

Dark Territory Parasite Eve

By DarkKush

USS Renegade
Mekagh Triangle
2364

"Captain Scott, we have arrived in the Mekagh Triangle," the voice over the intercom said.

"What's our ETA to the rendezvous point?" Captain Tryla Scott propped herself on her elbows, her voice ragged with sleep.

"Thirteen hours."

"Have sensors detected any other ships within the system?" The respondent paused a few seconds.

"No sir."

Scott nodded. "Thank you. I'll be on the bridge shortly."

"You know we've got thirteen hours," Lt. Terrence Glover said. He caressed her face, his fingers gently exploring her smooth, walnut brown skin.

"I think we've wasted enough time Terrence," the captain replied, with a semi-serious look.

"You can call it many things, but wasted is definitely not one of them," he laughed. Tryla turned away from him and sat up. Glover placed a hand on her shoulder. She trembled.

"Are you okay?"

"Why do you ask?" She glanced back at him.

"What's going on Tryla?"

"What do you mean?"

"Here we go with the evasive bit again," he sighed.

"Look Terrence, there are things that are need to know, and you don't need to know," she replied.

"What's up with all this secrecy? The encrypted communications, this strange rendezvous? You've even cut Commander Holmes out of the loop."

Tryla turned around to more fully pin him with a stare. "So, you and the XO bosom buddies now?"

"Hardly," Glover said. "But the man does have some friends onboard this boat, surprisingly, and word does get around."

"Fred's a good man," Scott chided. "And I'm one of those hard-to-believe friends of his. Be careful how you regard a superior officer Mr. Glover."

Terrence pulled his hand away. "Now, it's 'Mr. Glover'. What happened to Terrence?" It had long been a sore point with him, the messy dividing line between how or when he could engage Tryla as a lover as opposed to his commanding officer.

"You prefer Terry?" She teased, attempting to defuse the situation. Wishing not to rehash an old debate, he allowed that moment to pass. However, he just couldn't not address Tryla's new behavior.

"I prefer some transparency," he replied.

Her shoulders tensed, and she scowled. "What is that supposed to mean? What are you implying Terrence? That I haven't been truthful with you? Don't you know how much I'm sacrificing just to be with you? There are many on this vessel, and in the admiralty that would not approve of our relationship and punish us both career wise."

"Like your friend Holmes," Terrence couldn't help himself from laying in the jab.

"That's a low blow," Scott replied. "Fred's known about us for months now, and he hasn't said a word about it."

"No, he just rips into me every chance he gets," Glover replied.

"Fred's a stickler," Tryla said, "I have no problem with that. He's not going to let anyone cruise, even you."

"So that's what you think I've been doing?" Terrence snapped. "You don't think I've been carrying my load?"

"No," Scott said, placing a mollifying hand on his shoulder. Glover pulled away from her. "Of course not." She turned back around, and reached for her nightstand. She pulled a small box out and showed it to him. "Go on, take it."

"I don't give a damn about trinkets," he huffed. "You know that."

"Open it," she used her command voice. Terrence reluctantly complied. He forced himself not to gasp when he saw the single pip inside the box.

"What's going on?"

"Congratulations Lieutenant Commander," she smiled. "I had been planning to do something a bit more formal, but I think the occasion warrants you knowing how much I think about the contributions you've made to this vessel."

"I-I don't know what to say," Glover said.

"That's a first," she jibed.

"Ha," he replied, still marveling at the pip.

"Go ahead and get dressed," she said. "I can't wait to pin it on you at the official ceremony."

"Me either," Glover grinned. "But let me go back to my cabin. I need a shower and fresh uniform."

"I need to be on the bridge," she said. "We'll reconvene later."

“That’s fine,” Terrence said, not fully listening to her. He was still floored by his promotion and being one step closer to the captain’s chair. He put on his old uniform, smoothing out the ruffles as best he could before poking his head slowly out of the door, glancing both ways down the empty corridor. Satisfied that no one would see him exit the captain’s quarters, Glover quickly left.

USS Renegade **Main Bridge**

“So glad you could join us Mr. Glover,” Commander Frederick Holmes scowled. Glover returned the critique with a cocky smirk.

“Sir, I jump at every opportunity to spend time with you,” he said as he quickly took over the operations terminal. Sitting at the adjacent helm console, Lt. Sarhana laughed, hastily placing a hand over her mouth for cover. Glover grinned at the comely lavender-skinned Phalckerian, now a deeper shade due to her embarrassment. Holmes grumbled.

Captain Scott sighed loudly. “Can it Terrence,” she said. “And check the sensors again.”

“Yes sir,” Terrence said crisply. He brought up the sensor readouts on the terminal, his eyes scouring the data, looking for something telling. “I’ve got nothing.”

The captain frowned. She leaned forward in her seat. “This doesn’t make sense,” she said quietly.

“What doesn’t make sense?” Glover asked. Really, he wanted to state that this entire mission didn’t make sense. Usually Tryla was pretty open about mission specifics. She saw Terrence as a kindred spirit and a future captain and she wanted him to get as much of a view from the captain’s perch as possible, except for lately. For the last several weeks she had been taking secret communiqués in her ready room, and making decisions that didn’t seem all that logical. He wasn’t sure how much Holmes knew what was really going on, but if the large man had any doubts he wasn’t showing them.

Glover had tried to broach the subject of Tryla’s mysterious behavior, but she had shut him down quickly. Eventually he had decided to back off after she had asked him to trust her. Trust wasn’t something that came easy to him, but he felt he owed the captain the benefit of the doubt. She had placed a lot of trust in him after all.

Terrence pulled himself out of his reverie to the hard stares of both of his superior officers. “That’s none of your business Mr. Glover,” Holmes grated.

“I’m Second Officer on this ship,” Terrence couldn’t help himself. “I think that entitles me to be in the loop.” He could feel the tension crackling in

the air between himself and Holmes. He knew their latest testy exchange would fuel the shipboard rumor mill for the next few days, and Glover also recognized on some level how unprofessional the retort was, but Holmes pushed all the wrong buttons with him. The commander was a competent officer, but that was about it. He was a static person, a workhorse that liked taking orders more than giving them, Glover thought, and deep down he felt that man didn't deserve to be XO. However, Tryla had thought differently. She had been extremely candid with him that she thought Holmes had been looked over because of his bluntness, and she someone who wouldn't hold their punches as her second in command. Terrence thought that such an arrangement did more harm than good. When he was captain, he wanted simpatico on his bridge.

"You're ice skating on another charge of insubordination," Holmes replied.

"Cool it you two," Scott snapped. She stood up. "I'm going to my ready room. Fred you have the conn." A blinking light on Glover's console caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. He turned back around to gaze at the new information streaming down the screen's flattened surface.

"Captain, we've got a tachyon wave distortion, consistent with a cloaked vessel."

"Red alert!" Holmes snapped. Tryla quickly retook her seat.

"On screen," she commanded. The main viewer switched to a patch of undulating space, which slowly took the shape of a Klingon Bird-of-Prey. "Hail them," Scott said, with noticeably less tension than a second before.

"The Klingons aren't answering the hail," Lt. Gart said. "They're powering their weapons." He paused a beat, "They're firing!" A reddish rain of destruction poured from the Klingon warship, smashing into the *Renegade*.

With the ship's shields up, it made little impact, except to rattle the *Renegade* nearly to its ramparts. "What the hell is going on here?" Holmes asked.

"Damage report," Scott demanded, ignoring Holmes's question. After each department quickly reported in, the captain said, "Hail them again, Mr. Gart."

"No response sir," the Nausicaan Tactical Officer said, punctuating it with a snort. "They're firing again."

"This is growing tiresome," Scott said, after receiving a second damage assessment. Shields were down 15% and the engine room had incurred minor damage. Thankfully there had been no casualties to report. "Mr. Gart, target that ship's weapons and engines. Fire when ready." Twin golden beams stabbed into the Klingon ship, slicing through their shields.

"Direct hits," Gart said with glee. "The Klingons are hailing."

"You've come to finish the job of your brethren?" The battered Klingon roared at them. He was slumping in the command chair of a ruined bridge. "We'll never surrender! We'll never allow the Empire to be overtaken!" He declared.

"I-I don't understand," Tryla said, with equal amounts of confusion and fear in her voice. "I'm Captain Tryla Scott, I came in search of the Federation *Starship Bonaventure*, have you encountered that ship?"

"Today is a good day to die," the Klingon brayed.

"Captain, the Klingon vessel is overloading their warp engines," Glover said. "They're going to destroy themselves."

"Not if I can help it," Scott declared. "Gart, beam as many of those Klingons off that ship that you can. Place them in the brig, and have medical on standby."

"Aye sir," the Nausicaan remarked, with less enthusiasm than before.

"Six Klingons have been transported to the brig," Gart reported.

"That's all?" Scott asked.

"Those were the ones that had life signs," Gart said.

"Damn," Scott cursed.

"Those engines are critical," Glover reported.

"Get us out of here, maximum warp," Scott snapped. She jumped out of her seat and nodded to Gart. "Gart you're with me."

Glover wanted to go with the captain so bad that it was physically painful to remain in his seat, but he bit his tongue, and attended his station. "Like to come along Mr. Glover?" Scott asked from inside the turbolift.

He was halfway to the lift before he responded. "Yes sir."

USS Renegade **Detention Center**

Three of the Klingons, in various stages of health, were circling their unconscious comrades, their daggers gleaming. They began stabbing the insensate three.

"Stop them!" Scott ordered. Gart nodded, and the skittish security guard at the terminal controlling the brig's energy fields, jumped. Thick purple gas began pouring from vents in the cell's ceiling. The Klingons began coughing, but they didn't stop their murder. "Increase the dosage for God's sake," Tryla yelled.

The murderous Klingons began to stagger, but two of them were lucid enough to plunge their bloody blades into their chests. The third Klingon, the battered warrior that had screamed at them on the bridge, tried to do the same, but the dagger fell from his fingers. He glared at the Starfleet officers through the purple haze. He spat, "*PetaQ!*" He roared before he lunged at

them, flinging himself into the forcefield containing them in the cell. His body twitched and jerked madly as it was caught in the energy web.

