sentiments exactly," Zoll said. He gave several hand signals and the crew took up positions, threading down the corridor, behind what bulkheads or other cover they could find. The Zaldan knelt and Payne took up position behind him. The young human cradled a TR-116 rifle. The rifle was loaded with tritanium bullets, hard enough to punch through the wall they were propped against. The exographic targeting sensor he sported over his eye allowed Payne the ability to see through walls. Unfortunately, Zoll hadn't been able to outfit his entire security detachment with similar technology. Only Payne and Officer Milon had the rifles. Everyone else held phaser rifles or pistols. Milon stood a safe distance behind Payne. Both men pressed their rifle emitters against the wall and awaited Zoll's instructions. The Remans fired again, and Zoll returned fire, but told his two ringers to hold back.

The Zaldan tapped the chevron-shaped combadge on his chest.

*"Reeves here."*

"Do we have enough power to erect a forcefield in Deck Three, Corridor G?" Zoll rasped. He wanted to trap the Remans inside the corridor and give them a chance to surrender. If they didn't, he was going to order Payne and Milon to pick them off.

*"Let me check,"* Reeves replied. Seconds later, he came back online, *"That's a negative."*

"I thought as much," Zoll replied.

*"I'm sorry,"* Reeves answered.

"Don't worry about us," Zoll said. "We'll make do."

*"Good luck,"* Reeves responded. Zoll grunted before looking up at the two anxious men.

"Take them out, incapacitate as many as you can."

"Aye sir," came the crisp replies. Payne was all business now. And Zoll never had seen a time when the Benzite Milon wasn't serious. The recoils reverberated through the hall as both fired multiple rounds. Zoll squinted, chips of metal and dust pelting his face and stinging his eyes from the reports, but he held his ground. It

would look unseemly to appear fazed or daunted. He also took cautious peeks around the corner and fired a few shots every few seconds.

"They're running sir," Payne replied.

"That means they've got brains at least," M'Koma said.

"Not for long," Payne boasted. The Caitian sniffed with disgust.

"Why do you have to be so bloodthirsty?" She replied.

"Enough repartee, it's time to give chase," Zoll ordered. He stood up and waved his phaser hand forward. "Let's go."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Conservatory Salon**

"Keep your wits keen Cub," Queen Symea whispered down, her voice ragged with just a hint of pain. She limped along but Juanita and the guards surrounding them both knew better than to make note of it.

The contingent entered the darkened cartography room; only the muted stars dotting the walls provided dull illumination. "Behind me," Symea whispered, sweeping Juanita behind her. She heard the larger woman inhale, and the other Alshain did likewise. "Do any of you have its scent?"

"No my queen," came the terse replies.

"The creature is not here," Symea said, frustration creeping into her tone.

"Shouldn't we turn on the lights first and give this room a good once over before we move on to the next one?" Juanita asked. The question prompted a round of chuckling. Juanita looked around, her eyebrow raised in consternation. "I didn't know I made a joke."

"Lower your hackles Little One," Symea said, "We forget that humans don't have our heightened olfactory or visual senses."

"Besides turning on the lights wouldn't mean much if the Jem'Hadar was shrouded," one of the Alshain soldier's added.

"Perhaps, but maybe he left a clue behind that we might miss, if we are too focused on just picking up his scent," Juanita countered.

The queen nodded. "That does make sense," She said. She turned to her guards. "Activate the illumination and spread out."

"Thank you your Highness," Juanita felt mollified and pleased that the queen took her seriously.

"No, my apologies, sometimes we can rely too much on our senses," Symea confided. "It is a great strength that can be turned into a weakness with a crafty enough foe."

"I can't think of any adversaries craftier than the Jem'Hadar," Juanita said.

"I'm starting to understand why," the queen concurred.

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## ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

### **Food Storage Bins**

"The smell is atrocious," Captain Glover remarked. "What exactly do these Alshain dine on?" He asked, disgusted. He and Pell had been dispatched to the ship's lower levels in search of the Jem'Hadar. They were scouring over the food stores, and had already completed their inspection of the hydroponics labs. Now they walked between walls of metal doors, marked only with thin ventilation slits. Occasionally one of the creatures would growl, wail, or plow into the door of their containment unit as they passed by.

"If you want to keep your lunch I suggest you avoiding looking in the stalls," Pell replied. "Phew." She placed a finger under her nose.

"I know that Diellza put us on this detail for spite," Terrence replied. "They don't expect the Jem'Hadar to be hiding out down here. Even with his shroud, the smells he would pick up here would follow him like a solar flare."

"True," Pell agreed.

"So, this assignment was to keep us out of the way," Glover said. "What kind of allies are these?"

"They aren't as bad as it seems sir," Pell said.

"They eat live food, they still have social stratification and a group of second-class citizens living among them," Glover said, glowering. "I've read reports about their treatment of the Itrob. It's deplorable."

"Sir, greater ties to the Federation might alleviate some of those problems. The Alshain are torn between their imperial past and the desire to be seen and respected as a modern nation. Once they realize that most modern nations don't condone slavery, caste systems, or discrimination they might relent."

"Might, that's a big if," Glover replied.

"I know, but we've been allies with the Klingons for almost a hundred years and they are still an expansionist power."

"But that's different," Glover said.

"How so?" Pell rounded on him.

"Well," the captain shrugged. "It just is."

"No, we saw an opportunity for peace and we took it, mainly for our own benefit, and now an alliance with the Alshain offers a chance for us to expedite the end of the war, and we are taking it. The Federation can turn a blind eye to a lot of things if they stand in the way of their interests, or if they aren't threatening their interests....like the Occupation."

Glover tensed. "Pell...." He began.

"Terrence you have nothing to be sorry for. That blood dried a long time ago."

"But it still stains the galaxy," Glover said. "If we had done something about the Cardassians earlier then maybe the Dominion wouldn't have gained a foothold into the Alpha Quadrant."

Pell laughed bitterly. "You really believe that? If it hadn't been the Cardassians, it would've been someone else...maybe even the Alshain. Someone would've taken that Pah Wraith's bargain."

"Perhaps you're right," he glumly concluded. "But it doesn't erase the fact that the Federation did far too little to help your people."

"I know," Pell said. She reached out and squeezed his shoulder. "But your father's advocacy really helped some of us, and I'll be eternally grateful."

"Thank you for that," Terrence said. "It means a lot to me for you to say that."

Pell nodded, smiling. "It's heartfelt."

"I know," Glover said. "Now, let's move on to other topics."

"Such as," Pell asked, but her tone knowing.

"What's going on with your love life?"

"Sir, I don't think this is the time or place to discuss such matters."

"So, I take that as nothing then," Glover grinned. Pell merely smiled bashfully.

"Well, I for one am glad you decided to kick old Sandy to the curb."

"It didn't happen like that," Pell countered. "Donald got a great opportunity on the *Venture* and he took it, with my blessing."

"Yeah, whatever," Terrence blew through his teeth. "If he had been half the man I thought he might be, he would've recognized your worth more than any executive officer's seat."

"It's nice of you to say so Terrence, but I find it a little disingenuous, such a sentiment coming from you of all people. I believe your image would pop up under the definition of ambition in the database."

"No it wouldn't," Glover grinned. "That would be Captain Shelby on the *Sutherland*. Trust me, I know."

"I'll go with my gut on this one instead," Pell smiled.

"Suit yourself," Terrence shrugged. He held up the bulky scanner the Alshain had given him and swept it around the hall.

"Anything?"

"Nah," the captain said. "Just like before." He pulled the communicator latched to his belt and updated Lady Diellza. After his report, Glover declared, "There's nothing down here, and I'm tired of being sent on snipe hunts. Give us something substantial to do."

"*Snipe?*" Diellza asked, flippantly. "*I am not aware of that animal, but it sounds delicious. Stand by.*" Static filled the other line, and Pell braced herself for an angry retort. After a few stretched seconds, Diellza said, "*Take the nearest lift back to the Command Salon. We will reconnoiter there.*"

"That sounds like a plan," Glover replied, giving Pell a confident smirk. Once he had deactivated the communicator, he said. "Now that's how you get things done."

Pell rolled her eyes. "If you say so sir."

"I do. Say so," He bowed and made a sweeping gesture, "After you milady." The lift was just around the corner. Stepping in, Pell, more conversant in Alshain script input the transit command. The lift lurched upward, but then stopped with such force that Pell fell backward. Glover rushed to catch her, and she fell into his arms. He held her for a few seconds, their eyes connecting and his body flushed with warmth.

"I'm...uh...okay now Terrence," Pell whispered.

"Oh, yeah, of course," Glover stammered. He placed the woman upright. He looked down and around, composing himself before facing her again.

"It appears there's a glitch with the lift," Pell said.

"Try it again," Terrence said. "You know Alshain technology isn't as advanced as our own."

"I'm aware of that," Pell went back to the panel and input the same command. This time a surge of electricity shot out of the panel, wrapping around the Bajoran's hand with a lethal grip. Terrence launched himself at her, yanking her back and into his arms again with such force that he lost his footing. He fell against the wall and the quivering Pell fell on top of him.

"Ojana! Ojana!" He cried, holding the woman tightly. He placed her right side up. She had stopped quivering, and was no longer breathing. Glover immediately placed her on the deck and administered CPR. He was still working on her when the lift's light went out and the cabin plunged.

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Deck Three**

Every few seconds one of the retreating Remans would fire backwards, their wild shots usually missing. Except this time. The blast hit Officer M'Koma with such force that it spun her around. She crashed into a partially opened door. She grasped both ends of the door, trying to maintain her footing. Her claws scored into both edges of the door, pushing them apart. M'Koma fell forward into the room, the agony in her side spreading like a lava flow of pain throughout her body.

Clutching her sides, her pain was overwhelmed by a stronger scent of death. She blinked back the darkness, her eyes focusing on the charred husk smoldering in the center of the room. "Oh gods," she said, the scent registering a memory. She whispered the name, her heart filling with terror.



On the periphery of consciousness she heard voices around her. She sensed their concern. She tried pointing at the remains, telling them what they were. Before she slipped into darkness she was at least darkly gratified to hear someone utter: "The captain. That's the captain's body."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

#### **Lift**

Captain Terrence Glover's mind raced as he thought of survival techniques. He placed Pell's insensate body. He pushed his concern back to her to the back of his mind as he rushed over the blackened control panel. He gingerly touched the charred metal. Thankful that he hadn't been shocked, Terrence worked on the bolts connecting the panel to the wall. It was slow, painful going, the metal bolts cutting into his flesh. Eventually Terrence gave up. He wouldn't be able to open the panel in however seconds were left. He was at least grateful that the humongous cruiser at least gave them a few more seconds until it reached bottom. He could feel his stomach plunging along with the cabin.

Glover went back over to Pell and lay down beside her. He reached out and touched Pell's shoulder before wrapping his hand in hers. He had read before that the best way to survive a runaway elevator was to lay flat on the floor. The captain didn't know if it would work, and he silently made his goodbyes. It would be an interesting way to go, he figured, but at least he would die in the line of duty; a fitting end. He transferred his sadness to Pell. She had had such a rough life, living under Cardassian Occupation, losing her husband, living as a homeless refugee, and then her fitful relationship with Donald Sandhurst. She had never seemed to find much peace after leaving Bajor. Terrence wished that she had. He gazed at her. The sound of the screeching metal and burning cables filled his ears, drowning out everything else. "It's been a hell of a ride old friend," the captain whispered. He closed his eyes and prepared for eternity.

