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# Dark Territory

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## Stealing Fire

By DarkKush

**Caldera Expanse**  
**November 2377**

As *The Gift of Fire* burst free from the subspace tunnel, its steersman felt a pang of regret. The exodus from their home planet had been nearly catastrophic. The priests, the Fire Bearers, had saved the Sacred Fire, but at the cost of leaving the other strata to fend for themselves against the Cold Ones, without the warmth of the Sacred Fire to protect them.

The steersman's betrothed had been among those, hopefully, that escaped on *The Pillar of Fire*, the ship bearing the artisan and worker strata. She had been so proud of him when he had been accepted, an elevation from his station, as a pilot for the religious strata, the rulers of their world.

Neither one of them could've fathomed that his skills would be required one day to help the Fire Bearers vacate their world, or that he would be separated from his intended.

He tried not to think about her, he tried to focus on the task at hand. And there was much to focus on. The ship had taken a pounding, first from the cube, and then from the rough journey through the void, and not all of the obstacles had been naturally occurring. They had had to fight off marauders and other brutes, but they had also made some allies along the way, and it was one of those meetings that provided a route to this patch of space, far away from the Cold Ones.

One of the newfound allies, of a species once enthralled to the Cold Ones, had recognized their sculptures and artwork idolizing the Fire Beings that had visited their backwater world millennia ago and left behind a spacefaring civilization. The Fire Beings had changed everything, and the Aodh owed so much to them. When he had overheard the monks excitedly discussing their discovery that they might have found the home of the Fire Beings, the steersman knew that he would where that the ship's course had been set.

It was a cold comfort, but the steersman had been heartened that the priests had left information with whatever newly made friends along the way as to their intentions. He could only pray to the Fire Beings that *The Pillar of Fire*, *The Ring of Fire*, carrying the laborers, and *The Rain of Fire*, bearing the military strata, also found their way to them. The steersman had left as many beacons behind as the priests would permit.

"How distressing is our situation?" A sonorous voice eased into his thoughts, dispelling them. He knew the voice immediately. He quickly placed the ship on autopilot, turned and kneeled, hands planted and his eyes staring at the ground.

"Rise Steersman," the Prelate implored, blessing him with a touch on the shoulder. The pilot rose slowly, overwhelmed that the high priest would speak to him, much less touch him. The smaller, wizened man favored him with the gentlest smile. "Return to your duties, I will try not to disturb you."

"You-you could never do such a thing," he stammered. The Prelate chuckled, his purple eyes twinkling. He was dressed in orange and violet raiment befitting his station, though lacking his plumed miter. The crown of his hatless head was burnt orange, hairless, and smooth, unlike his face, which bore the violet sun carving that formed a circle from just below his lips to his forehead.

"That is very kind of you to say, but you know how our order frowns upon falsehood."

"I was not bearing falsity!" He declared, wincing at the sharp tone of his voice. "My apologies," he said quickly. He knew it was folly to even speak untruths around any of the religious strata, especially the Prelate. All of them were mind sharers. And all of his deepest thoughts could be laid bare at the Prelate's whim.

The Prelate waved a hand. "None was taken. May I take up position beside you?"

"Of course, of course," the steersman moved out of the way, and the head priest, the leader of their civilization, stood beside him. His hearts welled with pride as he gazed out at the stars, with the Prelate at his side. The high priest was clearly awed in a way that surprised an old space hand like the steersman. He seemed nearly as overwhelmed as the pilot had just been seconds earlier.

"Truly the Universal Hearth is a wondrous foundry," the high priest remarked. The steersman couldn't disagree. "And it is a good omen that we went through the fire to arrive at this place, our new home. It was like a rebirth." Behind them the slender corridor breathed plasma fire, like some legendary beast.

The steersman nodded in agreement, though he couldn't quite agree. Journeying through the spatial flexure had wreaked havoc on the ship's shields and structural integrity system, but nearly obliterated main propulsion. The ship's power grid was overtaxed keeping the vacuum from invading through all of the breaches and fractures crisscrossing the ship. Soon the grid would short out, leaving them without propulsion or life support, not to mention unguarded from the radiation and the other vagaries of space.

The steersman had long since jettisoned all of the escape pods, in a canny attempt to deceive a relentless hunting party. At the time the priests had backed his suggestion, even over the objections of some of the other pilots. They had trusted his judgment, and it had saved them only to perhaps doom them later, because now there was no escape, even for the Prelate, if the ship encountered more trouble. And what scans still worked told him that *The Gift of Fire* was far from safety. A minefield

of plasma storms and gravitational anomalies remained in front of them. The flexure had helped them avoid the intense tetryon fields suffusing the space around them, but only leave them victim to a very dangerous region of space.

The spouts of plasma spraying before them, some licking the benighted ship, and rocking it back and forth stressing the shields further, would have been beautiful if he was not caught in the middle of them. It was a riot of color, flames more magnificent than any he had witnessed during the fire ceremonies back home. It was as if they were within the engine room of the Universal Hearth, witnessing the combustion that kept the cosmos functioning.

"So, I ask again, how distressing is our situation Steersman?" The Prelate inquired. The pilot paused, not able to formulate the words. "I see," the priest said, understanding.

"I am confident that I can get us through this maelstrom, but the continued pounding the ship will take as a result will drain our remaining power reserves. If we are fortunate," he began.

"And we will be," the Prelate interrupted, his purple eyes shining with an unshakable faith.

The steersman gave his leader a few moments of respectful silence, before he continued. "After we exit this expanse, I don't know how much longer the ship can hold up."