Terrence began to smell the rank odor of cooking flesh. "Shut it off!" Scott screamed. "Turn it off damnit!" She rushed to the console to do the job herself, but the field dropped. The badly burned Klingon slammed onto the deck. Tryla hit her combadge. "Emergency beam out to Sickbay," she ordered. She placed it gently on the Klingon's arm. "Now!" She stepped back as the beam took hold of the injured man. "Let's go," she said without looking back.

USS Renegade **Sickbay**

"What's the prognosis Doctor?" Tryla asked the thin Saurian standing over the charred Klingon. A level-three forcefield encapsulated the fallen warrior.

"Far from optimal I fear," Dr. Eknath replied. "The patient had already received extensive internal injuries before the burns. Klingons are remarkably durable, but I'm not certain at this point if his recuperative system will yet rebound. I promise you I will do all I can."

"I have no doubt of that," Scott smiled. "Keep me informed the minute he wakes up."

"If," Eknath corrected. The captain nodded curtly.

"If," she repeated. She turned to Glover and Gart. "Back to the bridge."

"What's going on?" Terrence asked. He lightly grabbed her arm, not worried about how the gesture might look to Gart or Eknath. He was more concerned that Tryla had gotten herself into something that she might not be able to handle.

"Later," she said, gently prying his hand away. "Right now, we've to find the *Bonaventure*."

USS Renegade **Sixteen Hours Later.....**

"I've got debris and ion emissions," Glover looked up from his viewscreen. He rubbed his aching eyes. "I've think we've found the *Bonaventure*, or at least part of it." The viewer showed a trail of metal, bodies, and other materials spread along as if they were a pathway leading to hell.

"Let's follow that trail," Scott said. "Maintain red alert, shields and weapons ready."

USS Renegade **Main Bridge**

Gart's low growl prickled the hairs of Terrence's neck. He didn't need to check his console's readouts because the main viewer was filled with the image of a cleaved starship saucer, its darkened environs opened to the fatal vacuum of space.

"Nothing could've survived that," Commander Holmes grumbled.

"Check anyway," Captain Scott mumbled. She stood up from her seat, and walked absently past both Terrence and Sarhana. The captain pressed her face against the main screen as if in shock. "Is that the *Bonaventure's* main saucer?" She asked, still facing the viewer.

"Yes sir," Glover said after rechecking his terminal. "Scans do identify the vessel as the *Starship Bonaventure, NCC-99502. Galaxy-class.*"

"Damn," Scott cursed.

"Where's the rest of the ship?" Holmes asked.

"Good question," the captain added. She turned to look at Terrence. "You've got an answer for the XO Mr. Glover?"

"Not...yet," Terrence said, before getting to work. He didn't like being put on the spot, particularly when he didn't have a ready made answer. "I'm increasing the ship's scanning radius."

"Modulate our sensors to scan for the *Bonaventure's* composite materials," Holmes suggested. "Perhaps there's another trail that will lead us to the secondary hull."

"My thoughts exactly," the captain smirked. "Reading my mind again Commander?" Holmes harrumphed. Scott laughed.

"I've detected a trail," Glover said.

"Lay in a course," the captain ordered.

USS Bonaventure **Battle Bridge**

The away team materialized in a blaze of light on the dim battle bridge. A string of emergency lights spread throughout the bulkheads wanly fought against the murkiness. Everyone except the captain immediately whipped out their tricorders and began to scan. Captain Scott went straight to the man splayed over the command chair.

She gasped, "Captain Sipe." There was a large, wet, ragged hole in the middle of his chest, surrounded by the familiar burn marks of a phaser set to kill.

"Who could've done this?" Dr. Eknath asked.

"The more important question is why did they even bother?" Glover said. "The baryonic radiation levels suffusing the bridge are almost off the scale. If not for our EVA suits we'd already be showing signs of sickness." The captain glanced at Eknath for confirmation. The Saurian nodded in agreement, his frown noticeable even through his suit's thick visor.

"It appears that radiation sickness killed the rest of the bridge crew," Gart concluded. Scott nodded, oddly, inappropriately amazed that they actually had an environmental suit large enough for the Nausicaan. It was a stupid thing to be considering now, but much better than accepting the truth. The alien parasites had gotten to Ryan Sipe just like they had murdered Karapleedeez and McKinney. Admiral Quinn had been right after all. Though she had thrown in her lot with him and a few other officers months ago, she still held out a crazy hope that it was all just the ramblings of a well meaning, but senile admiral. But if that had been the case Captains Keel and Rixx wouldn't have joined this cabal, nor would Walker be actually considering bringing in Captain Picard from the *Enterprise*.

As much as she respected Picard, Tryla was doubtful that widening the circle was a good move; it just opened the door for an infiltrator to enter their ranks and destroy them from within. Then again, the parasites seemed to be doing that already. So far, the cabal's numbers had been shorn in half, with three talented officers, and many of their crews dying under "mysterious" circumstances.

She was certain that Gart's investigation would yield nothing exposing the true culprits of this tragedy. But she couldn't let him know that, not yet. Right now, she wasn't sure who she could fully trust, even among her own staff, and Tryla hated herself for feeling that way.

"Captain," Glover's concerned voice intruded on her brooding. "It's Chief Doyle."

The captain activated her combadge. "Go ahead Chief," she instructed her chief engineer.

"Captain, you're not going to believe this," the typically brusque woman said with uncharacteristic restraint.

"Never know till you try me," Scott tried to joke.

"We've got survivors, three in fact, but they're not doing well."

"Alright, prepare them for beam out," the captain ordered. She contacted *Renegade*. "Prepare for emergency beam in to Sickbay. Set up three level three forcefields. Patients might be suffering from severe exposure to baryonic radiation."

"May I take my leave?" Eknath asked.

"Of course," Scott said. "I'll join you. Terrence, I want you and Gart to pick this ship and its database apart. I want to know what happened here." She said, as deadpan as possible.

Glover nodded tightly. "You'll have an answer," he promised. Scott resisted the weary, knowing smile threatening to break out on her face. She bit down on her lip and sharply nodded.

"Get on it," she ordered, before beaming away from the dead ship.

USS Renegade **Sickbay**

Captain Scott beamed into chaos. Her bulky EVA suit absorbed much of the impact as a body slammed into her, knocking her against a wall. She slid to the floor, an unconscious body lying on top of her.

"You've killed us all!" She heard the Klingon roar, before another body landed beside her with a hard thud. Tryla saw that it was one of the medical staff. She struggled to push the insensate person off her and regain her footing, the suit restricting her movement.

By the time she had navigated back to her feet, a full security team had entered Sickbay, with Commander Holmes leading the charge. They circled the enraged Klingon. The fierce warrior wasn't giving any ground. He waved a wicked looking dagger at the team. Though Tryla had no doubt that Holmes was more than capable of handling the wild-eyed Klingon, she wished she had brought Gart back with her. The Nausicaan could easily match this Klingon's strength and ferocity.

"Commander Ch'ran!" Holmes rich baritone boomed. "Stand down!" Ch'ran snarled.

"Don't you realize what you've done?" He asked, his voice bordering on hysteria. He pointed past Holmes to the three beds holding the *Bonaventure* survivors enshrouded by forcefields. "I overheard your medics; those three are from the *Bonaventure*. They are *Jat'yn*! They are possessed!"

"Stand down!" Holmes repeated, even more firmly than before.

"I will never be taken, used by them," he spat, before charging the security team. It took several beams to bring the Klingon down. Tryla watched in horror as the warrior plunged his blade deep into Holmes's shoulder before he staggered to the deck.

As the security team rushed to secure the fallen Klingon, Holmes waved away the medical staff and directed them to attend to the other wounded first. Scott went to him. She winced as she saw the injury up close. "It's nothing," Holmes replied with bravado. "A nick is what we would call it back home in Nashville," he grinned, though the macho gesture didn't fully disguise the pained expression on the man's face nor his labored breath. The grin quickly morphed into a scowl. He lowered his head and his voice, and pulled her close to him. "What's really going on here Tryla?" He rarely called her by

name, even though she had given him license a long time ago. "I would really like to be let into this loop."

The captain sighed. *How could she justify keeping Fred out any longer?* The hilt sticking out of his shoulder was proof enough that not only could he be trusted, but that he could handle himself, and she needed someone to confide in, someone to carry the burden of the secret. "As soon as you get that dagger out of you, meet me in my ready room."

USS Renegade **Ready Room**

Captain Scott listened half-heartedly as Terrence finished his report. "Summing it up," he began, "it appears that the *Bonaventure* received multiple hull perforations during the battle with the Klingons, resulting in the influx of the baryon particles throughout the ship. This patch of space is ripe with the baryon particles. From the *Bonaventure's* records, the ship was a month away from its scheduled baryon sweep, so the ship was coated with them. It appears that the *Bonaventure* separated to perhaps stem the flow of the particles or to increase their chances of survival, but obviously that strategy didn't work."

"Good job Mr. Glover," Scott said, maintaining her silence about what she thought might've really caused the demise of the *Bonaventure*.

"What seems odd to me is how did a *B'Rel*-class scout ship best a *Galaxy*? With all respect to the dead, I can't see a *Galaxy* crew, or any Starfleet crew being so incompetent as to allow that to happen....well maybe the Border Service," The operations officer said with a brunt honesty that rankled Tryla.

"Show some respect Terrence," she chided. The rebuke jolted him. His bearing became even more rigid.

"I'm sorry captain, it's just..."

"Save it," she snapped. "Did it occur to you that perhaps the Klingons had help?" She asked, regretting her words.

"Well, actually it," Glover replied. "I was thinking that maybe several Klingon warships had attacked the *Bonaventure*. Gart and I have already begun exploring that scenario." He concluded smartly, pleased with himself.

"Nice show of initiative," Scott praised a bit too lavishly, happy that Terrence hadn't picked up on what she really had meant.

The door chimed. "Who is it?" The captain asked.

"It's Commander Holmes sir," Fred drawled.