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### ***USS Diadem***

#### **Main Bridge**

Lt. Kurman Daf's combadge beeped. He tapped without thinking, his mind still focused on getting all of the ship's systems back online. "Tallis is a Changeling," Zoll's ragged whisper cut through the Trill's preoccupation. He blinked.

"What?"

"Something wrong Lieutenant?" Lt. Reeves called out from the command well. Daf looked around and saw several other officers looking at him.

"Oh...uh, nothing," he squeaked.

"Was that one of the repair groups or security groups checking in?" Captain Tallis asked. She stood up and looked at him. He tried not to stare too hard, but there was nothing suspicious about her. She looked and acted like the captain he had served under years. But from what he had heard and read the changelings were masters of disguise that could imitate anyone down to the molecular level. But they also could mimic voices. Who was to say that it was really Zoll on the other line?

"One of the security groups, just informing me that the optical data network station has been secured. It's safe to send a repair crew down there now."

"Strange that they wouldn't inform us of that first," Reeves said.

"Who is heading that team?" Tallis asked.

Daf hesitated, "Well...umm...."

"Who?" The Andorian's gaze hardened. Her compin chirped. She activated it.

"Warrant Officer Zoll," came the reply, loud enough to be heard across the now nearly silent bridge.

"Is there some reason for this breach in protocol?" Tallis asked sharply.

"Yeah," the Zaldan said. "You're a Changeling. We just found the real Tallis's remains in her cabin." Certainly the bluntness sounded like Zoll.

Tallis laughed. "How do we know that you aren't the shape-shifter?"

"I'm willing to take a blood screening. Are you?" Came the terse reply.

"I've heard enough," the captain tapped off.

"Captain?" Lt. Reeves asked cautiously. "We have to test you."

"Of course," she said. "But first I want Zoll taken into custody and returned to the bridge."

Daf watched anxiously as Tom redirected a security detail to intercept Zoll's team. "That's done captain." The wearied human replied. "Now, the blood screening."

"Ah yes," the Andorian turned to him slowly. She put out her arm and rolled back her sleeve. "I'm ready when you are."

"Someone grab a medical kit," Reeves instructed, turning away from the captain. In that brief second Daf watched in voiceless horror as Tallis's arm elongated, her fingers shaping into a blade that speared Reeves. The human twitched in pain and surprise, trying to turn back around, to see futilely who had attacked him. Tallis, or the thing masquerading as Tallis, twisted the blade and Reeves gasped, spitting out blood. The shape-shifter pulled the blade from him. Her other arm had morphed into a similar weapon. The bridge crew recoiled. She grinned, the fact that it still wore Tallis's face, made the expression even more frightening.

"Now the fun begins," she promised.

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***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

## **Lift**

Glover smiled as he felt a familiar tingling run from his boots and up his body. Thank God, he thought as the transporter took him. He glanced over and saw Pell dissolving as well. "We're not out of the game yet," he whispered.

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### ***USS Diadem***

#### **Captain's Quarters**

#### **Deck Three**

"I want the rest of you to keep pursuing the Remans," Zoll commanded. "We can't let them run wild on the ship."

"Sir, you can't take on a Changeling alone," Payne replied. "I'm going with you."

"No, you're following orders," the Zaldan puffed out his chest.

"Screw orders!" Payne shot back. "These bastards just killed M'Koma! They killed the captain and now one of them is running loose on the bridge. It's my duty to protect this ship and that mother frinxer is the greatest threat to our security!"

"Well said," Zoll said. "You come with me. The rest of you, get going. Milon you're in charge."

"I can't wait to put a bullet through that Founder," Payne said.

"I can't wait to watch you do it," Zoll added.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

#### **Command Salon**

"That was a close call sir," Ensign Juanita Rojas said, smiling. She wiped away tears. "I thought I was about to lose you too sir."

Glover wrapped the young woman in a firm embrace. He leaned down and said softly, "You will never lose me. I'm too tough to die."

Juanita chuckled. "You almost have me believing it."

"I'll make a true believer before too long," he promised.

"Is Commander Pell going to be okay?" She asked. Glover looked toward the Alshain. They were hovering over her. Through the hirsute wall, the captain saw one of the Alshain waving a scanner over her.

Terrence, holding Juanita's hand, pushed his way through the circle. "How is she? Will she be all right?" The kneeling Alshain looked up.

"She will live," The woman said. "But she will need medical attention for the burns."

"Take her to an auxiliary medical chamber," Queen Symea commanded. The female officer picked out several burly warriors and they gently picked up Pell's body. Symea gave another order and the quartet was beamed away.

"Shouldn't we go with them?" Rojas asked.

"There's not much we can do for Pell now," Terrence replied. "And I trust the medical staff to mend her injuries. I shouldn't have a reason not to trust them, should I?" He turned to Lady Diellza. She snorted.

"No harm will come to her," The Unguis operative replied.

"You have my word," Symea added, mollifying Juanita. She trusted the fearsome royal.

"I'm assuming that we have our Jem'Hadar saboteur to thank for that mishap," Glover ventured.

"That is correct," Diellza said.

"Did any search team encounter him?"

"No," The Unguis replied grimly.

"We must redouble our efforts," Queen Symea said.

"I agree," Vizier Topal chimed in.

"We will reform teams," the queen began.

The captain cut her off. "I don't want to go on a wild goose chase. I want to be in the thick of things. This bastard tried to kill me, and he hurt my friend. I want him." Juanita was a little frightened by the change that had come over the captain. The rage had come over him like a storm cloud, and she could see the fire blazing in his eyes. It reminded her of how he was after Chin'toka. Thinking about Chin'toka, all that carnage, and Pedro, Juanita realized that she understood better than most the cause of his anger.

Symea nodded. "Your blood thirst is admirable."

"You don't know the half," Terrence said.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **En Route to the Armory**

Captain Terrence Glover was seething. All he saw flashing before his eyes was Pell's unconscious body; it seemed like the smell of her burned flesh would linger in his nostrils forever. He walked beside War Minister Ardit. He was the only Alshain in their search party walking upright. The other guards were loping on all fours, and some had even taken to crawling along the walls. Glover was impressed despite himself at the warriors' agility and the sharpness of their claws.

Ardit leaned forward, his ears standing up on his head, his nostrils flaring as he took in the scents of the corridor. "Anything?" Glover asked. He had been able to stop himself from repeating the question every few seconds. The white-furred War Minister didn't seem too annoyed by the captain's persistence. Terrence wouldn't have cared if he had been. Ardit turned to him briefly.

"Nothing," he said tersely, before taking another whiff.

"Damn, this is getting us nowhere," Terrence grouched.

"What do you suggest we do, *not* search for the Jem'Hadar?" Ardit asked, a fine smattering of scorn in his voice.

"No," Glover said. "I say we call him out."

"What?"

"Call him out," the captain repeated.

"Excuse me?"

Terrence sighed. "The Jem'Hadar are warriors, first and foremost. If he feels his honor has been questioned, he will respond."

"The Jem'Hadar are soldiers of the Dominion, genetically programmed to worship their Founders," Ardit repeated. "Perhaps his mission is to disrupt the peace conference and he has chosen to do it by stealth."

"Maybe," Glover shrugged, his nonchalance belying his words. "But I don't buy that. Besides there aren't any Founders around to give him orders, and he's got to be frothing with revenge for the way we slaughtered his buddies. Restraint isn't a Jem'Hadar strong suit."

"When you did you become such an expert on the Jem'Hadar?" Ardit challenged. Glover pulled up to his full height, just reaching the base of the Alshain's throat. The captain glared up at him regardless.

"I've killed more Jem'Hadar than you care to know," Terrence said.

"And you regretted each death I'm sure, in human fashion," Ardit replied.

"No, I did not," Glover said, hating the coldness in his voice, but he couldn't lie. He had stopped caring about the lives he took to defend the Federation for quite some time, and now with Pedro's death and Pell injured, his heart had never been blacker.

Ardit pulled him short, his ears drooping slightly as if he was seeing Glover for the first time. "You are serious?"

"Am I smiling?"

"You humans never cease to surprise me," the War Minister shook his head.

"I'm glad we keep you amused," Terrence quipped.

"Perhaps I was wrong to advise the Exarch not to join the Alliance. Though Earth's history is replete with bloodshed, I had thought the thirst had been leached out of your kind for centuries now."

"We..., well most, of us don't enjoy what we have to do in this war, but we do it regardless. We owe our families nothing less."

Ardit nodded solemnly, "Well spoken. What is the Klingon phrase, 'Die Well'?"

"Something like that, but I don't have any intentions of doing that any time soon," the captain remarked.

The War Minister chuckled, "Of course not, captain. You may try your approach."

Glover nodded. He stepped forward, and cleared his throat. Raising his voice, he called out, "Where are you? I know you're here, near the ship's armory, and I know you're shrouded, hiding like rodent! Come out and face me! I want to add your carcass to my growing collection of Jem'Hadar hides!" The captain paused, waiting a few moments. He glanced at Ardit and the Alshain gave a most humanlike shrug. The captain squared his shoulders and began again.

The taunting did nothing but reverberate off the walls. After a few more moments Glover stopped, feeling slightly embarrassed. He turned to Ardit. "Either he's not here or he's more of a coward than I thought."

"War Minister!" The guard at the point position reared up on his hind legs. He pulled at the rifle slung across his back, but before he could fire at the Jem'Hadar that had just shimmered in front of him, the gray-skinned warrior put a hole through him.

"Bingo," Glover muttered as he reached for the disruptor in his holster. The Jem'Hadar took aim at Ardit next and the captain jumped in front of him as the other Alshain warriors leaped en masse at the soldier.

"I don't need your protection," Ardit huffed. But Glover noticed that the War Minister didn't move away from him. The Jem'Hadar began a whirl, in one hand his disruptor barked fire and in the other, his *kar'takin* sliced through armor and fur. Completing his swirl, he stood alone. Four more Alshain warriors lie dead or dying at his feet. Terrence was stunned that the Jem'Hadar had been untouched. He knew he would have to do something to remedy that. The Jem'Hadar snarled, and Glover did likewise.

The captain aimed his weapon and fired. The weapon hit the Jem'Hadar point blank in the chest. The energy dissipated, rippling along the creature's chest. "What the hell?" Glover asked. The soldier moved forward, a smile etching across his hardened features.

Glover fired again, and again. But the Jem'Hadar absorbed the energy. Was it some type of personal shield? Glover's mind raced. No, it appeared like the Jem'Hadar had rippled along with the energy. But how could that be? Were his eyes deceiving him? Could whatever energy field surrounding the warrior be creating an optical illusion? The Jem'Hadar was almost upon him. Glover roared and charged forward, shifting the disruptor around to grasp its barrel. He would use it as a

bludgeon instead. The Jem'Hadar warrior took a defensive position, his pole arm at the ready.

"Computer, end program," Ardit said dryly. Glover's weapon sliced through thin air. He stumbled in the attempt to both slow his momentum and maintain his footing.

He turned on the War Minister. "What the fuck just happened?"

A disruptor was in Ardit's hand, and it was aimed at the captain. "I couldn't have our creation gut a Starfleet captain....especially when I have much bigger plans for you."