"Enter." The large man strolled in, in perfect health and a new uniform. He nodded stiffly at Lt. Glover. The younger man just as stiffly returned the acknowledgement. "You're excused Mr. Glover." Terrence glanced back at her,

questions and resistance in his gaze, but Tryla wasn't in the mood for entertaining any of that. "Dismissed," she said sharply.

After Terrence left, taking a cold front with him, Fred settled down in one of the seats facing her desk. "What's going on Tryla?" He asked.

She directed his gaze to the screen inset in a wall beside her aquarium. She activated the screen, and the golden Federation emblem gave way to a very old, yet spry man. "Captain Scott," he acknowledged, before switching his gaze. "And Commander Holmes, I don't think we've had the honor."

"No sir, we have not," Holmes said.

"Admiral Gregory Quinn," he warmly replied.

"*Bonaventure* has been destroyed," Scott said with preamble. Quinn grimaced.

"Damn, I hoped you could've gotten to them in time," he said.

"Admiral what we're they doing in the Mekagh Triangle?" She asked.

"There were rumors that the infestation had even reached the Klingon Empire," Quinn said. "Captain Sipe had been dispatched to acquire data about the parasite infiltration from the So'taj, Klingon Imperial Intelligence. It appears that our enemies laid a trap for him. It's a shame....all those lives lost."

"Not all," Scott said. "There were three survivors, and one from the Klingon vessel."

Quinn's expression switched from sadness to fright. "Captain, you've got to quarantine those people immediately."

"The *Bonaventure* people are in Sickbay, and the Klingon, a Commander Ch'ran, is in the brig. I'll go into details about that later."

"I trust in your ability to handle the situation, but please be careful, and limit the contact of your crew with both the Klingon and the *Bonaventure* personnel, until you know for certain they aren't infected."

"Yes sir," Scott said.

"Despite your misgivings, Captain Picard has agreed to meet with us at Dytallix B, in the Mira Antliae system. You are to proceed there at once. I suggest you maintain radio silence until you reach Dytallix B. Only take messages from one of us."

"I understand," Scott said. Quinn nodded and smiled before switching off the link.

"Well, I don't understand," Holmes replied. "What was that all about?"

USS Renegade **Recreation Center**

"Your form still needs work," Sarhana replied. She swatted the air with her racket. "You're movements have got to be more graceful."

"I'm not in the mood for another hoverball lesson right now," Terrence said, shoving his racket into his bag. He roughly wiped the sweat from his face.

"I don't think you were much in the mood for a game at all," Sarhana surmised. "So, why did you challenge me to a match?"

"I...don't know," Terrence admitted. "I just wanted to expend some energy I guess, work something out of my system."

"And that would be?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he curtly replied. Sarhana whistled, a gesture expressing exasperation on her home planet.

"Humans are so transparent," she concluded, prompting a smile from Glover.

"Is that so?"

"Yes," she answered, before slipping her own racket into her bag. She slid the bag over her shoulder and came over to Terrence, invading his personal space, though he didn't mind the intrusion. Her lips nearly touching his, she said softly, "Humans always say they don't want to do the thing they want to do, so spill it."

"All right," he sighed. "I just feel that there is more going on with this *Bonaventure* situation and the captain knows, but isn't sharing."

Sarhana sagely nodded. "Perhaps."

"And don't you find that unsettling?" Glover asked.

"Not really, no," Sarhana said, adding, "In the Phalkerian Domain authority figures are never questioned."

"We aren't in the Phalkerian Domain," Terrence pointed out. Sarhana smiled.

"And you should be thankful for that, because if we were Commander Holmes would've disposed of you long ago."

"Don't think he hasn't been trying," Glover countered.

"Terrence, I don't think Holmes's criticism is that fatal," Sarhana replied.

"Maybe, but it sure feels like I'm on his chopping block sometimes," Terrence admitted.

"You make people uneasy, there's nothing wrong with that," the Phalkerian said. "You keep people on their toes, make them up their game."

"Is that right?" Glover grinned. "You really think so?"

"Yes," Sarhana said, leaning even closer. Her lips brushed against his. He turned away.

"Sarhana, we can't do this."

"Why not? You find me attractive do you not?" She stepped away from him. Unable to stop from looking, he took in her shapely, statuesque form, the skintight yellow leotard creating a nice clash with her lavender skin.

"I can't," he weakly replied.

"The rumors really are true, aren't they?" She asked, her eyebrows knitting with concern.

"What rumors?"

"You and the captain," Sarhana replied.

"What about me and the captain?" His voice filled with dread.

"It's true," Sarhana said, "Don't deny it."

"Sarhana..." Glover began.

"This was a mistake," the Phalckerian said. "I apologize."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Terrence said. "Let me explain."

"There's nothing to explain," Sarhana said. "You and the captain are both adults. You should be allowed to fraternize without fear of reprisal. It is to the detriment of Starfleet that many others do not share my view. Your secret is safe with me."

"What secret?" Terrence asked, exasperated. "I haven't 'admitted' to anything."

"You don't have to," Sarhana revealed. "That fact that my question left you speechless is answer enough. It takes a lot to hold your tongue."

"Good one," Glover said, with a sigh.

"Just be careful," Sarhana said. "I respect the captain, but realize that she worked very hard to achieve her position, the youngest captain in Starfleet. Her career means a great deal to her. Please don't place yourself into a position where it will force her to choose between you or it, because you might not like the answer."

"There's nothing going on between the captain and me," Glover lied. "She's my superior officer, nothing more."

"Good one," Sarhana laughed. "Just remember what I said, okay?"

Terrence nodded. "You got it. After we freshen up, care to share a drink with me at the lounge?"

"Sounds like a plan," Sarhana replied.

"A plan that will have to be placed on hold," Commander Holmes's voice boomed from the entrance of the recreation room. Terrence fought hard to hide his frown and his fear. He wondered how long the First Officer had been standing in the doorway, and how much he had heard and seen of his exchange with Sarhana. "I need you both on the bridge."

"Yes sir," both of the officers replied, almost in unison.

USS Renegade
Detention Center

On Fred's urging, Tryla had brought Gart into the cabal as well. Now the three of them stood outside the holding cell staring at Commander Ch'ran. The Klingon stared back at them. "Come to try to finish me off," he challenged.

"No," Captain Scott stepped forward. "We're here for answers. We want to know why you attacked the *Bonaventure*."

"Ha," Ch'ran laughed. "The *Bonaventure* attacked us."

"I don't believe it," Holmes replied.

"I don't care what you believe human," Ch'ran said. Gart growled in response. "Nor you Nausicaan targ," the Klingon laughed.

"Insults will get us nowhere," Scott said.

"There's 'nowhere' for me to go," Ch'ran said. "My crew is dead, my ship lost, and you denied me the honor of dying in combat, preventing me from reaching Sto'Vo'Kor, so there is nothing for me now."

"What about the truth? Why did the *Bonaventure* attack you?"

"Because of those things, those creatures," Ch'ran said, his nostrils twitching in disgust. "They had infiltrated the crew, and they were trying to stop us."

"Stop you, from what?" Holmes asked.

"The So'taj had uncovered information about neural parasites attempting to subvert Starfleet. They also had attempted to do the same thing to the Defense Force." Scott gasped, prompting Ch'ran to nod. "Yes, it's true, but we stopped them, and Chancellor K'mpec wanted to share what we had learned in the interest of friendship. Admiral Quinn had told us that the captain of the *Bonaventure* could be trusted, but the parasites must have gotten to them."

"So, you destroyed the *Bonaventure*?"

"No," Ch'ran said. "If I had, my admission to Sto'Vo'Kor would not be in doubt. We engaged with the vessel and then sought to escape to warn the Empire, but the damage we had incurred had severely hindered our efforts."

"And then we showed up, and you thought we had come to finish *Bonaventure's* job?" Scott asked.

Ch'ran nodded. "As far as I knew, the parasites had succeeded in overtaking Starfleet and it was my duty to inform the Empire to prepare for possible hostilities."

"That doesn't explain the *Bonaventure's* destruction," Gart pointed out. Ch'ran grinned.

"We did inflict some damage on the vessel," he boasted, "but not enough to destroy it. Mysteriously, but fortunately for us, the shields failed at an opportune moment erasing the *Bonaventure's* tactical advantages. It is quite possible a mutiny broke out on the ship, and coupled with the strikes we made against it, doomed that crew."

"That is plausible," Gart grudgingly said after a few minutes thought.

"Yeah it is," Scott admitted.

"So, do you still have the information?" Holmes asked.

"Yes," Ch'ran said. He yanked a long strand of hair out of his head. He held it aloft. "This is a polymer strand with our information about the parasites. Lower the forcefield and I will give it to you." Tryla nodded at Gart. The Nausicaan lumbered over to the control board and lowered the shield. Holmes reached for the phaser at his hip, but Scott stayed his hand.

She outstretched her palm and Ch'ran dropped the strand into it. He attempted to cross the threshold, but Tryla told him to stop. "Why?" the Klingon demanded.

"The crew might be unsettled by you walking freely about," the captain said. "We are the only ones privy to this information and we don't want to alarm them, so for the time being you will remain in the brig."

"This is an outrage!" Ch'ran thundered.

"No, it's a reality," Scott shot back. "Raise the field." The Klingon bellowed and jumped at the captain, smacking into the forcefield instead. The jolt sent him flying into the cell's wall. He shakily got back on his feet. "You'll pay for this insult."

"That sounds like a walk in the park compared to what we're up against now," the captain rejoined. "But thanks for the data. We'll make sure to put it to good use."

USS Renegade
Sickbay
Isolation Ward

"It's quite ingenious really," Eknath uncommonly gushed, "in a warped way of course. Counteracting the baryonic radiation by dousing yourself with beta radiation; though that led to another set of medical problems." Glover nodded impatiently.

"So, can I speak with the patients now?"

"Yes Lieutenant," the doctor replied. He pressed the console beside the transparent doors leading to the isolation ward. The three *Bonaventure* survivors, dressed in blue hospital scrubs, were huddled together in a far corner of the room. They looked at Terrence and Eknath with open suspicion. The looks made Glover long to have a phaser.

"I'm Lieutenant Terrence Glover," he said. "Ship's Second Officer." His three counterparts looked at each other, before a blonde human male spoke.