"Like hell you do," Terrence declared. "Once I finish whooping your ass I'll get to the bottom of this." He charged. Ardit fired.

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

Lt. Daf moved quickly, his fingers running across his flattened console. The Trill tried to block out the shouts and yelps from various bridge crew members as the shape-shifter wearing Captain Tallis's face continued her killing spree. "Done," he breathed in relief, seconds before the Changeling pierced his chest.

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## ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

### **Command Salon**

Queen Symea stood on the bridge, at its prow. Alone. Ensign Juanita Rojas knew what grief looked like, all too well lately, and she was tempted to walk over and inquire how the consort was. However, she was afraid that Symea might take her compassion as a sign that Juanita thought she was weak and bite her head off. Literally. So, she stuck to the task at hand.

Juanita had convinced the Queen that a full sensor sweep of the ship might yield a clue about the Jem'Hadar's whereabouts. Nauarch L'Dac had already ordered a full diagnostic of the ship's systems to determine if any more had been sabotaged after the turbolift accident. That search was still ongoing.

Juanita had parked herself at one of the console, squinting her eyes to try to divine the alien script as best as she could. So far she hadn't found much, or at least she hoped she hadn't, and just missed it.

"Admiral," one of the Science Officer's said, waving a frantic hand. "I've found something!" Everyone on the bridge turned to the salt-and-peppered female. L'Dac leaped out of his seat, landing gracefully on the upper command deck. Queen Symea was almost right on his heels, despite her injuries. But Juanita beat them both. She

glanced over the other woman's shoulders, her eyebrows knitting at the energy readings. They seemed familiar.

"What have you found Oyan?" He asked briskly.

"Some unusual low level power readings and they are running throughout the ship," she said. "They weren't a part of our schematics. Are they part of an upgrade?"

L'Dac rubbed his chin. "None that I am aware of?"

"Did you order these modifications?" Symea turned to Vizier Topal.

He shook his jowly head. "No my Queen." She turned back to L'Dac.

"What are they?"

"The readings are consistent with holographic imaging technology," Juanita said, proud that she had remembered the signatures from a paper Pedro had written on the subject. He had been a proponent of spreading holographic imaging technology throughout starships, allowing Emergency Medical Holograms full access. Starfleet hadn't implemented the procedure, but it appeared that the Alshain had. Or at least the *Vyras* had been equipped with them.

"Why is this important?" Symea focused her attention on Juanita. The young woman gulped before replying.

"On Starfleet vessels holographic figures are restricted to areas with holographic emitters...but on your vessel, holographic emitters have been spread throughout the ship."

"Why would this upgrade be necessary, and who authorized it?" Symea roared, angling around the bridge so that everyone could experience her ire. Most shrank back, but curiously Vizier Topal strode forward. The man's whole demeanor had changed. The nervousness had been replaced by a swagger that Juanita hadn't thought the man could ever possess.

"In order to do this," he said. "Computer, activate program." Several Jem'Hadar soldiers materialized on the bridge. The fake Jem'Hadar grabbed Juanita. She struggled against the photonic replicas but to no avail. The Jem'Hadar simulacra had even gotten the jump on Symea. Two held the woman and a third held a blade at her throat.

The Queen snarled. "Topal!" She roared. "I'll eviscerate you for this. Your entrails will flavor the broth I'll make of your blood."

Topal chuckled. "There was a time when females kept their place," he said wistfully. "Under Exarch Jasta, women would've never displayed such impudence. With the misguided Jedalla on the throne, so many of our old ways have been tossed to the winds. And now he wants to complete the destruction of our civilization by making war with the Dominion!"

"Topal, I knew you were an obsequious toady, but I never took you for a traitor. You have brought shame and dishonor upon your Sept," L'Dac said. "And this revolt ends now."



Topal grinned. "You're forgetting that the Queen transferred authority to Lady Diellza and I can assure you that she's an agreeable sort."

"The Unguis are involved too!" Symea's stunned expression showed a rare glimpse of vulnerability. Topal inhaled it. "And what of the Peerage?"

"D'Noth is an old fool," Topal said. "I couldn't risk him running back to Exarch Jedalla with our plan. However, I'm sure we can buy his complicity."

"And how could you do that?" Symea asked skeptically.

"By ending the blood feud with Sept L'Dac, and giving him the admiral's territory and holdings," the Vizier said coolly.

"I will never assent to that," The Nauarch declared.

"Dead men have no say in the matter," Topal said blithely. He glanced at one of bridge officers and they stood up. He pulled his sidearm from its holster and took aim. L'Dac stared the man down.

"Stop this! Don't do this! Its mutiny," Juanita snapped, "Don't you have any honor! He's your commander for God's sake!"

"Muzzle the cub," Topal commanded. Scaly hands covered Juanita's mouth. She tried biting the fingers, but the photonic soldiers had probably not been programmed to feel pain.

"End it," Topal commanded and the man did. A hushed, frightened pall hung heavy in the air. "Now, where were we?" Topal clapped, and sat down in the dead admiral's command chair.

"You'll pay for that, and all of this," Symea promised.

"Why should I? I'm not responsible for this unfortunate incident and the ones that are still to come," Topal declared.

"If you are not to blame, then who is," Symea said, struggling vainly against the Jem'Hadar. "Because I would certainly like to meet him."

"You already have," Topal said.

"What?"

"I said you already have," Topal said; Juanita could hear the twisted merriment in his voice.

"Who is it?"

"Why it's Captain Glover."

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Optical Data Network Station**

#### **Deck Three**

The damned Remans had decided to make another go at a stand right outside the ODN room. Milon had hastily ordered his men to take up positions, but his mind

was on the Founder on the bridge and the havoc it was wreaking. From there, it could destroy the ship. He just hoped that Warrant Officer Zoll and Payne got there in time to do something about it. But the Benzite wondered if they could really do much at all against a shape-shifter.

Milon used his exographic targeting sensor to gaze through the wall he was propped against. The Remans had spread out along the hall, taking up positions behind several bulkheads. It was going to be hard to root them out. "Great Dome Maker", he muttered. Two Remans were trying to pry open the door to the ODN room. "We can't have that now, can we?" Milon asked to no one in particular. He took aim and felled the two would be interlopers. Their deaths brought on a new round of firing from the Remans. Milon jumped back from the wall, the metal and plastics suddenly growing uncomfortably warm, but they were a long way from turning into slag.

"Let's hit them back," Guard Tart chopped at the bit to return fire.

"Being reckless could get you killed right now," Guard Leach admonished. "Calm down rookie," she added.

"You've only been on active duty for two months longer than I have," Tart shot back.

"Two months on a ship at war," Milon said sternly. "Do as she says and keep your emotions in check."

"Yes sir," Tart said grudgingly. Leach smiled at Milon, flicking a hand through her luxuriant red hair. The Benzite turned away quickly. He realized that Leach had been paying more attention to him lately and she had begun engaging in what humans called flirting. It was very disconcerting to Milon. He just hoped if he ignored her changed behavior that it would revert back to the way it had been. Another round of fire filled the hallway. Milon took another look through the wall with his sensor. The intense heat interfered with his readings, but it appeared that the Remans had been joined by others. A mass of dark shapes had joined the Remans.

"This just got a lot harder," Milon muttered.

"What has happened?" Leach asked, now all business.

"The Remans have gotten reinforcements," Milon hated to admit.

"We've got to move now, storm them before they do the same to us," Tart said.

"I agree sir," Guard Yu added. Leach nodded.

"We can't sit here like sitting ducks," she said.

"But the casualties," Milon said. "They'll have the superior position. They can pick us off one by one."

"But we'll have surprise going for us, and we're better trained," Tart said. "Some of else might not make it, sure, but we all signed on knowing that."

The Benzite looked again at Leach. She bit her lip and then looked away. Her head turned away from him, she whispered. "I think he's right sir."

"All right," Milon said, motioning with his free hand. "We go, in a staggered formation." He traded his rifle and sensor with Yu. He took her phaser. "I want you holding back and these might come more in handy to you."

The young woman nodded. "Yes sir."

"I guess it's no time like the present for a mad charge," Milon tried to joke.

"Was that a joke, sir?" Leach asked, smiling.

"Something like that," he stiffly confessed.

"You've got to work on your comedic skills," the woman said.

"Maybe you can give me a few holodeck suggestions," Milon said, realizing too late that he had stepped into it. Leach brightened.

"I sure will sir." The Benzite shrugged. He realized too late that he had just made date. At the moment human dating rituals were the least of his worries, Milon tried to maintain perspective. Besides, if he survived the next few hours, going on a date with Leach might be more preferable.

"Those Remmies are far too quiet," Tart said. "I think they're up to something."

"Let's go, now," Milon said tersely. The security detachment swung out from their hiding places, their weapons at the ready.

A group of ragged, bloody Romulans stood in the middle of the hallway. "What kept you so long?" A female Romulan asked. She wiped her blade on the Reman corpse she was crouching over.

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Command Salon**

A hard slap brought Terrence to wakefulness. "What happened?" He asked groggily. His tongue was swollen and his mouth was dry as sandpaper. He squinted through at the painful lighting. "Ardit," he muttered.

"I'm here," the War Minister said.

"So are we." The faraway voice sounded like Pell's. He felt pressure against him, and spidery touch running across his hand. Glover tried to move his arms and realized he was bound.

"Pell?" Glover asked hopefully.

"I'm beside you Terrence," Pell whispered, though her voice actually sounded louder to him this time. He felt her warm breath on his check.

"I'm on the other side sir." It was Juanita. She rustled behind him. *Thank God they were both alive*, he thought. He realized the trio was sitting on the floor in the

well of the command salon. Shadowed, indistinct shapes that had to be their captors towered over them.

"Silence," the command was harsh. Glover opened his eyes wider, focusing on the origin of the venomous voice. It was the Vizier. Topal.

"You and Ardit, you're in this together?"

"I would feel disappointed if you didn't know of my role as well human," Lady Diellza stepped into his view. She looked down on him with scorn. "I gladly supplied the holographic generators to pull off our plan."

"Where's the queen?" Pell asked.

"Spending her last moments of life with the Exarch; we aren't heartless after all," Topal said.

"Why are we still alive?" Glover asked.

"We have plans for you," Ardit replied. The captain shook his head.

"I would never follow scum like you," Terrence declared.

"If you value the lives of your colleagues you will," Lady Diellza warned.

Pell laughed. "Do you really think we're dumb enough to believe you'll let any of us live?"

Diellza growled low in her throat. She moved toward the laughing Bajoran but Ardit restrained her.

"Calm yourself milady," he admonished. "Act accordingly to your station." Diellza snorted loudly in frustration, but then backed away.

"Whether you comply or not, it doesn't matter. We've already mapped your likeness and can replicate a holographic copy of you to do our bidding." The Vizier said.

"And what would that bidding consist of?" The captain asked, though he had a pretty good idea what the conspirators were up to.

"Your replica will assassinate the royal couple, negating the need for the Exarchate to join the Federation Alliance. You will be taken back to Alshain Proper for trial and execution."

Diellza gleefully added, "Actually we're just going to hand you over to the Dominion, a sign of faith that we will abide by our non-aggression treaty. Our Dominion contact has already expressed interest in meeting you Captain Glover. To accommodate her wishes we have already reversed course."

"This isn't going to fly, Starfleet won't just accept your explanation," Glover asserted, "And they'll see through your ruse."

"How can you be so certain of that?" Diellza smiled. "When you arrived, it was a boon for us Captain Glover. We had intended to pin the murders on Captain Covey, but her honored status among many of our people might've made convincing them of Covey's perfidy difficult. Not so you, not after we release a record of your actions, particularly during this war, and your psych evaluations provide all the ammunition

we require to peg you as a man that succumbed to terrible stresses and suffered a psychotic break.”

Glover roared, throwing himself against the restraints. “I’ll kill you! You had no right, no right to...how did you get access to my private files?”

“I’m Unguis,” Diellza said, the only explanation she felt was necessary. “Our people might even come to pity you...in time.”

“Besides I think Starfleet has greater concerns at the moment like holding off the Dominion than investigating a rogue captain,” War Minister Ardit said. “In a few months the Federation won’t even exist.”

The comment spiked the captain’s anger. He strained against his binding. “You son of a bitch!”

“Yes,” Ardit shrugged. “Is that supposed to be an insult on your planet?”

“Why Vizier Topal, have you done this? You have served the royal family for decades,” Pell asked, her curiosity overlying her disgust.

“I serve Sept O’Jinn still,” Topal quietly intoned.

“I don’t understand,” Pell remarked.

“It is not for you to comprehend,” Topal retorted. “Be grateful that we have revealed this much to you. I thought it was the least we could to inform you that your deaths will save billions of Alshain lives.”

“And doom the Alpha Quadrant in the process,” Glover added.

Diellza glared. “I’ve heard enough from you. Guards remove them to holding cells.”

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

Zoll had already made his peace with his family before he dropped from the ceiling, from one of the crawlspaces crisscrossing the bridge. He rolled immediately as he hit the hard deck, disappointed that he grunted in pain. At the end of his roll, he came up and swept his weapon around. The Founder, its shoulders and head resembling Captain Tallis but the rest of its body was an undulating mass of golden viscous fluid. “Mr. Zoll, so good of you to come,” it said, one arm flying out to bat his gun away, and cracking his fingers in the process. The end of the other arm formed into a spear, and it punctured his shoulder, pushing through meat and bone as the Changeling drove him against a wall.

Zoll clenched his teeth to prevent himself from screaming in pain. “How do you unlock the central computer?” The Tallis-thing asked. It twisted the blade after Zoll refused to answer. He screamed out, cursing himself for his weakness. The shape-shifter twisted the blade again. “Answer me.”

"Screw you!" The Zaldan yelled. Despite the agony, he relished the use of one of his favorite human expressions.

"You brought this on yourself Zaldan," The Changeling said. A knot formed on the spear-arm, morphing into a spindly smaller version. The Founder aimed it at Zoll's stomach. He steeled himself for disembowelment. "You can stop this," the creature was using the captain's voice. It enraged him further.

"Do your worst," he said.

The Changeling sighed. "You will come to regret those words." It aimed the arm towards Zoll's stomach. He tried to break free from the arm holding him to the wall, but his strength was waning and the pain too immense. The blade-arm nicked his stomach. Zoll flinched.

"Care to speak..." The Founder said before the bullet punched right through the center of its forehead. Zoll barely moved his own head in time before the bullet pounded through the wall, bits of metal and plastic pelting the Zaldan's face. The Changeling staggered backward, yanking its spear-arm free of Zoll's shoulder. The Zaldan yowled and fell to one knee. He touched the gushing wound, his fingers quickly becoming drenched with his blood.

He glanced in the direction of the captain's ready room. A neat hole marred one of its doors. The doors swished open seconds later and Officer Payne strolled out. "I got him."

"No, you didn't," Zoll said, struggling to his feet. The shape-shifter was in a gelatinous pool in front of him, writhing and reforming. "We don't have much time." He propped himself against the wall for support. He waved at the weapon's locker inset into a wall along the upper aft deck. "Photon grenades, and anything else that might blow this thing away, get them."

"I'm on it," Payne said. But he stopped and threw his rifle to Zoll. The Zaldan caught it one-handed and turned it on the coalescing Founder. A hand shot out from the pool, grabbing the rifle and yanking it from Zoll's grip. It threw the weapon at Payne, clocking him in the back of the head. The man fell forward, crashing onto the upper deck. Now Zoll couldn't see his prone body behind the elevated platform's consoles. The Changeling took human form rapidly, but this time it dispensed with the Tallis charade. It stood before him, a golden being with blunt, almost nonexistent facial features.

"If you do not unlock the computer I will destroy this vessel," the Founder promised.

"You're going to do that anyway," Zoll retorted.

"I will spare you, if you comply," the Changeling replied.

"No."

"If I can't get the information from you...perhaps from the human," the Founder turned toward the upper deck.

"Oh no you don't," Zoll reached for the alien's neck, but his hand passed through a glob of squishy fluid. The creature's face formed on the back of its head. And his body shifted without turning around.

"You have become tiresome," The Founder said. Zoll felt only a sharp sting for only a second and then nothing as the creature lanced his brain.

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Optical Data Network Station**

"Damn," Guard Jorianna Leach smashed her hand against the console. "We're locked out."

"That's not necessarily a bad thing," Milon replied. He stood over the flustered young woman. "It means that the Founder doesn't have access to our core systems."

"Unless he is the one that locked us out," Decurion Mucius replied, folding his arms across his broad chest. After the Romulans had introduced themselves it hadn't taken Mucius long to get under Leach's skin.

"How do you know it's a he?" Leach couldn't stop herself.

"That isn't any of your concern," Sublieutenant Pugio stepped forward. Mucius averted his eyes.

"I think it might be," Milon stepped forward. "Full disclosure might help us gauge what the Changelings motives be and what actions it might take to further them."

Mucius laughed. "The thing is heartsick."

"What?" Both Leach and Milon asked.

Pugio gritted her teeth. "Are you familiar with the Hundred?" Both Starfleet crewmen shook their heads. The Romulan officer sighed. "The Hundred were Changeling infants sent into space by the Dominion to collect information about other species. Have you heard of the Security Officer on your Deep Space Nine?"

"Constable Odo, of course," Milon said. When Leach shrugged, Milon frowned at her reproachfully.

"Sorry, but current events aren't my bag," the human female said.

"Odo was one of these Hundred. We discovered another...in the Hibernia System. We captured it and was transporting it back to Romulus to study. However, we didn't realize it had a mate. The creature impersonated one of our Reman overseers and sowed the seeds of mutiny among the slaves, all in an effort to free its beloved," Pugio said, a sneer growing on her face. "The commander gave his life to ensure that the creature's insurrection would not be rewarded."

"Oh God," Leach covered her mouth in shock. "It isn't a Founder?"

"Of course it is," Pugio said. "It possesses the same genetic stock. The research we could glean from studying it might provide us with a weapon to end this war once in for all."

"Not only do you practice slavery, you captured two noncombatants, murdered one, and want to use the other for a bioweapon," Leach charged, her face flushing with heat. "What kind of monsters are you?"

"Monsters that will still be standing when this war has concluded," Pugio said. "I wonder if the Federation, with its oversized and outdated 'morality' will be able to do what is required to bring a relentless foe like the Dominion to heel. It will require that we be more ruthless."

"Not at the price of losing our souls it won't," Leach shot back.

Pugio shrugged, in seeming imitation to the far more smug Mucius. "Our deities have no problem with victory."

"Enough of the recap and discussion of afterlives," Milon said. "I think we might be able to help out Mist'ers Zoll and Payne after all." All eyes, including Jorianna's, turned to the Benzite.

"The ODN system controls data transfer to the central computer core," the Benzite began.

"Access to the core had been blocked," Mucius pointed out, but Milon ignored him. A hard stare from Sublieutenant Pugio silenced the burly Romulan from speaking again.

"Not completely," the Benzite said. "We don't have access to major systems, but secondary systems, such as auxiliary transporters, we do."

"I don't follow you," Leach said.

"If we can get a lock on the shape-shifter, we can beam him out into space," Milon said.

"Impossible, the shape-shifter can mimic even inanimate objects down to the molecular level, and they can also survive space. What's to say that it doesn't attach itself to the hull, bore its way back in and kill us all," Pugio said, shaking her head as if her suggestions should be obvious.

"What do you propose?" Milon asked stiffly. Leach could see that the Benzite was making a herculean effort to maintain his poise.

"That we reconfigure one of your transporter beams to emit a quantum stasis field," Pugio suggested.

"Why?" Milon beat Jorianna to the punch.

Pugio looked at Mucius. The Decurion frowned but nodded for her to continue. "We have...developed a way to stop a Changeling from morphing. As long as it stays within range of the field, its powers will be severely depleted."



"Don't tell me this is the first time the Star Empire has shared this information with us, because that's the way it sounds to me," Leach. Milon scowled, and Jorianna shut up.

"It isn't," Pugio said in clipped tones.

"If you can do it, if you can trap the Changeling, then please do so," Milon stepped aside. Leach gave up her seat and Pugio slid quickly into it. With Leach's guidance, Pugio input the commands to create a stable field.

"Excellent," Milon nodded. He moved to another terminal. "I will reroute this to the nearest transporter. "It should only take...there."

"What are you waiting for," Pugio said. "Activate it."

"I already have."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Incarceration Chamber**

"I will slaughter you and your families personally!" Exarch Jedalla roared at the guards that delivered the trio of humans to his cell. The guards remained silent, but wary. They pushed the humans into the cell and hurriedly clanked the door shut. He winced as his rage caused a burning in his chest. His mate placed her hand on his shoulder, but he roughly shrugged it off. He had already shown far too much weakness and he would be damned if he revealed more. In fact, somewhere along the way, the Vizier had come to view him as weak, and had planned his downfall. He didn't think the obsequious Topal would ever have the nerve to defy him, in anything, if he didn't gauge that Jedalla could not respond appropriately.

And it appears that the Vizier had been right. He had been surrounded by traitors all this time, on his personal command vessel no less. Even his secret police, which was supposed to enforce loyalty to him throughout the Exarchate, had been compromised. He wondered how deep the conspiracy ran, and if his Dauphin Jang and his other children were safe, and his uncle, the Grand Duke. If Jedalla and his sons fell today, Jarko would be the heir to the throne, and Jedalla knew that the old man was too sickly for such a burden. He pledged to his patron deity, Garrm that he would do all within his reverse his fortunes. And once he had retaken control he would cleanse the stables.

"Exarch, are you well?" Lt. Commander Pell asked. "It's good to see you on your feet." Queen Symea snarled, and Jedalla was heartened by his wife's jealousy. It was perhaps put on for his benefit, but he didn't mind it.

"I am well," Jedalla stood to his full height. His captors had been foolish enough to unshackle both him and his mate. The Exarch also noted that the humans

had been left unrestrained as well. It pointed to the confidence of the cabal, and that would be their undoing. "But I promise you our enemies won't be."

"I like the way you think your Highness," Captain Glover spoke, his voice as cold as the lava pouring through Jedalla's veins.