"I'm Lt. Commander Luc Trudeau," he said, turning to nod at each of his compatriots, "and they are Lieutenants Kaie and Ndako." The Trill female and K'normian male also nodded at Glover.

"Is it true? Are we the only survivors from *Bonaventure*?" asked Lt. Kaie, a smallish Trill female, with close cropped raven hair, gazed deeply at Terrence with eyes too ancient for her young face. Had the woman seen so much on that *Bonaventure*, or before to earn such a gaze, the lieutenant absently wondered.

Glover looked at Eknath. "They don't know?" He whispered.

"I told them, but it appears that the horrendous reality is a bit too much for them to absorb at the moment," the Saurian said quietly.

"I see," Glover said. He then addressed the sad trio. "I'm sorry for your loss, but you are the only survivors from the *Bonaventure*."

"That'll be all Mr. Glover," Commander Holmes stentorian voice stamped on his words. "Why are you not on the bridge?"

Terrence reined in his annoyance yet again. He ground his teeth, and bit back a snappy retort. He turned slowly to see the First Officer just outside the isolation ward's door. "Dr. Eknath informed the bridge that the patients had been sufficiently decontaminated. Since you and the captain were interrogating the Klingon, and I had the conn, I took it upon myself to secure statements from them."

"Klingon?" Trudeau said, his face reddening with anger. "You have a Klingon onboard?"

"How many?" Lt. Ndako asked, his golden eyes burning with anger. "Are they from the ship that attacked us?"

"That's enough," Holmes said. He glared at Glover. "Mr. Glover, back to the bridge."

"But Commander," Terrence protested.

"That's an order!"

"Yes sir," Glover said through gritted teeth.

USS Renegade **Captain's Ready Room**

Instead of assuming the conn, Terrence went straight to the captain's ready room. Before the door had even closed behind him, he blurted, "What the hell is going on?"

Captain Scott closed the laptop on her desk, and stood out of her chair. She planted both arms, by the knuckles, on the desk's top. She speared Terrence with her gaze. "Who the hell do you think you are to address a superior officer like that?"

The vehemence in Tryla's words pulled Terrence back from the brink. He blinked several times, his mind frozen. "I-I'm sorry." He said eventually. "It's just... I don't like being left out."

"It's called need to know, and you don't need to know," Scott said.

“Captain, you’ve elicited my advice on other important matters,” Glover tried.

“Not this time,” the captain said. “And I suggest you let the matter drop. No more unilateral actions.”

““Unilateral actions?” Terrence asked, exasperated. “I don’t follow.”

“You should’ve informed both Fred and I when Eknath told you the patients were safe enough to be interviewed, instead of doing it yourself. Stop bucking for plaudits Terrence.”

“I was trying to do my duty,” he replied hotly. “You told me to get you answers and that was what I was attempting to do! I knew you and the XO were busy with Ch’ran, so I was doing the team work thing, which you’re always harping on me to do more of. Sorry,” he said, with roiling frustration.

“Commander Holmes and Gart will conduct this investigation from here on in,” Scott said. “Your shift’s up in a half hour. Take off now, go back to your cabin and think about what I said.”

“Yes sir,” Glover said, exiting the room without asking for or waiting to be dismissed.

USS Renegade **Second Officer’s Cabin**

“Dad, something really fishy is going on,” Terrence said. Several new lines of worry joined the rest on Admiral Samson Glover’s weathered face. The older man rubbed a hand over his salt and pepper hair.

“Terrence you could be overreacting. You’re only the second officer. You can’t be privy to everything the senior leadership does.”

“But Dad, you don’t understand. There have been other times when the captain has shared things with me, asked for my insight, on stuff that I wasn’t privy to. What’s so different about this time?” Of course Terrence couldn’t tell his father that part of his anger was fueled by frustration at the sudden aloofness of a not merely a commanding officer, but a woman he had last shared a bed with only a few days ago.

“Son I think you’re really blowing things out of proportion.”

“Okay, maybe I am Dad,” Glover lied. “But just to amuse me, is there something big going on or coming up.”

Samson shook his head. “Not really. There’s been a spate of officer reassignments recently, along with some deaths. And there was that business with Starbase 12 going offline, but nothing that seems ominous or too par from the course.”

“Hmmm,” Terrence rubbed his chin. “Thanks Dad. If you hear of anything....”

"I'll let you know," Samson replied. "But in the meantime I advise you to listen to your captain. She didn't get there at that age by magic."

"I know," Glover said.

"Yeah, but sometimes you don't act like it," Samson grumbled.

"You're right," Terrence said, more contrite, "I'll do a better job of keeping my mouth shut and my ears open." His father grinned.

"I'll believe it when I see it."

USS Horatio

Captain's Ready Room

Mira Antliae System

Captain Walker Keel walked around his desk and grasped Tryla's hand in a firm shake. Simultaneously the *Horatio* captain sized up Commander Holmes. Scott's XO proudly withstood the scrutiny. After a minute, Keel shrugged and smiled.

"I guess he's alright," he said, looking over at his first officer, a morose Andorian. The Andorian didn't return his commander's smile. "Fred Holmes, this is Captain Walker Keel and his Executive Officer Torvald," Scott made the introductions. Holmes replied tersely to each man.

"Now that's out the way, what have you got for me Tryla?" Keel asked. Scott gave the man a datapad filled with the information gleaned from Ch'ran's polymer strand. He glanced at the pad for a few minutes, his eyebrows going up and down with each revelation. Eventually he handed the pad to Torvald. The Andorian didn't even blink while he took in the information. After he was finished he passed it back to Keel. "Wow," Keel began. "I didn't realize the infiltration had reached so far."

"It's definitely cause for concern," Scott concurred.

"As is Ryan's death," Keel frowned. "He was a good man."

"They were all good people," Scott said, alluding to the other fallen members of the cabal. Keel nodded.

"You're right," the *Horatio* captain concluded. "That makes it even more imperative that we replenish our ranks."

"You're certain about Picard?" Scott asked, though she already knew Walker's answer. "How do you know that he hasn't been compromised yet?"

"Actually...I don't know," Keel admitted. "But I intend to test him when he arrives."

"And if he fails the test?" Scott prodded.

"I'll-I'll do what needs to be done," Keel said quietly, "for the survival of the Federation."

USS Renegade **In Orbit of Dytallix B**

“Whoa, take a look at the Big D,” Lt. Erich Long, the ship’s Science Officer gasped. “She’s a beauty.” The large, silvery-white *Enterprise-D* had just joined the *Renegade*, the *Thomas Paine*, and the *Horatio* in orbit. The *Enterprise* easily dwarfed both the *Renegade* and *Thomas Paine*, which were *New Orleans*-class frigates, but was even larger than the *Ambassador*-class *Horatio*.

Glover repressed a shiver, remembering the shattered hull of the *Bonaventure*. The *Enterprise-D* was a sister ship of that doomed vessel, and was of identical design. Lt. Sarhana whistled.

“Got a problem with the Big D?” Glover asked.

The Phalckerian shook her head. “No, just incorporating whistling as a sign of appreciation. I’m trying to be cross-cultural here.” Terrence laughed. The *Enterprise* was a nice ship, but its crew was what really impressed Glover. They were the best of the best, and at one time he had hoped he would get a call from Captain Picard to serve. That call had never come and Glover’s ego had been pinched by the tacit rejection. Terrence knew that he could rise faster serving on smaller ships like the *Renegade*, however just the thought of serving aboard the Fleet’s flagship would’ve been a nice feather in his cap. Surely he would’ve made a better First Officer than Riker.

Terrence eventually pulled himself away from the majestic site of the *Enterprise* and a life that might have been. He buried himself in his work, or at least pretended to. His mind was more preoccupied imagining what was being said on the planet below. Four Starfleet captains, meeting in secret, whatever it was it couldn’t be a good thing.

Before he knew it Captain Scott was signaling to beam aboard. Commander Holmes gave up the center seat and nearly barreled to the turbolift. Glover uneasily took the conn. For one of the first times in his career he didn’t like sitting in the captain’s chair.

USS Renegade **Captain’s Quarters**

Just when she was finally drifting off to sleep, the intercom squawked. “What is it now?” Tryla grouched.

“Sir, it’s a priority-one-message from the *Enterprise*,” the anonymous voice replied. The captain wasn’t sure who it was speaking to her, and for some reason it chilled her insides. “Put the message through, secure line.”

She hopped out of bed, taking a few seconds to steady herself. She rushed to her desk terminal and activated. “Captain Picard, what happened?”

The captain's mouth drew into an even tighter line. "The *Horatio*..." She heard just a hint of give in the man's strong voice. "It was destroyed. We suspect it might be sabotage."

"Oh no," Tryla said, squeezing her eyes to keep back the tears. They flowed anyway. "Walker...did anyone survive?"

Picard's face slackened. "No. There were no survivors."

"What are we going to do without Walker," Scott said, more to herself than the Enterprise captain. "He was our rock. Now, he's gone, just like Ryan, Onna, and Mac." She shook her head in disbelief.

"Captain Scott, I don't know what your course of action should be, but I'm going to Earth. I'm going to expose this alien infiltration to Starfleet Command. Maybe if we turn on the light the insects will scatter," Picard replied, with a quiet fury.

"Captain, do you think that's wise?" Tryla asked, now concerned for Picard's safety. "They obviously know who we are; they'll be gunning for the rest of us next."

"That's exactly why Starfleet Command needs to be made aware of the threat we face...or be exposed as part of that threat."

"You don't think the infiltration has reached that far, do you?" Scott asked.

"Do you?"

"I-I'm not sure," Tryla admitted. "I think you should speak to Admiral Quinn about this first."

"I intend to," Picard promised. "Once I reach Earth."

"I'll rendezvous with you," Scott offered. "It's not best for us to travel alone anymore."

"You're right, but Captain Rixx might need your assistance more than I," Picard said. "He's currently en route to the Ngame Nebula. I recommended that he remain there until he hears word from me."

"Captain I can't let you take on this hazard by yourself," Tryla declared. Picard gave her a faint smile.