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

Security Officer Dwight Payne willed himself up to his hands and knees. He shook his head, but his head throbbed and his vision remained blurry. "Got to survive," he muttered to himself, "Got to push through." He heard the shape-shifter before he saw it. The sound of its movement reminded him of running water. A rippling golden mass ran beneath Payne and formed in front of him. Payne looked up, ignoring his aching head. The Founder was now wearing the guise of a species he had never seen before. It was now tall with a barrel chest and a thick alabaster fur coating. The creature leaned down almost to eye level. Golden fire smoldered from its hooded eyes. He reached out, grabbing Payne's chin, firmly but not painfully.

"You will tell me what I need to know," the Founder said.

"Screw...you," Payne was able to say.

"I need to return to the Hibernia System," the Changeling said.

"Not my concern," Payne replied. He tried to pull out of the creature's grasp, but the Founder yanked his face back around. The security officer bit back a yelp.

"I am not your enemy," the shape-shifter said.

"Could've fooled me."

"My name is Daas. I am a shape-shifter, but I have no quarrel with your people. My mate was taken by the Romulans and I came to save her...but she's gone now, and I just want to return home."

"You just massacred the captain and a good deal of my crew, and you think I'm going to help you?"

The Changeling sighed, a look of genuine reluctance settled over his features. His fingers dug into Payne's flesh. "I will have to divine this ship's secrets without you."

Payne wrapped his hands around the wrist of the Founder, in an attempt to wrest away. But the shape-shifter's grasp was ironclad. The security officer knew he was about to die, but his life didn't flash before his eyes, and he was thankful for that. But he couldn't stop himself from closing his eyes. A humming filled his ears before a stinging current touched his skin. The Changeling's hand fell away. Payne's eyes snapped open and he fell backward.

The Changeling was trapped inside an amber colored transporter beam. He was pounding against the photonic walls. He appeared to be speaking, but his voice

was muffled. Payne pushed back, unable to believe his good luck. He heard more transporter beams behind him. Turning around, his heart shrank. A trio of Romulans surrounded Milon and Leach.

"It's okay," Milon said, a note of disbelief in his voice, "the Romulans are with us."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Stateroom**

"This was unanticipated," Vizier Topal admitted.

"So, what are we going to do about it?" Lady Diellza asked.

"Sept D'Noth is too powerful. We need their support, not to mention the influence Lord D'Noth wields among the Peerage." War Minister Ardit said.

"Isn't the territory we ceded him from Sept L'Dac enough?" Diellza asked, incredulous. "What else could he want? The O'Jinn bloodline will still sit on the throne; tradition has been tweaked but not abolished."

"You are correct, but perhaps it will take him a little time to adjust to the new realities." Ardit offered.

"If he will not sanction our action then I will find a member of his Sept that will; or a more compliant member among the Peerage." Diellza said.

"I suggest that we give him a moment to realize that our way is the best," Ardit replied. "Force can't be used for every situation," he admonished the Unguis operative. Diellza sniffed.

"The War Minister is correct," Topal said after quiet consideration. "Once D'Noth realizes that tradition has not been cast aside he will join us, and with the Peerage and the Starforce behind the Grand Duke any opposition to his reign will melt away."

"It might turn out exactly as you say, but I wouldn't be much of a spymaster if I didn't design contingencies," Diellza responded.

"No, you wouldn't be," Topal said, "and I give you leave to concoct them."

"I take my leave of you," the lady nodded at them both before departing. Once the door had closed, Topal activated an interference field against any listening devices.

"She is too dangerous," Ardit said.

"I know," Topal nodded. "But she is still useful...for the moment."

"We need someone we can trust in charge of the Unguis. They will be needed to enforce order once the populace learns of Jedalla's assassination."

"I have just the candidate in mind," Topal said. "I will take care of that as soon as we return to Proper. What is our ETA?"

"The sutahr last informed me that we forty-six hours from our border."

"Have long range sensors detected any Starfleet ships?" The Vizier asked.

"No, we haven't encountered any Starfleet or Federation vessels," Ardit said. "We have been fortunate in that regard."

"Let's make sure that we keep it that way," Topal said.

"The sutahr has been informed to take sparsely traveled routes though it has added to our travel time."

"A small price to pay," the Vizier concluded, "to see our plan make with success."

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

"I'm going to enjoy watching them take you apart," Sublieutenant Pugio declared. Daas threw himself futilely against the transporter beam.

"How did you do it?" Officer Payne asked, still disbelieving.

"We supplied Mr. Milon with data on the quantum stasis field," the big Romulan bruiser said. Payne noted the funny look on Leach's face, but he was surprised that she kept her mouth shut.

"Yes, the Romulans supplied us with information about the field, which prevents the Changeling from changing form. But I spliced the stasis field with an annular confinement beam to trap him." The Benzite added.

"So, what are we going to do with him?" Leach asked.

"Throw him in the warp core," Tart suggested, prompting a laugh from the burly Decurion.

"He is our prisoner," Sublieutenant Pugio declared. "You will escort us to the Romulan border where we can transfer the prisoner to one of our vessels."

"Excuse me sister," Payne couldn't help himself, "But have you taken a look around this bridge?" He paused, glancing at the carnage surrounding them. Many of the others did too. Leach's breath caught in her throat. "That thing murdered our captain and all of our command officers."

"It did no less to my superiors," Pugio shot back. "Plus we had taken it into custody first."

"No, you had kidnapped him and his mate," Leach said. Inside the beam, Daas gave a muffled wail. "Maybe if you hadn't done that in the first place, none of this would've happened."

The Romulan sneered. "How naïve you humans continue to be," she spat. "We did what was necessary to win this war. Something you proved incapable of doing until we joined your alliance. Without us, the Dominion would've long planted its flag on Earth. You should be thanking us, but yet you question our methods? The gall of you *veruul*!"

"That's enough," Milon said, holding up placating hands. "Nothing will be gained by arguing. Since the Romulans don't possess a ship at the moment, Daas will remain on the *Diadem*. Once we have arrived at Starbase 21, I'll let our superiors determine the shape-shifters ultimate fate. The main thing we should be concerned about is rounding up the rest of the Remans and restoring the ship's systems."

"You speak much wisdom," Pugio said. The Benzite nodded. "We will assist you in any way we can."

"I am ready to take lead on mopping up the Reman resistance," Decurion Mucius said. Pugio gave her permission.

"I want Ms. Leach to accompany you," Milon suggested. "And I want lethal force used only as a last resort."

Mucius groaned, but Pugio backed up Milon.

"I want to go too," Payne said.

"No, we've still got to get you checked out, and I have another job for you," the Benzite said.

"And what would that be?" The human couldn't take the note of challenge out of his voice. The Benzite sighed, his expression suddenly growing weary.

"As my first officer."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Incarceration Chamber**

Terrence Glover's muscles were charged with frustration. He glanced at Exarch Jedalla and the Alshain ruler nodded. He was on all fours, in a pouncing stance. Both men understood, without stating it, what each had to do. Queen Symea, Pell, and Juanita formed the last line of attack. The door parted open. The two men leaped. A body fell through the doors. In mid-flight, Jedalla ripped the man's head off its body, throwing the corpse to the side as he still sailed through the air. Glover wasn't as fluid. He crashed into a second body that flew through the door, crashing to the ground in a tangle of limbs. Glover threw the dead weight off him and began pounding the man. He stopped a few seconds later when he realized that the Alshain soldier wasn't offering any defense.

Taking a closer look at the Alshain warrior, he noticed a neat hole through his armor. The Alshain was already dead. "Please my lord, I beg you, I came to help!" Glover heard someone wail beyond the door. "Please!"

"Exarch Jedalla, hold up!" Glover shouted. "I think he's telling the truth."

"Jedalla, cease!" Queen Symea commanded. She and the others had already walked through the open doors. When Glover passed through the slit, he saw Jedalla still crouching over a prone and quivering Lord D'Noth. One arm was held rigid above him, with blood dripping claws extended and ready to maul. The thin man

had his head thrown back, offering his throat for Jedalla to tear out if necessary; a sign of submission. The captain noted a disruptor pistol beside the supplicating noble.

"I believe the soldiers were already dead," Glover said, "And Lord D'Noth killed them."

"Is that true?" Jedalla bellowed.

Lord D'Noth nodded vigorously before answering, "Yes, milord. The conspirators sought to enlist me in their treason, but my loyalty remains to you, the true ruler of our people. I would never overturn millennia of law and tradition."

Jedalla nodded after a few seconds. He stood up and offered his hand to the Peerage head. The Exarch gently pulled the older man to his feet. "I should never have doubted your loyalty."

"You had every right too," Lord D'Noth said. "If your own Vizier can betray you, who can you trust?"

"How many remain loyal on this vessel?" Queen Symea asked.

"I don't know?" Lord D'Noth admitted. "I have gathered a small clique of loyalists."

"Enough to take back this vessel?" Glover asked. Lord D'Noth frowned at the human's impudence and didn't answer.

"Do we have sufficient forces or not?" The exarch asked.

"I...don't know," Lord D'Noth said.

"Well, let us find out," Jedalla said, "And let us be quick about it. Our escape will not go unnoticed for long."

"Your Highness, don't you think it would be more wise to escape," Pell suggested. "We can take a shuttle and warp away."

"I will never be run off my own vessel," the Exarch declared. "I will hold this vessel or die in the attempt."

"Pell, the Exarch is right," Terrence said. "We've got to draw the line somewhere."

"Captain," Pell leaned forward, her voice softening, and for his ears only, "I think you've already crossed it."

"No, he hasn't," Jedalla said, pointing to his upraised ears when Pell looked at him askance. "My queen shall escort you to the shuttle pods. Take them, and seek asylum inside the Federation."

"I won't leave you," Symea declared.

"You will obey me," Jedalla flared. "Protect the Starfleet officers. Show both the Federation and our people that our bond remains strong no matter how our enemies try to derail the summit."

Symea snorted, but lowered her head. "I will acquiesce my love." She reached out to touch his face, but Jedalla stepped back.

"Go, now," He commanded, his voice hard as duranium.

"Be careful sir," Juanita said, hugging Glover tightly. He was stunned by the woman's emotional response, but also relieved that someone felt so strongly about him. He tepidly returned her hug. Pell also gave him a hug, though it was more chaste.

"Don't give in to your anger," Pell warned. "And come back to us in one piece." He leaned close to her.

"Make sure you take care of both Symea and Juanita, the fate of the war might be riding on it."

"I won't let you down," the Bajoran said.

"I know you won't," Glover smiled wanly. "I just wish I could make the same promise to you."

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### **Somewhere in Alshain space...**

"The *Vyras* is en route back to the Origin Sector," Syndic Gedvin said with satisfaction. The grand duke wasn't as pleased as the cleric.

"Has the royal couple been...removed?" Jarko asked. The syndic looked away before finally meeting the duke's eyes.

"No, they are being held with the Starfleet officers," Gedvin finally answered.

"What?" Jarko barked. "Why are they delaying Jedalla's execution? Each second he lives puts our little gambit in greater peril."

"The Vizier was reluctant to neutralize the Exarch without the support of Lord D'Noth."

"D'Noth is on the fence on this?" Jarko asked, raising an eyebrow. "I thought we had sufficient support among the Peerage?"

"Well, Highness, Lord D'Noth can be quite stubborn and reactionary," Gedvin said. "Perhaps the prospect of so much change so quickly is disturbing to him."

"Perhaps," Jarko rubbed his chin. "But wouldn't it be easier to convince him with Jedalla removed from the equation as soon as possible?"

"Ah, the Vizier and the others are planning a more elaborate end for the royal couple, one that will reinforce support your decision to sign a non-aggression pact with the Dominion." The cleric paused, idling.

"You have something else to add Gedvin?" Jarko snapped. He was still troubled by the Vizier's change in plans. He knew enough about his nephew to know that if he was given enough opportunity he could turn to the tables in his favor.

"Have you signed the pact yet?"

"Don't you think it a bit presumptuous to sign a treaty when I haven't assumed the throne yet?" Jarko grumbled. "I won't sign the treaty until I am Exarch."

"Of course, of course," Gedvin bowed and began backing out of the room. He wisely never took his eyes off the duke, and Jarko did likewise. As the cleric stepped through the doorway, Jarko called out:

"Be mindful of who you serve Gedvin. Our interests and the Dominion's are one in this instance, but the future remains....unknown."

"I will take heed," Gedvin promised. "I would never choose the Dominion over the Exarchate."

Jarko shook his head, forcing back a coughing fit stirring in his lungs. *Haven't we both done that already?* "I will make sure you don't."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

#### **Main Propulsion**

Lord D'Noth imperiously waved the guards away. The two young warriors stepped aside, their eyes trailing the aristocrat as he strode forward. Their inattention proved just long enough to be fatal. Glover had thrown a knife in years and he questioned his aim, but he wouldn't dare voice his doubt. Exarch Jedalla exhibited no doubt whatsoever. He launched the blade at his target, the wind milling weapon slicing through the air. It caught the unsuspecting warrior in the throat. He gurgled, clutching at the knife before he slumped against the wall. His partner could barely react before he caught Glover's knife in his chest.

Terrence quickly followed the Exarch's lead. They rushed from their hiding spot behind the bulkhead leading to the main corridor into the engine room. The small contingent of loyal soldiers D'Noth had gathered backed them up. The captain wished they had more backup, but Jedalla had split the small force, sending the last loyal Paladins to retake the ship's central computer core. Terrence could already hear the sound of disruptor fire and screaming filling the room. He barely looked down, grabbing his blade and the dead man's weapon as he moved forward. Jedalla had already entered the room, his pilfered weapon barking fire. The captain followed suit. The trio had caught the engineers completely unaware. The engineers offered little resistance. It was another matter for the few security guards the cabal had posted in the engine room, no doubt to insure compliance with the mutiny. Glover took up behind the nearest standing console, right inside the door. Jedalla stood strong, daring the enemy soldiers to strike him. The captain noticed that D'Noth had forgone hiding as well and stood in front of his monarch, a living shield. The Paladins had also formed a cocoon around their sovereign. The display disgusted Glover, but at the same time he admired the collective courage. The cocoon moved deeper into the room, sweeping the room with disruptor fire. Glover tried to pick off as many resisters as he could.



This wasn't the fight he wanted. He wished that the holographic Jem'Hadar had been real, or at least he was facing seasoned Alshain warriors, and not a bunch of scared kids. Even the rebel guards looked too young.

Lord D'Noth grunted and fell to one knee, clutching his chest. Blood gushed from between his fingers and splashed on the floor. Jedalla walked around the wheezing man, intent on eliminating all of his enemies. He killed two more before a Dragoon from the Exarchal Guard stepped from behind a terminal. The resisters stopped firing. "Finally one rebel has found their missing backbone. Do you accept my challenge?" Jedalla asked.

"One condition," the Dragoon said.

"You are in no position to make demands," the Exarch snapped.

"If I am successful, or if I die with honor, you will spare my men," the officer ignored him to finish his sentence.

Jedalla snarled. "I promise nothing...but a quick death."

The Dragoon bared his sharp teeth and sprang. Jedalla easily sidestepped the lunge, catching the man by the throat and yanking him from the air. He snapped his neck and tossed him to the side. The entire room, Glover included was awed by the powerful display of ferocity.

"This mutiny has grown tiresome," Jedalla intoned with a note of boredom in his voice. "I will tolerate disloyalty no further."

Jedalla stood impatiently in the middle of the floor, the dead Dragoon curled at his feet. The remaining soldiers and engineers solely filed out from their hiding places, their weapons clanging loudly as they dropped them on the metal floor. Glover had taken the brief respite to check on Lord D'Noth. The elderly man was lying on his stomach in a pool of blood. Terrence checked his pulse. "Lord D'Noth is dead."

The Exarch's body quivered at the news. He glanced back at the still kneeling Terrence, his gaze as black as the densest singularity. A chill ran over Glover's body. "Kill them," Jedalla hissed, "Kill them all."

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## **Starfleet Research**

### **Daystrom Institute Technological Annex**

#### **Galor IV**

Lt. Jasmine Glover centered herself before answering the call. She expected it was Admiral Samson Glover calling again, on Terrence's behalf. She knew her husband was coming to Earth, and had deflected her attempts to ward him off. Jasmine just hoped she still had enough time to make it to Earth before he arrived. It would prevent her from having to answer a lot of questions about where she had been and what she had been doing. Even though the answers would explain why she

hadn't been able to make it Pedro's funeral or be there for Terrence during that awful time.

Her heart hurt with the pain as she thought about Terrence, his world reeling with the death of his best friend, and how she had turned away from him, pushed him away. But how could she tell him about her work with Starfleet Intelligence? It was a classified project that might give the Alliance the ultimate victory, and it would prevent more Chin'toka's. *Yeah right*, she thought glumly. She had come to conclusion that the project would create more destruction than it would end, and had recently decided to inform her SI liaison that she would be leaving the project soon. *But one hurdle at a time*, she thought, before bringing Admiral Glover on line. "What's wrong?" She asked immediately. Her father-in-law's expression was pinched as if he were in deep pain. His face was drawn, with dry, ashen skin that was a noted contrast to the usual lustrous brown. "Please, don't tell me..."

Jasmine couldn't finish because her heart was clogging her throat. "He's missing," Admiral Glover finally said, though the answer did nothing to alleviate her anguish.

"What happened?" Jasmine asked, pleading. "Please..."

"I can't get into details," Samson replied. "The ship he was on en route to Earth...it was attacked by a Dominion patrol."

"Oh God," Jasmine covered her mouth in shock. "No, no...oh God."

"It's not just Terrence...Pell Ojana and Juanita Rojas were on board too," Glover exhaled as if he had been punched in his stomach.

*Pedro had just died, please don't have his family bury another child so soon*, Pell silently prayed.

"We're doing everything we can to find them," Glover promised. "If there are...survivors, we'll find them." The admiral choked up.

Jasmine placed her hand against the cool screen. "You know Terrence wouldn't let a few Jem'Hadar stop him. He's out there."

"I know," the admiral said. "I would like to think I would know, I would feel if he wasn't there anymore. But sometimes...I don't know, I doubt that...and then I wonder that maybe he's out there, but he isn't all there."

Unconsciously Jasmine touched her artificial arm. She had lost an arm and leg early in the war, and was still having a hard time accepting her prostheses. Sensing the trend of her thoughts, Samson added quickly, "I'm sorry."

"No," Jasmine said. "Don't apologize. I know what you mean, and it's all right. I want him back in one piece too."

"I'm going to bring him back," the Admiral declared, though Jasmine wasn't sure if the message was directed at her, or fate, daring the capricious nature of the universe to defy him. The usually staid man's boldness reminded her of his far more

blustery son. She wiped away the beginning of tears. Once she had disconnected the link, she would let the dam burst.

"I'm here sir, if you need someone to talk to," Jasmine said. The older man smiled wearily.

"Thank you daughter," He said. "But I should be saying that to you."

"How about we prop each other up?" Jasmine offered.

"Deal," the admiral somberly replied.

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## ***USS Urania***

### **Captain's Ready Room**

Captain Rahul was impatient. Normally he could manage his restlessness better, but his native Efrosian sensitivity to others' emotions had gotten to him. The bridge crew was restive, and he really couldn't blame them.

The mission into the Maw had been shelved due to bureaucratic wrangling and turf battles among the Alliance members. Or so Rahul and most of the mission's participants had been led to believe. It had been less than a day ago that Admiral Glover had called him into his private office and removed some of the murkiness surrounding the delay. The ship carrying the Alshain Exarch had been attacked by the Dominion and had possibly been destroyed. Furthermore, his son Captain Glover and two other Starfleet officers were assumed aboard. The *Diadem*, which had been escorting the Alshain vessel, had been forced to break off during the attack and had barely survived itself.

The Admiral informed him that *Diadem* had recently established contact with the starbase and that he had authorized a recovery mission to expedite the damaged ship's journey to port. Glover had then sent him out to track down the missing Alshain cruiser.

The crew had been both excited and mortified when he briefed them on the mission. They wanted to get back into action, but at the same time they were rightly concerned about the ramifications of the Exarch's assassination in Federation space. Perhaps the outcome of the war hung on their ability to find the *Vyras*, or at least divine what happened to her.

He had left the hunt in the capable hands of Commander Kapoor while he updated Admiral Glover. "Anything yet?" The graying man asked tightly, his voice sounding uncommonly strained and flat. Rahul could tell that the man hadn't slept in days. The front of the admiral's tunic looked wrinkled, and his eyes were glassy.

"No sir," Rahul said, saddened that he didn't have better news. "Our Operations and Science Departments are working hard on this. They have taken the

*Vyras's* last known location and created projections of likely routes. I have dispatched four shuttles to create a web of coverage. We'll find them sir."

"So, you haven't picked up an ion trail or seen any debris?" Glover pushed, not mollified by the captain's confident declaration.

"Yes, we've detected remnants of several ion trails, some decayed beyond recognition, and we've also encountered debris, which we've identified as Dominion in origin."

Glover nodded, "At least some of those bastards got what they deserved. I just hope the *Vyras* didn't go down fighting."

"I don't think she went down sir," Rahul said. The Efrosian found himself in the unusual position of propping up the normally chipper admiral.

"I hope you're right," Glover sighed. "I don't know how I could manage if you're wrong."

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### ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Command Salon**

Vizier Topal occupied the center seat. Though he had been subordinate to far more powerful men for his entire life, he had been close enough to power to realize that the men who wielded it did so mainly because of divine will and not because of their own talents. An accident of birth had kept him from being among their numbers.

But as he had come to accept the necessity of committing regicide, Topal had also come to realize that the monarchy itself was antiquated, and just as much a threat to the resuscitation of Alshain civilization as joining the losing side of the war for the Alpha Quadrant. He had made sure that Jarko would be selected as the next Exarch because he knew the ailing man didn't have long to live and he could ease a transition away from monarchy after his death. The fate of the Exarchate was too important to rest solely in the possession of one man any longer.

"I think we have given Lord D'Noth enough time to ponder our offer," Lady Diellza murmured from his side. "It is time for him to make a decision."

Topal stroked his plump cheek. "I agree," he said. "We need to present a united front to the people to insure an orderly transfer of power."

"Communications Officer, contact his Lordship," War Minister Ardit said from behind Topal. The man had been pacing the bridge for what seemed like hours, his restlessness keeping the entire bridge on edge. Topal had allowed that state of tension to exist to keep the officers alert in case they encountered any Alliance patrols or vessels.

"Lord D'Noth is not answering the summons," the stout female at the comm terminal replied. Ardit instructed her to make a second attempt. Her answer was the same.