"Isn't that what commanding a starship is all about?" He asked, before his expression turned more serious. "And to be frank with you Captain Scott, if the *Enterprise* falls victim to sabotage or some other 'mysterious' end, you and Captain Rixx can continue the fight."

Scott sighed. "Damn, that makes a lot of sense."

Picard nodded. "Thank you. I'll be in touch with you again once we reach Earth. Until that time be careful."

"You too." Switch off the transmission, Scott spoke into the intercom hidden in one of her ceiling bulkheads. "Captain Scott to Engineering."

"Doyle here," Tryla smiled. It was far past the Chief Engineer's shift, but Gerri Doyle didn't know the meaning of time off.

“Chief, I need you to run a level-one diagnostic on all propulsion systems immediately. If you find anything unusual I want to be informed ASAP.”

“I’m on it,” the woman replied. Tryla’s smile grew. With some of her subordinates, Terrence especially, he would’ve peppered her with a dozen questions before getting to work. The thought of her lover, gave Scott a wicked inspiration. “Chief, please inform Lt. Glover that I want him to initiate a similar scan on the ship’s critical systems.”

“Aye,” Doyle said.

“Scott out.” Tryla looked wistfully at the bed. There was no way she could sleep now, with thoughts of Walker Keel heavy on her mind. Also the bed hadn’t felt right without Terrence beside her anyway. She pulled off her night clothes and put on a uniform. On the way to the bridge, she woke up her XO. “Meet me in my Ready Room.”

USS Renegade **Main Engineering**

Chief Doyle had contacted Tryla shortly after her meeting with Commander Holmes. She had never heard the normally unflappable engineer sound so startled. More surprisingly Doyle had asked to speak to the captain alone.

Tryla’s stomach roiled as she entered Doyle’s office. She was both intrigued and frightened of what the woman wished to share with her, but she concealed her anxieties behind the sternest countenance she could muster. “Gerri what’s wrong?”

Chief Doyle, an older, thickset woman with short, salt and pepper colored hair, looked up from the small device placed on her desk. “Thank goodness I found it in time.”

“What is it?” The captain asked, walking forward. She was anxious to get a better look at the cylindrical device. “It looks like an injector rod.”

Doyle smiled coldly. “That was the point. It’s actually an explosive, primed to go off by remote control, but I’ve already deactivated it.”

“Oh my,” Tryla gasped. She leaned over from the other side of the desk. “Someone on board placed it there?”

Doyle nodded. “I’m sure of that.”

“Any ideas who?” Tryla asked, still looking at the fake rod.

“Yeah, actually I do,” the chief engineer said.

Tryla looked up, startled. “Who?” She just got out before the engineer leaped from her seat, and grabbed the captain’s shoulders. Scott ripped free of the woman’s grip.

“Gerri, what the hell are you doing?”

Doyle smiled; her gaze savage. She squatted on the desk, on all fours like some beast.

The captain reached to tap her combadge. Doyle lunged at her, forcing Scott against the wall, her head slamming hard against an unyielding bulkhead while the air was forced from her lungs. Tryla slid to the ground, dazed and terrified. The chief engineer stood over her, a grin spreading over her face.

Tryla reached for her combadge again, but tapped only her cloth. The chevron-shaped communications device wasn't there. She looked around for it. Doyle chuckled and held out her hand. She opened it to reveal the captain's compin nestled in her palm. Scott reached for it, and the engineer slammed her head against the wall again.

The captain's shock was almost as great as her pain. She looked back up at the woman still standing over her. “Why?” She weakly asked.

“I'd rather show you than tell you,” Doyle said as she leaned down, her girth pressing into Tryla. With almost inhuman strength, she pinned Tryla's arms against the wall. “This might hurt a bit, but I promise you it's worth it.” She smiled again, but this time her mouth widened in grotesque proportion. Scott heard a faint scraping sound coming from the woman's mouth, and then she saw Doyle's throat bulge.

Tryla screamed as Doyle's mouth grew wider. The chief engineer silenced her cries with a kiss.

USS Renegade **Conference Room**

Lt. Terrence Glover was on edge. His concern for Tryla was mixed with anger, confusion, and hurt over what had happened to both the captain and Chief Doyle.

He just couldn't believe that Doyle was dead and that Tryla had killed her in self-defense. He hadn't known Doyle all that well. She seemed more interested in her job than making friends, and Terrence had seen no reason to force the issue. None of it made sense; it seemed as if the universe itself had gone mad. Ever since Tryla, her voice bordering on hysteria, had called the bridge, asking for help, Glover felt he had been along for the ride on a train rushing over a cliff.

He had beaten Holmes and Gart to the turbolift and all three men had shared an uncomfortable silence. Terrence was sure fears were running rampant in both their minds as well. Glover's imagination hadn't matched the reality when he entered Doyle's office and saw the captain, on her knees,

hovering over the chief engineer. From the odd angle Doyle's head was turned, Glover knew the woman was dead.

"What happened?" Holmes had grated. Tryla looked up at them, her eyes finding Glover, and there was something so lost in them that it frightened him. Before she could respond, she shuddered, and fell backward.

They had rushed her to Sickbay. The captain had regained her senses by the time they arrived. She had adamantly refused Eknath's attempts for a bioscan. She only allowed him to treat her cuts and bruises. She had insisted that time was of the essence and she needed to address the senior staff immediately.

Despite Dr. Eknath's rushed ministrations, the captain's face was still bruised and she moved gingerly in her seat. But her eyes were steely. "I should've done this sooner," she began, "but the Federation is in grave danger. There has been a conspiracy brewing for months, by an unknown alien power, to subvert Starfleet. Only a handful of officers, myself included, have known about it. Many of those officers are dead, killed by the aliens."

Sarhana whistled. "I can't believe it."

"Believe it," Holmes grumbled.

Glover shook his head slowly, trying to accept what Tryla was telling him. "I'm sorry captain, but do you have proof of this conspiracy? And are you saying that Chief Doyle was a member of it?"

Scott regarded him coolly for a moment before responding. "Yes," she said. "On both counts." She pressed a button inlaid on her portion of the long conference table. The small screen behind her activated. "This information was largely derived from Klingon operatives...." Tryla weaved a tale, backed up by the images on the screen that made Terrence question his grip on reality.

Tiny, purplish, scorpion-like creatures, a newly discovered parasitic form of life had first been documented on the Klingon military outpost on the planet Muldor II. Imperial Intelligence had divined that the aliens were planning to take over the Klingon Defense Force, and according to the captain, had now set their sights on the Federation. "The infiltration runs deep," Scott somberly concluded. "Before Gerri...died, she revealed that Captain Rixx and the crew of the *Thomas Paine* had been compromised."

Holmes glowered. "Damn," he softly cursed.

"How did the Klingons stop them?" Lt. Long asked.

Tryla tilted her head quizzically, regarding the question for a few moments. "It appeared that Klingon physiology ultimately proved too resistant, and the Defense Force also took no precaution in wiping out even a hint of infestation. The entire Muldor system was 'cleansed'," the captain finished with a shudder.

"My gods," Dr. Eknath gasped. "Surely there had to be a better way."

"The Klingons methods were brutal, but perhaps they had the right thing in mind," Holmes said. "These parasites are extremely intelligent and very dangerous. They take over people's bodies, their minds. Even letting one survive could've caused untold damage to the Empire, and now they're targeting the Federation."

"That's why we've got to stop them," the captain declared, "before they can infect others. The *Enterprise* is heading to Earth to inform Starfleet Command of the conspiracy. The aliens know they have been discovered, and we've got to stop them from launching whatever they have in store for us...or Captain Picard."

"Has anyone stopped to try to establish a dialogue with these creatures?" The chief medic asked. "Perhaps their intentions are peaceful."

Holmes grunted, but Scott nodded. "I've often pondered that at first," she admitted. "But their actions prove otherwise."

"Are you going to inform Captain Picard about Rixx?" Glover asked. Scott responded with a tight smile, but her gaze grew even more frigid. "He might have some ideas about what the *Thomas Paine* is up to or at least so he can be on guard," he added weakly.

"To be honest, Jean-Luc is a late comer to this," the captain replied. "He knew less than any of us, and perhaps that's for the best. Captain Keel is dead and Rixx has been infected. I think Earth is probably the safest place for the *Enterprise* to be heading. No, this is our fight. It has been all along. I regret not informing you all sooner, but I need your support now."

The crew all nodded in agreement. Terrence did too, but not as enthusiastically as the others. Scott smiled again. "Thank you. The *Thomas Paine* was last headed for the Ngame Nebula. I have already ordered the ship to lay in an intercept course. I need you all at your posts, and I require your best. The next few hours will not be easy, but I expect nothing but the best from you. Furthermore, to prevent further acts of sabotage I have ordered all non-essential personnel confined to their quarters for the duration of this mission."

"Sir...don't you think that's a little extreme?" Glover asked.

Scott rubbed her bruised cheek. "No more extreme than my chief engineer trying to kill me. Listen, these things, whatever they are, aren't just imitating us, they are us, or rather, inside us. With a crew this size, that means there are too many potential threats to leave walking freely about the ship. Right now, none of us can be fully trusted."

"That makes a lot of sense," Gart added.

"I know it does," Terrence grouched, "but it just doesn't sound right to me. It sounds like overkill."

"This is my ship, and I will run it as I see fit," Scott said sharply. "The safety of this crew is my responsibility."

"It's our responsibility," Glover shot back.

"That's enough Lt. Glover," Holmes moved forward in his seat. Glover did the same.

"This meeting is adjourned," Scott said. "Terrence, hang back."

Glover waited pensively as the rest of the crew filed out of the conference room. Once they were alone, Glover left his seat. He sat on the edge of the table and reached out to grasp Tryla's hand.

She pulled away from him. "What are you doing?"

"Tryla, what do you mean?" He reached for her again.

"Touch me again, and I will call security," Scott said. She stood up quickly. "I had wanted to allay your concerns, but it appears you have other intentions in mind. Need I remind you of Starfleet regulations pertaining to fraternization?"

"What are you talking about?" Terrence asked, punctuating it with a nervous laugh. He stood up and faced the captain. "Is this some type of joke? I know you're under a lot of stress and all."

He reached for her again, and wrapped her in his arms before she could protest. "What's wrong with you?" He asked, as the woman began to struggle. "I know you're probably pissed off about my questioning your orders, but that has nothing to do with us."

"With us?" She asked, her coyness sounding more like confusion.

"Need I spell it out?" He laughed again.

"Yes, please proceed."

Terrence sighed. "You sure like to play games sometimes. Okay, we're lovers, even though you haven't been so tender lately."

"Lovers?" Tryla shuddered and she instantly relaxed in his arms. "Lovers," she repeated softly in his ear. "Is that right?"

"It used to be," he said.

"Perhaps we can be again," she said.

"That's more like it," he grinned. The captain nudged him back toward the table. He pushed the chair out of the way and sat on the tabletop. She pressed against him.

"I want to explore," she said.

"Now? Here?"

"Yes."

"In the middle of a crisis?"

"Can you think of a better time?"

"Actually...no," he smiled. Now, she was starting to sound again like the Tryla he knew. Perhaps it was all the stress that was making her act strange. He lied back on the table and she climbed on top of him. Glover pulled the woman on top of him, crushing her body against his in a strong embrace. Tryla moaned softly, the sound arousing Glover even more. He began to

roughly explore the woman's body, but suddenly he stopped. She looked at him askance, the coldness from her gaze completely melted.

"What's wrong?"

"What about your injuries? I don't want to hurt you," he said. "Perhaps we should do this some other time, when you're fully healed."

"I want to do it now," she replied. "I want to experience this sensation."

"Huh?"

She kissed him. "I'm not as fragile as you might think," she said, before kissing him again, this time even more hungrily. Glover relented, giving into his passion. His hands resumed their journey up her back. He intended to move from the nape of her neck to the zipper at her throat. His fingers brushed across something sharp sticking out of the captain's neck.

Glover gently ran his fingers over it again. "Tryla...captain," he said more formally after she didn't respond to his first summons.

"What?"

"What the hell is this?" He fingered the protrusion again, it twitched. The captain rose up, planting her arms on both sides of his head. She sighed, and the heat she radiated died in an instant.

"You couldn't leave well enough alone, could you Terrence? A pity," she said.

"Huh...what are you talking about?" Glover tried to rise up, but the captain head butted him with such force that black waves undulated before his eyes. His eyes watering, he glanced at Tryla. A rictus grin was spread across her face.

"It's unfortunate that our Queen sent only one of us to this vessel. You would make a prime host," Tryla said, but Glover knew it wasn't her truly speaking.

"Release the captain immediately," he demanded. The thing controlling Tryla made her laugh. Her thighs locked tightly around his ribs with crushing force.

Her arms pinned him to the table, and he struggled futilely against her. "Fight it Tryla, you're stronger than it, don't let them win."

"Too late," the captain said, before she head butted him again.

USS Thomas Paine

En Route to the Ngame Nebula

"Captain Rixx," Lt. Zarla, the ship's Operations Officer called, a curious tone in her voice. "Long range scanners are picking up another starship on an approach vector."

The captain tensed immediately. "Identify them."

"It's the *Renegade*," Zarla replied. Rixx relaxed slightly. Even though he was glad it was Tryla, the Bolian was now concerned about the reasons for her appearance. Captain Picard had told him that he would recommend that Tryla also sought cover inside the nebula, but Rixx didn't think she would go for that. His impression of the young human was that she was very headstrong and liked to be in the eye of the storm. Whatever might be making her turn away from that storm certainly couldn't be good.

"Hail them," Lt. Commander Glen Palfrey, reading Rixx's mind, said. The captain gave his First Officer a lipless smile.

"They are not responding to the hail," Zarla replied. For Rixx, the tension was back.

"Try again," he ordered.

"Captain, they're powering forward phasers," Tactical Officer Dixon yelled. Seconds later the ship rattled as several powerful volleys struck it. Rixx held onto his armrests, the only reason he remained planted in his seat. Most of the rest of bridge crew weren't as fortunate, Commander Raines included.

In the dim lighting, flaming consoles produced a baleful glare. The bridge filled with the acrid smell of smoke as another round of fire smashed into the ship. "Shields," Rixx said. "Raise the shields!"

"Too late," Zarla looked back at him. Her planar Zaldan face was blackened and bloody. "Our shield generators were taken out in the first assault and auxiliary reserves in the second."

"What about weapons," Rixx said, trying not to notice that Palfrey had not resumed his post.

"We've still got those," another officer had taken over the tactical console.

"Use them," Rixx said, "and may the gods grant us mercy."

USS Renegade **Detention Center**

Terrence's head smacked the cold, hard deck, waking him up and adding to the agony of his still throbbing head. He felt hands grabbed him and he fought them off.

"Let go of me!" He screamed blindly, still half-unconscious.

"Calm down," a voice he didn't recognize said. "We're just trying to help." Glover slowly opened his eyes. He remembered the officer from the *Bonaventure*: Trudeau. Trudeau, flanked by his comrades, was kneeling beside him. All three had nervous expressions. The ship trembled again.

“What’s happening?” Terrence asked, but then answered his own question. “Oh God no! She’s attacking the Thomas Paine!” He tried to get up, but Trudeau grabbed him.

“Settle down,” the man got out before he was silenced by one of Terrence’s elbows. The man fell back with a thud. His crewmates rushed to catch him before he hit the deck. Terrence used the distraction to leap forward. He stopped just a hair’s breadth from slamming into the force field. “Frinx!”

“Ha, that’s the best curse you could come up with?” The Klingon Ch’ran guffawed from the adjacent cell. “I see why you Starfleeters are so weak.”

Glover ignored him. He glared at the security officer standing at the center’s operations console. Lt. Yavarn-Enlo, assistant security chief, had his phaser at the ready.

“Release me at once,” Terrence said in his most imperious voice.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” the Grazerite security guard replied.

“Why not?”

“We’re under orders from the captain to detain you until you can stand for court martial,” Yavarn replied.

“She attacked me,” Glover couldn’t constrain himself. “She’s one of them Yavarn, the captain’s infected!”

“That’s what she said about you,” the guard countered, the charge hitting Terrence like a physical blow.

“She’s-she’s lying,” Glover replied, with far less vehemence. He mulled over how he might try to convince Yavarn of the truth. “Test us, have Doctor Eknath test us.”

“You’ll have to run that by the captain,” Yavarn said. “I have my orders.”

“Yavarn,” Terrence found himself pleading, “You don’t understand. That’s not the captain.”

“Looks like her to me,” he riposted.

“It is, but it isn’t....don’t you get it, don’t you understand?” Glover said with increasing frustration.

“No, he doesn’t,” Ch’ran butted in. “None of you seem to have appreciated the true threat of these creatures, until it was too late.”

Glover bit back his annoyance and called out to the Klingon. “You believe me?”

“Yes.”

Terrence then looked at the *Bonaventure* officers. Trudeau was rubbing at his bloodied mouth. Glover asked them, and they nodded in agreement too.

He turned back toward the guard. “You see, I’m not by myself in this.”

“You’re right,” Yavarn quipped. “and maybe that’s why you are all in those cells.”

“Why you cocky son of a....” Terrence’s curse died on his lips when the lights went out.

Immediately he took action, leaping across the threshold, he hit a large, fast moving object with such force that it knocked him to the ground. Yavarn screamed, and then Terrence heard a sickening, wet snap.

The lights flickered back on and Glover looked up to see Ch’ran throwing Yavarn’s lifeless body to the deck. “You bastard!” Terrence roared. He clambered to his feet and crouched in an attack stance.

Ch’ran whipped around, his hand engulfing Yavarn’s small phaser. Glover gritted his teeth, but held his ground. “You’ve all lost your minds. I’m getting off this vessel, and you’re going to help me.”

“No, I’m not.” Ch’ran waved the phaser in his face, but Terrence didn’t flinch.

“We’ll get off this ship, together, all of us.”

“That is acceptable,” Ch’ran said, surprising Glover by agreeing so easily. With his free hand he deactivated the forcefield. The three Bonaventure officers warily stepped forward.

“After we’ve warned Starfleet, I’m going to make you pay for what you did to Yavarn,” Terrence promised.

“This is war,” Ch’ran declared. “Our jailer died honorably, what is there to be angered about? Humans, I will never understand you.”

Glover was seething, but he had to put the interests of the Federation first. He didn’t want to leave, he wanted to march right up to the bridge, and plow through everyone until he could confront Tryla, or rather the thing possessing Tryla. He knew that his lover was somewhere still inside. He was certain that whatever embers of Tryla remained had kept the alien from killing him in the conference room. But Terrence knew it was a lost cause. His only hope, hell, the entire Federation’s only hope was for them to try to get away so they could sound the alarm. “This way,” he said tightly, after poking his head out of the detention center’s door.

The dim, red-lighted corridor was empty. It was a good thing that the captain’s edict restricting non-essential crew to quarters remained in affect.

They made it without incident to the Auxiliary Shuttle Bay; Glover thought it best to bypass the main one due to the high level of activity normally there. Ch’ran proved quick on the trigger and he stunned the three crewmen on duty.

Standing on the ramp leading to the *Shuttle Raines*, Terrence’s fear and love for Tryla began to gnaw at him. He just couldn’t leave her; he couldn’t bear the thought of that parasite inside her, controlling her for one more second. Putting her and his crew at risk. Not to mention countless others.

“You guys get out of here,” he ordered as he ran back down the ramp. “I’ve got to try to stop this.”

“No,” Trudeau called, “It’s suicide.”

“It sounds Klingon to me!” Ch’ran roared. “Glover!” Terrence looked back and reached up to grab the phaser that Ch’ran tossed at him.

“It’s not over between us,” Glover declared.

“I hope not,” Ch’ran responded. “Qa’pla!”

Terrence hopped off the ramp. He only gave the escapees a few more seconds of his attention, watching as the ramp slowly rose up and sealed shut, and the antigravs kicked in, lifting the *Raines* off the deck. By the time it had passed through the shuttle bay’s opened door and into space, Glover was already heading for the bridge.