"Use ship's internal sensors to locate Lord D'Noth," Lady Diellza ordered. One of the bridge crew promptly obeyed her order.

"The Lord's bio-locator is not emitting," the Sensor Officer said, with confusion and fear warring on his face. The sensors register the Lord's last biosignature in Main Propulsion," the Sensor Officer replied.

"Why can't you detect his bio-locator?" Ardit asked, concerned.

"More importantly, why was his last location in Main Propulsion?" Topal asked. Diellza leaned forward in her seat.

"Contact Main Propulsion," The Unguis operative ordered. "Let's get to the bottom of this."

"Umm, lords..." the Sensor Officer interrupted with a gulp, "I'm now detecting a bio-locator consistent with Exarch Jedalla....and a human life sign in Main Propulsion."

"What?" Ardit and Diellza seemed to ask the question at the same time Topal did.

"Check the Incarceration Chamber," Topal snapped. The main screen flickered to a view inside the chamber. Pieces of two corpses were spread across the floor.

"Damn!" Ardit smashed his fists against the railing right above Topal's head. "They've escaped."

"Initiate security procedures!" Diellza roared. The woman was out of her seat, on her feet, her claws jutting out of her hands and her eyes red with blood lust. "Activate the photonic Jem'Hadar! I want them captured and brought before me now!"

"Yes milady," the Security Officer said. Almost before he could complete the statement the deck plates shuddered beneath them. The ship jerked to a stop. Alarm klaxons blared across the bridge and emergency lights flashed.

"What just happened?" Topal demanded.

"The warp engines have gone offline," The Sensor Officer said.

"Sir...there has just been a hull breach in Shuttle Bay Four. One vehicle has escaped into the vacuum." The Security Officer added.

"Lock a tractor beam on it and bring it back," Diellza ordered.

"We...can't," The Security Officer said, fear and dejection filling his voice. "We've...lost..." The bridge went black. Seconds later, the lights returned with such intensity that they blinded Topal. He shut his eyes against the painful glare.

A mocking voice filled the bridge, *"Did you think it would be easy to dispatch me so easily? Did you truly think that Great Garrm had disowned me?"*

"I recommend you surrender now Jedalla. If you do so now, I promise I will insure that Symea and your children will live out the remainder of their lives safe in exile."

*"I am your Exarch, address me as such!" Jedalla thundered, "And your Queen has already escaped. She will carry the truth of what you have attempted to do here to our people. They will see you all for the sniveling rodents you are. Relinquish the bridge and I will execute you quickly and your septs will not bear your shame."*

"Never!" Lady Diellza snarled.

*"Then that means we're going to have to take it then,"* Captain Glover said jauntily.

"You and what force?" Ardit asked, "The crew has sided with us."

*"Not everyone has sided with your cabal,"* the human replied.

*"And I grant amnesty to any who wish to renounce your treachery,"* Jedalla added.

"Cut off the link," Topal ordered. The Communications Officer complied.

"Place a force field around Main Propulsion, we'll trap them there," War Minister Ardit said.

"I'll prepare a strike team," Lady Diellza offered.

"No, once we've erected the forcefield, we'll pipe gas into the room. I want Jedalla alive...for the moment."

"Sir, the Exarch has already erected a forcefield around the bridge. We have been cut off," The Security Officer said.

"What?" Topal's jowls quivered with rage and fear. "How is that possible?"

*"Exarchal Protocols,"* Jedalla's voice boomed across the bridge again. The main viewer shifted to Main Propulsion. The blood splattered Jedalla stood beside the human Glover.

"I thought I ordered you to sever communications!" The Vizier shouted, smashing his fists in the central chair's armrests.

"Did you really think I wouldn't institute some type of failsafe, an override in the eventually that the ship was overtaken by our enemies? This program has lain dormant in the ship's systems for years." Jedalla said. "I remain the master of this vessel."

"Back down now," Captain Glover said, his voice filled with surprising, and sickening sympathy. "You've lost. At least save the honor of your bloodlines."

"This is more important than our septs and clans," War Minister Ardit replied. "Jedalla will lead us into a war we can't win. We're trying to save the Exarchate. Jedalla will lead it to ruin."

"I am the ruler of all Alshain, the best interest of our people lies not with placing ourselves under the thumbs of the Dominion," Jedalla said. "Our best chance for freedom, for self-determination lies with the Federation Alliance. We've had

these debates already and the Peerage agreed with me to ally with the Federation. You have no right to subvert our laws, our customs due to your cowardice."

"It is your arrogance, your belief in a mythical Greater Alshain that will be your downfall," Ardit charged. "I know our military capabilities, and we are not prepared for a sustained war against the Dominion, despite your propaganda."

"That decision has already been made," Jedalla repeated. "We will war against the Dominion and we will reassert ourselves on the galactic stage."

"The war will destroy our ability to do just that," Ardit said, exasperated.

"I'm through talking with you," the Exarch sniffed.

"Surrender," Captain Glover urged.

"No," Jedalla snarled. "I sentence the entire bridge to death. Captain Glover, I give you permission to carry out the sentence."

"What?" Glover turned to the Exarch, surprise evident in his voice and expression.

"I will not defile myself by even touching these traitors," Jedalla explained. "Beam them out into the void, and let them perish like the dishonorable snia that they are."

"I'm not a murderer," Glover balked.

"It isn't murder," Jedalla replied. "I am the ultimate authority in all matters Alshain and this is an Alshain vessel. You will be carrying out a lawful action. It is an honor that I have bestowed upon you, a chance to satiate your desire for revenge, for what these traitors did to Commander Pell."

"I think they should stand trial," Glover said.

"Are you rejecting my benevolence?" Jedalla challenged. The Exarch reared up over Glover, but the human held his ground.

"I am not," the captain said tightly. "You gave me permission to carry out the sentence and I told you how I want to carry it out."

"I won't participate in any show trials," Topal declared.

"There is your answer Captain Glover," The Exarch said. "No, they can't be allowed to live for a nanosecond longer," Jedalla added. Topal's stomach twisted in knots as he sat back in his seat, preparing for the end.

"I won't be a part of this," Glover protested. "This isn't right."

The Exarch laughed. "Perhaps the War Minister was right, after a fashion; perhaps the Federation doesn't have the stomach for victory." Jedalla said, scratching his chin, "Which explains your recent losses...like in Chin'toka."

"I...would advise you not to mention Chin'toka again," Glover said. Topal heard the dangerous edge in his voice. The two men faced off. For a moment his spirits soared with the fantasy that both of his adversaries would slay each other.

"Mercy is not a value we hold dear," Jedalla said after a few moments. "Vulcans have a concept, 'Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations', if we are to be

partners you must understand and appreciate the predator's heart that dwells in all Alshain. And perhaps what you find so detestable about it is that you share the same heart. Hunters know hunters."

Topal watched transfixed while Glover pondered his words. He nodded. "You might be right. But I don't murder."

"If you haven't yet in this war, you will," Jedalla promised.

"Maybe, but not today," the human stepped away from the Exarch. He turned his back to the screen.

"Much to learn," The Vizier barely heard Jedalla mutter. Topal's stomach roiled. He needed to relieve himself, but he knew it would be futile to leave the center seat. There was really nowhere he could run.

"It's time to carry out the sentence," Jedalla said, his voice devoid of emotion. He looked off screen. Topal looked at Diellza, but the woman kept her eyes locked forward, toward the main viewer, but the Vizier knew she was gazing at something else, something deep within and far more important. He shifted in his seat to look at Ardit. The War Minister was standing by the railing, his expression stoic, but Topal noticed that the man's claws were digging into the metal.

*It's really about to end*, the Vizier thought sadly before he felt the tingle of a transporter beam on his fur, and then he felt a painfully frigid cold, a crushing burning in his chest, and then nothing.

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### ***Eluder-Class Shuttle Dewclaw***

"If it's got an engine I can fly it," Ensign Juanita Rojas said again, miffed at Symea's millionth offer to take the helm.

"She is pretty good at what she does," Lt. Commander Pell said, and the compliment made her feel much better.

"I have no doubt of that, but this is an *Alshain* vessel," Queen Symea pointed out. "It took a lot for me to accede to my husband's wishes and leave the field of battle. I am not one to allow others to take the driver's seat."

"Just trust me on this one, all right," Rojas griped. Symea chuckled.

"All right Cub," She said gently. "I will take over the defensive systems terminal." The ensign turned around and gave the queen a smile and a head nod.

"Thank you Your Highness." Pell smiled too, before resuming checking the shuttle's engines. They had escaped the *Vyras* with little difficulty and Pell had instructed Juanita to plot a course to the nearest Starbase, which Symea had translated as Starbase 21. The Alshain script had taken Juanita a few seconds to



manage. But she figured she would have a lot of time to bone up on it since their journey would take three days at the shuttle's top speed.

It would also hopefully take her mind off of what was happening on the *Vyras*. She hoped that Captain Glover wouldn't get hurt or worse. She had always thought the captain was tougher than tritanium, but she had thought the same thing about her brother, and fate had cruelly proven otherwise. If Captain Glover didn't make it of the *Vyras* alive she didn't know what she would do. The idea stressed her so that she forced herself to put it out of her mind, though it kept burrowing its way back into her consciousness.

"Any response to our hail?" Pell asked, as if she somehow knew that Juanita needed a distraction. They had sent out an automatic repeating call for help several hours ago. So far, they hadn't received any response, which might not be a bad thing, particularly if the conspirators aboard the *Vyras* had nearby compatriots.

"No ma'am," Juanita said.

"Keep it activated," the Bajoran instructed. "Space is vast, but not infinite. We'll get a response, for better or worse soon."

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## ***USS Diadem***

### **Main Bridge**

Milon wanted to stand at his usual Tactical console more than anything. But he knew that the crew didn't need another Tac Officer at the moment, they needed a captain.

The Benzite shifted uncomfortably in the center seat. It didn't fit him, not yet anyway. He was glad when the stand-in Ops Officer called out, "Sir, we're receiving a long-range distress call; audio only."

"Answer it," the Benzite ordered.

"We're not in range yet," the flustered Saurian replied.

"Put it on speakers," Milon said. A small smattering of claps broke out at the sound of Queen Symea's voice. *At least someone from the royal family survived*, Milon thought. He was relieved that their move to separate the ships hadn't spelled total doom for the other party.

"Can we send a response?"

"Not quite in range yet," the Saurian said.

"Triangulate on that message, we're going to render aid," Milon said.

"This ship isn't capable of undertaking such a mission," Sublieutenant Pugio said. The Romulans had taken seats along the aft section of the bridge. Milon stood up and pinned the Romulan officer with a hard stare.

"I think we know this ship a lot better than you," Guard Payne, at the Tactical console, said.

"I see you've been such good stewards," Decurion Mucius snorted.

"At least we didn't lose our ship," Payne shot back. Mucius stood up, and Payne stepped away from his console.

"Stand down Mr. Payne!" Milon said.

"Him first," Payne riposted. Mucius rapidly clenched his hands as he flexed his biceps.

"Sublieutenant Pugio please restrain your subordinate," Milon snapped. The Romulan shrugged, and blew through her teeth, clearly showing her boredom.

"Rein it in Mucius," she said. The large Romulan seethed, not stepping back. Pugio brandished her firearm. She walked calmly over to Mucius and placed the emitter cone against his temple. "You will obey me," she hissed.

Mucius's face twisted with disgust but he backed down, and Milon sighed in relief. The last thing he needed was another confrontation.

"Helm, I want you to lay in a course based on the signal," the Benzite said. "We don't leave people in the lurch," he explained to the Romulans.

"Remember your generosity almost cost you your lives when you came to our aid," Pugio warned.

"Are you saying we shouldn't?" Milon asked, incredulous. The question stumped the woman. The Benzite thought it was a good omen.

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## ***USS Urania***

### **Main Bridge**

Captain Rahul stepped briskly onto the bridge. He squinted, his sensitive eyesight always taking a moment to adjust to the lighting. He had tried to adjust it several times but nothing had worked, so he gave up and decided to live with the discomfort. "What do you have?"

Commander Ananda Kapoor stood up smoothly from the center chair. The slender, brown hued human responded crisply, "Sir, we have received a distress message from the Alshain shuttle *Dewclaw*. They are asking for assistance."

"How far are we from them?"

Lt. Harper, the ship's Operations Officer, answered without being prompted. "Six hours at maximum warp."

"Shall I call the other shuttles back?" Kapoor asked.

The Efrosian shook his head. "No, let them continue the search. Inform them of the distress call, and tell them we are changing our course to lend aid. Perhaps the shuttle's occupants can help us piece together what happened."

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## ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras*** **Command Salon**

Exarch Jedalla lounged in the command chair. Not as spacious as his Crimson Throne, but it was sufficient. Captain Glover stood rigidly beside him, staring at the main screen with intense skepticism. An Alshain shuttle was sandwiched between two Starfleet vessels, one a battered *Sovereign* and the other a pristine *Excelsior*.

"It's not an illusion," the monarch said. "We have passed our test and the gods have granted us our reward. Hail the Starfleet vessels."

The screen shifted to the interior shot of a Starfleet bridge. An Efrosian captain stood in front of his command chair. He bowed. "Your Highness, my name is Captain Rahul, of the *Starship Urania*."

"Rahul, it's good to see you again," Glover said, genuine relief in his voice. There was an uptick in the left corner of the Efrosian's mouth when his eyes shifted to the human.

"It is also good to see you to," Rahul replied. "Your father will be most pleased to know you are well."

"I'm sure he will, and I can't wait to tell him," Glover said.

"We were in the process of assisting both the *Dewclaw* and the *Diadem*," Rahul said. "Once we are finished, we will escort you to Starbase 21."

"The *Vyras* is heading to Earth," Jedalla said, making sure his tone brooked no debate. Rahul gave him a double-take.

"Excuse me sir, but my orders were to recover survivors and return with them to Starbase 21."

"Is your President Santiago at Starbase 21?" The Exarch asked.

"Well, no, he is not," the Efrosian answered.

"Then I am not going to Starbase 21," Jedalla said. "I ask that you transport my wife back to this vessel."

"The Queen, Lt. Commander Pell, and Ensign Rojas are undergoing a medical check. Once that's concluded, I will release her." The *Urania* captain promised.

"Release Pell and Rojas too," Glover said. "They're coming with me, and we're going to Earth with the Alshain delegation."

"Sir, a lot of people, not just your father, would like to debrief you," Rahul said.

"That can wait," Glover replied nonchalantly. "I've got a good memory, I won't forget the details. Besides, the delegation needs a Federation escort. Since you've have your hands full taking care of the Diadem, we can handle things here."

"Just from a smidgen of what Commander Pell told me, I have no doubt of that," Rahul nodded. "The Admiralty will not be pleased at your delay, but I don't think you are overly concerned."

Glover shook his head. "Not really." Rahul almost chuckled.

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## ***Exarch-Class Cruiser Vyras***

### **Private Chambers**

"I've got to go Ivan, make sure you don't scratch or dent my ship before I return," Captain Terrence Glover said. Lt. Commander Cherenkov replied with a tight-lipped smile.

"I'll see what I can do."

"All right," Glover said. "See you in two weeks." He turned from the monitor and looked at the door. There was a light wrapping on the metal. An old fashioned way to announce an arrival that he knew could only be one person. "Open."

The Bajoran stepped through the space provided by the retreating door. She was looking much better. The burns and scarring on her hand had been removed by the *Urania's* expert medical staff. He stood up. "How are you?"

"I'm fine," she said, walking into his open arms. He hugged her tightly. "It's good to see you again sir," Pell added. He quickly released her.

"Likewise," He said. He gestured for Pell to sit on a couch in the center of the living space and he took up a position on the opposite end. "You didn't run into any trouble after leaving the *Vyras* did you?"

"Actually, it was an almost pleasant trip, once we got the Queen to settle down a bit."

"I bet," Terrence chuckled. "I'm glad I stayed onboard to route the cabal."

"Are you really? I've heard about Lord D'Noth," Pell shook her head regretfully. "How bad was it?"

"It...was bad," Terrence admitted, looking down and then away from her. Pell moved over and lightly touched his shoulder.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Still looking away, his eyes boring into a dull gray wall, the captain said, "Not really."

"Okay," Pell said. She kept her hand on his shoulder and he was grateful for the contact; it felt like a tether that kept him linked to his humanity, perhaps the last link.

After a few moments Terrence decided to speak. "I didn't lose it. I didn't cross the line...like you thought I might."

"I didn't think you would," Pell said softly, "I was just afraid you might. This war has spread a lot of darkness, and none of us are immune to its shade."

"I did, I do, want revenge," Terrence said, finally looking at Pell, drilling her as he had the wall. He needed her to understand that what he was saying was how he felt, no matter how shocking it might be, "I want not just to defeat the Dominion, I

want to hurt them, like they hurt Jasmine, they hurt Pedro...they hurt me. And when I thought they had hurt you..." He stopped, overcome with memories and mortification. Pell sat quietly, letting the moment pass. Terrence was grateful for that. "But when the truth was revealed, and I found myself facing a bunch of kids in Main Propulsion, kids following orders, not genetically programmed killing machines, it just didn't feel right...slaughtering them."

"I heard what Jedalla did, and I heard a little about what you said to him," Pell replied, squeezing his shoulder.

"You're really nosy, you know that?" Glover laughed. Pell's gentle squeeze turned into a pinch. "Oww!"

"Seriously Terrence, I'm proud of you. You controlled your rage. You didn't let it control you."

"This time at least," Glover said, not quite as pleased with himself. "I wonder about the next time, and this damned war will provide plenty of next times."

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## **Starbase One**

### **Public Transporter Room Twelve**

#### **Sector 001**

#### **Three Days Later...**

The young boy leaped into Terrence's arms. He latched onto his neck, hanging on for dear life. "Hey Uncle Terrence!" He shouted into the captain's ear. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too Jalen," Terrence said. He kissed the boy on the cheek.

"Are you ready to stop assaulting your uncle now?" Jamaica Mendes, Jasmine's older sister said, with a smirk. She was taller, dark chocolate to Jasmine's milk chocolate complexion, and didn't have caramel colored eyes, but they resembled each other enough to comfortably be identified as sisters. Terrence carefully let Jalen back on the ground, and the energetic young man pounced on Juanita next.

He peppered the flustered young woman with a ton of questions, and Glover smiled at the exasperated expression on her face. He hadn't wanted to leave Juanita on the cold, sterile starbase while Jedalla and Santiago hashed out a treaty. Terrence thought bringing Juanita with him would be good for her. She needed to be around people, needed to be active so she couldn't dwell as much on Pedro and the incidents on the *Vyras*. He gave his sister-in-law a quick hug, her swinging braids brushing against his face. He blew them back.

"Where's Jazz?" He looked around, but Terrence already knew that his wife wasn't in the transporter room. "Is she okay?"

"In a manner of speaking, she is," Jamaica said.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Physically she's recovered fairly well," Jamaica intimated, "but emotionally...it's been tough for her."

"I know," Glover said, thinking about the last rushed conversation he had with his wife. He had really wanted to unload all of his anguish about Pedro to her, but she hadn't had the time or the capacity to bore more pain.

"I thought her assignment with the SCE would be good for her," Jamaica said. "She just recently got back from an assignment, a couple days before you. But since she got back, she seems like she's been in a daze...withdrawn."

"Do you know what type of assignment she was on?" Glover asked, instantly concerned.

"No, she couldn't tell me, or so she said," Jamaica wrinkled her nose in annoyance. "But I think it might've brought back memories of that battle in the Tyra System."

"Oh God," Terrence breathed. "I need to see her."

Jamaica put a restraining hand on his chest. "She's at home. We'll be there in a few minutes. Just go slow with her, okay?"

"I'm her husband," Terrence griped, "I think I might know what my wife needs."

"And I'm her sister," Jamaica held her ground, "I've known her a lot longer than you. And I've been there for most of her recovery...unlike you."

The cutting words hurt more because they were true. "I'm a Starfleet officer," Terrence said, but the excuse didn't have any force behind it. "I had a duty..."

"You're more than a Starfleet officer," Jamaica said, quietly, but firmly, her words echoing Pell's. "You're a husband too. Marriages aren't like military assignments. It's messy; problems can't always be solved in a neat, timely manner."

"Spoken like someone who has never been in the service," Terrence quipped.

"I'm being serious now Terrence," Jamaica reproached him. "Just give her time okay? I know you only have a couple of days and you might want for things to be like they were with you and Jasmine, but that's not going to happen, and you have to be willing to adjust. If nothing else, for her sake."

Glover marshaled in his disappointment. "I just want to see my wife."

Jamaica smiled sympathetically, "That's a start."

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## **Somewhere in Alshain Space....**

Keilan was sorrowful, "It appears that our plan encountered unforeseen circumstances. The Exarchate officially joined the Federation Alliance this morning." The Vorta shook her head. "It is unfortunate...we will show you no quarter...but do know that I personally came to respect you these last few months."

Grand Duke Jarko smashed the screen with his fist. The smell of smoke, burning circuits, and singed fur filled his nostrils. His rage brought another coughing fit. "Milord," the duchess gasped. She rushed to his side, but he pushed her away.

"This is most distressing, most distressing," Syndic Gedvin said.

"There is a bright spot," Duchess Lerin offered. Both men looked at her in confusion.

"It doesn't appear that Jedalla interrogated the conspirators, and he might not know of our role in the regicide attempt. I'm certain the Dominion won't tell him."

Gedvin calmed down a tick, but he was still nervous, "How can you be sure?"

"We still draw breath, don't we?" Lerin shot back. Jarko chuckled.

"And here to think that your greatest possession was beauty, but you have quite the cunning intellect," Jarko guffawed. "I was a fool to misjudge you my dear. I was a fool...about many things."

"Jedalla will drag us to ruin still," Gedvin declared.

"He is the Exarch, and he has made a decision," Jarko said. "I will support him...with the remaining time I have left. I strongly suggest that you do the same."

"But..." the syndic began. Jarko growled, quieting the man.

"It's over, and we lost. I only want to die in peace now; it's not much longer."

"But what of the living?" Gedvin asked.

"That's Jedalla's problem, not mine. He'll lead us to war or ruin, but the gods have spoken. You of all people should respect their decision."

"But if the gods are wrong?" Gedvin voiced, mortified by his own words.

"Then there is no hope...for any of us," Jarko replied. "No hope at all."

**THE END**