USS Renegade **Main Bridge**

“Keep up pursuit!” Captain Scott yelled. “Don’t let them escape into the nebula!” Between the lines of static on the viewer, she saw their damaged sister ship jetting away on full impulse. The dark gaseous body of the nebula loomed before it.

The increasingly weaker part of Tryla that was really Tryla cheered, but the shadow had engulfed her, seethed with hatred. The Queen-Spawn had commanded that all challengers to her dominion be destroyed. The soldier-spawn was determined to fulfill the Queen’s commands at all cost. Despite a devastating first strike the *Thomas Paine* had proven resilient, and the soldier-spawn had struggled to access all of its host’s tactical expertise. It had been surprised that a human could possess such iron will.

“Captain, there has been an unauthorized departure of one of shuttles from the auxiliary bay,” the hulking Tactical Officer Gart reported. The Queen-Spawn had decided against using the Nausicaan’s as hosts. Their strength and endurance were impressive, but their mental faculties were too small.

“Stop them! Use the tractor beam!”

“They’ve initiated evasive maneuvers.”

“Who could it be?” She looked at Commander Holmes.

“It has to be Glover,” the man ground his teeth.

“Check the detention cell,” it ordered, unable to remain immune to Scott’s admiration of the young human. He would’ve made a worthy host indeed.

“They’re gone,” Holmes said, “and one person down there is dead,” he paused, “The bio-signature is Grazerite.” Gart keened.

“Stop that shuttle, with what ever force is required,” the soldier-spawn ordered, the captain’s voice cracking as Tryla made a vain attempt to reassert control.

Gart fired. A glancing blow shook the shuttle, but did little to stop its progress. The shuttle pushed on.

"I didn't say 'disable' it, I said stop it!" the soldier-spawn snapped after receiving Gart's report of minimal damage. "We can't allow the infection to spread."

"Captain, but Lt. Glover is on that ship," Holmes said, with surprising softness. "Are you sure you want to take that step? We don't know for certain that Glover or anyone else on that shuttle is infected? Or even if they are that the infection can't be cured."

Scott's body shudder as the soldier-spawn was repelled by the human's description of it as if it was a disease, as if the clarity and strength its species gave their hosts was something undesirable. The man's casual arrogance hardened the soldier-spawn's resolve. "They murdered one of our crewmen. Does that sound like something Lt. Glover would normally do?"

Holmes mouth drew into a tight line and his expression became somber. He shook his balding head. "No...it doesn't," he admitted.

"It doesn't sound like him to me either." The soldier-spawn used Tryla's distress to break into her mental defenses and access more of the human's memories. The woman truly did love Glover, and there was some essential part of her being that was screaming in torment right now. It was an unusual, but not all together unpleasant sensation, the soldier-spawn concluded.

"Stop the shuttle," the soldier-spawn repeated. "Lethal force is permitted."

"Captain, this isn't right," Holmes said, but the soldier-spawn ignored him.

"You heard me Mr. Gart," it said, barely controlling its anger.

Several beams arced from the ship, lashing into the escaping shuttle. It exploded seconds later. Sarhana's tortured gasp was audible. The soldier-spawn would have to deal with her later. "Gart, what the hell was that?" Holmes bellowed. "You could've taken out the engines or the shields and then tractor beamed them back to us!"

"Justice," the Nausicaan simply answered. "Maybe Yavarn's soul can now find peace."

"You're relieved," Holmes snapped.

"No, he isn't," the soldier-spawn replied. "Retain your post Mr. Gart. Great work." Holmes looked at it askance, the first signs of real doubt starting to lace his weathered face. The commander would also have to be dispatched. The concept of dissension was completely foreign to the soldier-spawn, a product of a hive-mind. Such a thing could not be tolerated, even among those not blessed with such mental unity and clarity.

"Captain, I..." the First Officer began, but the soldier-spawn rounded on him. It wanted to smear the floor with him, but merely snapped:

“Mr. Gart, escort Commander Holmes from the bridge!”

“Just hold on a minute,” Holmes began.

“Now Mr. Gart,” the soldier-spawn repeated. “And Lt. Sarhana too.”

“Captain,” the woman turned around in her seat. “What did I do?”

“You and Mr. Glover were very close,” it said, touching on a trace of the host’s jealousy of their friendship. “At this moment I can’t trust you to do your best.”

“And you two weren’t?” The Phalckerian archly challenged, her face darkening.

“Captain, I must formally protest,” Holmes said, still seated. The soldier-spawn looked at Gart, jump starting the man. He bounded down into the command well.

“You can file all the protests you like while you’re in your quarters,” it replied with a heap of sarcasm. The Nausicaan stepped beside the commander and laid a large hand on his shoulder.

“Please come with me sir,” he grumbled. Holmes yanked away from Gart’s grasp, but he stood up. He scowled at the captain.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea.” The soldier-spawn merely had Tryla nod.

“Lt. Sarhana, stand down from your post,” the soldier-spawn ordered. The Phalckerian sighed, but she didn’t protest. Gart escorted them both to the turbolift. Two of the indistinguishable bridge officers assumed the vacant posts at Tactical and Flight Control. Once the turbolift doors had closed, the soldier-spawn returned its attention to the battle at hand.

“What’s our status?” The soldier-spawn began, but its words dried in Captain Scott’s mouth when the *Thomas Paine* made an abrupt about face and charged at the *Renegade*, its few remaining weapon’s banks blazing.

“Evasive maneuvers!” The soldier-spawn screamed too late.

USS Renegade **Corridor**

Terrence pounded down the empty, red-tinted corridors; his progress impeded by the nearly constant assault ship was weathering. The barrage almost knocked to his feet more than once, but he kept on. He had to reach the Auxiliary Control Center, an operations room that would allow him to gain control of the entire ship without having to go to the bridge or engineering, which he was sure were heavily manned. Once he had stopped the ship dead in space maybe the creature would be more amenable to persuasion and release Tryla, or at least he hoped the crew would see he was telling the truth and do something about it.

Rounding another corner, Glover froze. Commander Holmes, Lt. Sarhana, and Lt. Gart were walking down the hallway. Sarhana's eyes widened, and Gart snarled. He pulled out his phaser. "Take cover Lt. Glover!" Holmes yelled as he grabbed the Nausicaan's gun arm, forcing the shot to sizzle just shy of Terrence.

The smell of burnt ozone jolted Terrence into action. Instead of taking cover, he charged forward, raising his own weapon. Unfortunately he couldn't get a shot at Gart. Both he and Holmes were struggling for the security officer's phaser.

"Sarhana, what's going on?" Terrence quickly asked.

"The captain....she's...." Sarhana shook her head, her confusion and shock cutting off her words. "She...relieved the First Officer and me."

"That's all I needed to know," Glover said. He joined Holmes in attempting to wrest the phaser away from Gart. The Nausicaan was incredibly powerful. He drove a pointed elbow into Terrence's jaw, smashing teeth and bone. Glover dropped to the deck, losing his own phaser, but he fought off the pain to wrap his arms around the man's stout legs. He jerked, throwing the Nausicaan off balance. He fell to the deck with a surprised roar.

"Move!" Sarhana shouted. Holmes tried to help untangle Glover from the fallen, thrashing Nausicaan while simultaneously holding him on the ground. Sarhana stepped forward, and aimed Terrence's phaser at the officer. She fired. Gart laughed, and responded with a stiff uppercut that threw Holmes back. Gart then grabbed Glover roughly by the neck and began to squeeze as he got on his knees. Terrence slowed him down with a desperate punch in the man's crotch. Gart wailed and before sinking his tusks into Terrence's shoulder. Glover screamed.

"Now...would be a good time!" He yelled to Sarhana after the scream.

"Sorry, but I don't want to kill him. I'm trying to figure out the best stun setting," the Phalckerian nervously replied.

"Just do it!" Holmes snapped, his mouth welling with blood. She fired again. Gart's grip slackened instantly. His eyes rolled back in his head and he fell to the deck like a tree.

"Are you all right?" Sarhana asked, rushing to Glover. She inspected the nasty bite marks on the man's shoulder.

"I'm fine, thank you," Holmes remarked. Sarhana scowled and Glover chuckled. Terrence, using both the wall and Sarhana's support, got to his feet. Holmes joined them.

"Still think I'm infected?" He asked the First Officer.

Holmes shook his head and looked Glover directly in the eye. "No, I don't."

"You really think the captain has been infected with one of those things?" Sarhana shuddered.

"It's the only thing that can explain her behavior," Holmes surmised. "None of this, this battle with the Thomas Paine, the destruction of the shuttle..."

"The shuttle was destroyed?" Glover asked, shock almost robbing him of speech. Holmes nodded, his expression full of remorse.

"The captain ordered it," he said.

"Oh God," Glover placed a hand against his forehead. "We've got to stop her...it...before anymore damage is done or lives are lost."

"Agreed," the two other officers affirmed.

"So, where were you headed?" Holmes asked.

"Auxiliary Control," Terrence replied. Holmes gave him a bloody grin.

"I know where you're going with this, and I like it," the commander replied. Glover smiled too.

"Glad you agree."

"How about you two save the rapprochement until after we've regained control of the ship?" Sarhana asked.

Holmes shrugged and Terrence chuckled. The three headed toward Auxiliary Control, keeping each other on their feet as the deck plates continued to tremble.

USS Renegade **Main Bridge**

"Captain? Captain, are you all right?" Lt. Long asked. He was currently occupying Holmes's seat. The soldier-spawn didn't respond. The Queen-Spawn needed it. The *Enterprise* was en route to Earth, and its imminent arrival was causing distress to reverberate among the groupmind. The wall of fear had reached the Queen, and it needed reassurance.

"Lay in a new course," the soldier-spawn ordered.

"Where too?" Long asked, doing his best to hide his frustration and confusion.

"Earth," it said.

"Earth?" The officer standing in for Gart asked, her tone incredulous. "But sir, we're in the middle of a battle. We can't just cut out and allow those infected to get away."

"You have your orders," the soldier-spawn snapped. "Carry them out!" Long looked at the Tactical Officer, and gave a barely noticeable shrug.

"You heard the captain," he said to the whole bridge crew. "Lay in a course for Earth."

"Maximum warp," it added.

"Maximum warp," Long repeated. The soldier-spawn then remembered something.

“Where is Lt. Gart? It shouldn’t have taken him that long to drop off Commander Holmes and Lt. Sarhana and return to the bridge.”

Long began checking. A half-minute later he glanced at the captain, a worried expression on his face. “You’re not going to like this,” he began.

USS Thomas Paine **Main Bridge**

Captain Rixx stood up; suspicion warring with relief, as he watched the *Renegade* turn around and jet off.

“This must be some kind of trick?” He turned to his XO. Lt. Commander Palfrey, a bandage wrapped around his head, spoke up.

“Yes sir, it must be, but for the life of me I can’t think of what it is.”

“Tryla Scott doesn’t quit...ever,” Rixx said, rubbing his bifurcated chin. “This doesn’t make sense.”

“Like attacking us in the first place did?” Lt. Zarla, his Operations Officer, remarked with customary bluntness. Normally Rixx saw the woman’s honesty as refreshing, but at the moment he found it jarring and rude, especially after the dozen crewmembers he had lost today. He merely stared at her with rebuke in his gaze. Zarla eventually turned back around and returned to her duties.

“Captain, Zarla’s right,” Lt. Kirk Wiley, stationed at the bridge’s auxiliary engineering console chimed in. “On North Star we have a saying ‘don’t look a gift horse in the mouth’, I think that’s some advice we should aim to follow.”

Rixx looked at Palfrey for an explanation. But Palfrey looked to the captain for one too.

“I think Wiley is just telling us to count our blessings,” Aquan Ensign Lemare wryly remarked.

“She hit the nail on the head,” Wiley grinned. “How about we take *Renegade’s* perhaps temporary absence and high tail it out of here?”

Palfrey remarked. “That makes sense to me.”

“Agreed,” Rixx intoned. “Lemare, set course for the Ngame Nebula. If, or when *Renegade* returns she’ll have a hard time tracking us in the nebula.”

“Yeah,” Palfrey nodded. “And I would rather take my chances with the Paxans than tangle with Captain Scott again. That one was too close to call.”

“Agreed,” Rixx repeated, his thoughts split between concern over his dead crew and what was happening on *Renegade*. He hoped that Tryla was all right and could pull off at least one more miracle.

USS Renegade **En Route to Auxiliary Control Room**

“Nuts!” Holmes grumbled as several shafts of light materialized in front and behind them. Both Sarhana and Glover stood back to back, their phasers at the ready.

“Drop your phasers,” the head of the security detachment order. The team of six surrounded them. They all had phaser rifles pointed at them.

“No,” Terrence said.

“Listen Lieutenant,” Holmes began. “The captain is infected.”

“Drop your phasers,” the officer ordered again.

“I said no,” Terrence repeated.

“Just everyone hold on a minute,” Holmes replied.

“We have our orders,” the officer repeated. “Fire!” The trio went down in a storm of phaser fire.

Starfleet Academy

Earth

Two weeks later....

“How are you doing?” Lt. Calvin Hudson gently asked. Terrence ignored the question, focusing on a bed of recently planted Broadway lilies.

“That Boothby still has his touch,” Glover wistfully replied.

“I see you’re still running away from this right now,” Hudson surmised, punctuating his observation with a frown.

“You know Boothby never cared for me,” Terrence admitted, his voice and his attention far away. “I never really had time for him, whenever he wanted to talk about plants or whatever. I was always so busy, always had somewhere to be, something to do.”

“Terrence, what does that got to do with what just happened? I think you need to address it, if for no other reason to get it out of your system.”

Suddenly Glover turned on his old friend, his eyes burning with anger. “You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about!” He snapped. “It’s Tryla that’s going through hell right now. She has to contend with all the damage that thing inside her caused, all the deaths. It’s hell right now for her, and I can’t do a damn thing about it.”

“You’re right,” Hudson said. “Especially when you’re carrying around so much anger for her right now.”

Terrence pulled back, stunned and scared. “You’re talking crazy Cal.”

“Terrence, don’t you think I’ve known you long enough to see through that lie,” Hudson said, with less venom than the charge should’ve warranted. He tried to place a hand on Glover’s shoulder, but Terrence kept his distance. “Terrence, on some level you can’t separate Captain Scott from that neural

parasite that was inside her. On some level, you think she brought this on herself, that she wasn't strong enough to resist the parasite."

"That's not true!" Terrence raged.

"Yes it is," Hudson replied calmly. "You blame her."

"No, no, I don't," Glover declared with lessening force. He turned away from Cal. "That's not true," he said far more softly.

"You see a lot of yourself in Captain Scott, and vice versa. You can't help but wonder if you too would've succumbed to the parasites. You used to see a mirror reflection of strength and ambition in the captain, now you're seeing your vulnerabilities, your weaknesses, and you can't stand that."

Glover's shifted his jaw, trying to think of a response, but he couldn't manage one. Eventually he said, "When did you become a counselor?"

Hudson smiled. "I'm a jack of all trades."

"I see," Terrence replied, mulling over Cal's words. Terrence, Cal, and Ben Sisko had formed a life-long troika after rooming together at the Academy. Of the three, Cal had often proven to be the most level-headed and sensible. Though Glover wanted desperately to deny the truth of Hudson's words, he just couldn't. So he knew the adult thing to do was to examine Cal's words, and try to figure out how much truth was really in them.

"I don't know about you, but this walk down memory lane has made me hungry," Cal said, rubbing his stomach for emphasis. "I promised Gretchen that we would join her parents for dinner in Bavaria."

"Cal, you shouldn't have," Glover said, even though he really didn't want to be alone right now.

"Yeah right," Cal said. "Come on, let's go."

USS Renegade

Main Bridge

McKinley Station

Commander Holmes stiffly placed the third pin on Glover's collar. "Congratulations Lt. Commander Glover," he said, with a washed out drawl. The man had aged years in the span of a couple weeks.

Glover nodded. "Thank you sir," he replied with equal stiffness. The captain had handed off the duty of Terrence's promotion to Holmes. Since the neural parasites had been defeated and the inquiry had cleared her of wrong doing, the captain had been holed up in her cabin. Holmes had assumed command and was guiding the ship through the refit needed after the battle with the *Thomas Paine*.

The bridge crew clapped, even Lt. Gart. The inquiry board had also absolved the Nausicaan of responsibility for the destruction of the *Raines*, but Glover couldn't, and he was certain Commander Holmes never would. The

neural parasite's actions had divided the crew, and Terrence wasn't sure if they could ever be united again. He did know that it would take strong action on the captain's part, and at the moment she refused to do so. But he was going to rectify that.

"Commander, may I be excused?" Terrence asked. Holmes regarded him silently, his bushy eyebrows knitting in consternation.

"Do you think it's wise?" He said quietly, so that only Glover could hear the question.

"I do." Glover replied.

"You're excused."

USS Renegade **Captain's Quarters**

"I don't have time for this," Captain Scott said listlessly. She turned back to the vid clips of her family.

"Make time," Terrence said. He walked in front of the ancient television. Tryla groaned and tried to look around him. Eventually she picked up the small device she had told him ancient Earthers called a remote control to turn off the set.

"What do you want?" She asked.

"You know what I want," Terrence stated.

"I'm not in the mood for that either," she replied, causing Glover to sigh.

"You know that's not what I'm talking about," he grouched.

"Then what?"

"The crew needs you," Terrence said. "We can't do this without you."

"I've given almost all of my life to Starfleet, and this ship," Tryla replied.

"I think they can go without me for a while."

"How long is a while?"

"I don't know."

"This doesn't sound like you. This doesn't sound like you at all."

"I don't know what I'm supposed to 'sound' like," Tryla hotly retorted, "especially after that monster took over my vocal cords and made me a murder innocent people."

"It's not your fault," Glover said. "No one blames you."

"I blame me," the captain poked her chest. "I-I tried to resist. I really did, but it was so...it was everywhere, I-I couldn't escape, I couldn't do anything." She lowered her head, her chest heaving as the tears fell. Glover sat beside her and pulled her into his arms. She tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her.

"We'll work through this, I promise," he declared.

"We can't," Tryla said. "This is something I have to do."

"I want to help, I want to be there for you, let me," Terrence begged.

"No, it's too late, things are different now," the captain replied.

"Please don't say that."

"This...thing between us should've never happened. I can live with the doubt in other's eyes, but not yours," Tryla admitted.

"I don't doubt you," Glover said.

"Yes, you do," the captain replied. "And you should. It was I who gave the order to fire on the *Thomas Paine*, to destroy the *Raines*. It was my hands that killed Gerri and hurt you. I feel so dirty, so unclean. I just want to scour the filth from my skin and my soul, but I don't know how."

"Let me help you," Terrence pleaded again.

"The best way for you to help me is to resume your post Mr. Glover," she replied with a cold formality, "and forget that there was ever anything between us. The relationship was a mistake, and it's now a liability. One I can't afford right now."

Terrence reared back, struck by the woman's words. "You don't mean that. Tryla we love each other."

"So?" She asked. "You knew one day that the demands of the uniform might require us to go our separate ways."

"This is not that time," Terrence said. "You need me, I *need* you, more than ever right now."

"No, what we both need is to get back to business," Tryla said. "To the constant self-improvement that makes us winners. I need to rebuild my sense of self, something that parasite stripped away from me, but I have to do it by myself."

Terrence shook his head in disagreement.

"I'm not going to change my mind," she stated. "Go back to the bridge Terrence, and to your first, true love: your career. I made the mistake of making a detour, and it nearly got you killed."

"Tryla, it's not..."

"You can say it's not my fault all you want, but if I believe it is, then it is," the captain replied. "You're dismissed."

Terrence's throat closed up at the dismissal and a pain lanced through his heart. He looked at her deeply, his gaze imploring, but Tryla's expression was inscrutable, different, alien. He had never seen that look before and it frightened him. For a second he wondered if the alien parasite had truly been extracted from the captain, and in that instant he understood what she meant. The trust had been severed between them.

He got off the couch and left Tryla Scott's private life without saying another word.

THE END