The Prelate tapped his wrinkled, hairless chin, as the steersman's diagnosis sank in. "We might be the only survivors left of our kind," he intoned solemnly, "So we must do all that we can to make sure that the Sacred Fire never goes out." He looked at the steersmen squarely, "Do all you can to get us past this chaotic space, and then send a call for distress."

"Are you certain?" The steersman couldn't help but ask, for once forgetting his place. "But this sector of space is unknown to us, what if a hostile force intercepts our message?"

"We have made enemies along the way," the high priest nodded sagely, "but also friends. It is the will of the Universal Hearth to determine which we will find here. For all we know the Fire Beings are just waiting on the other side of this hell for us, ready to collect their children."

"I understand," the Steersman replied, vowing to bury his doubts behind a determined mien. He wasn't as trusting as the priests or monks, but then again, he didn't possess their knowledge of the universe. It was above his station. And now that the high priest had made his wishes known, the steersman would do all within his powers to see them realized. He quickly turned to his task, setting up an automatic call for help in all known languages that would start transmitting as soon as they had vacated the expanse.

"Now all we can do is wait," the pilot remarked, unable to remove the grim expression from his face.

“And pray,” the Prelate added, with a far more cheerful tone, but no less wary countenance.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Crosthwait***

The Type 11 shuttle eased slowly along the cusp of the expanse, the energy barrier roiling, with fingers of plasma fire reaching out greedily for the sleek silvered vessel. Commander Tai Donar knew it was killing Lieutenant French to pilot the shuttle on anything less than full throttle, but he took their assignment seriously.

It was doubtful that any ship would be foolish, or unfortunate enough, to venture through the Caldera Expanse, but a spatial flexure had long since been found within its searing embrace.

The Calderans, the namesakes for the expanse, had long ago discovered that the flexure provided an unstable gateway to the Delta Quadrant. But this sector of space was blessed, or cursed, with another entrance, the slightly more stable subspace corridor left by a race lost to time, an eon ago. The usually hermetic Calderans had been surprisingly forthcoming about their discoveries.

As news of the massive influx of refugees from the Delta Quadrant was becoming more widespread, Tai had to wonder if the sudden chattiness, relatively speaking, of the Calderans was due in part because they didn’t want to deal with the throng and were trying to push them off on to the Federation as quickly as possible.

The Federation was happy to oblige them, just one more reason the Angosian was glad he had left his homeworld to join Starfleet Special Missions which then had turned into a career with the Exploratory Division.

The *Erickson* had taken up position near the mouth of the corridor, also known as the Calderan Corridor, which struck Tai a bit oddly. For an avowedly reclusive people they had a curious habit of naming things after themselves. Captain Redfeather had ordered two shuttles to patrol the nearest exit for the expanse.

Tai had thought one shuttle could handle the task, but Security Chief Shashlik had quickly informed him that in addition to the natural dangers of space travel in this sector, pirates often used the expanse to strike out at passing ships, and then escape by going back into it. Only the most skilled or insane pilot and one with an extremely well shielded ship would dare to follow them. The captain hoped that the sight of two Starfleet shuttles would dissuade any buccaneers lying in wait on the other side of the expanse.

Tai had mixed feelings about encountering pirates or other trouble. Frankly he wouldn’t mind a disruption of the monotony. And there was a part of him eager to test his mettle against some of the adversarial Delta Quadrant species that they had learned about courtesy of Project Pathfinder.

The endeavor had been set up to facilitate communication with *Starship Voyager*, which had been lost in the Delta Quadrant for several years. Miraculously

the ship had survived and now Starfleet had managed semi-regular contact with the brave souls aboard.

Captain Janeway's crew had provided a wealth of information about the other side of the galaxy, including potential threats. Races like the Devore, Vaadwaur, Vidiians, Species 8472, and one that he took special note of: the Hirogen.

He had faced one of their hunters years ago, while he still wore the colors of his native Unomia state on Angosia III. The alien had somehow made it to Angosia before his ship crashed in the Iturri Jungle, and true to their predatory nature it seemed, the Hirogen began hunting his training cohort. Tai barely made it out alive, but he had triumphed, but for years he had wondered where the hunter came from, and now, courtesy of the Pathfinder data, he knew that he been spawned from a race of predators.

His own predatory nature thrilled at the chance to face more Hirogen or something even more dangerous, though his concern for his new crew helped stanch his persistent blood lust.

"Not the welcome you expected eh, Commander?" The jovial voice issued through the intercom, breaking up his blood clotted thoughts.

Tai blinked, surprised at how deep in thought he had been. On the small viewer set between the cockpit seats, Chief Engineer A'nurd smiled at him, his deep-seated, golden eyes shining with merriment.

How the Munzalan stayed so cheerful was something Tai doubted he would ever understand. A'nurd piloted the Type 10 shuttle *Carruthers*.

The man had volunteered, but if he hadn't, he was sure the captain would've sent him anyway, at the behest of the crew no less. From Tai's take, A'nurd was a good officer, but a little too taxing.

"Nothing like staring into a cauldron to get the old blood stirred huh?" A'nurd asked. "Being so close to the expanse is really keeping me on my toes, and tail," he said, the black furred tip of it rising behind him, and wagging over his shoulder as if in greeting. The lemur-like Munzalan laughed at his own joke.

Donar didn't know what to say, so he kept his lips drawn in a tight line. "Anything new to report?" He eventually mumbled unable to stand the engineer's expected look and wide smile.

"No sir," A'nurd said, bringing his shuttle to *Crosthwait's* starboard. "How about you?"

"No, nothing here," Donar said, not able to completely squelch his disappointment. He knew that the captain didn't expect them to make any encounters, but he still felt like he had something to prove. Being a first officer was a new experience for him, one that he didn't know if he was cut out for. As a security or tactical officer, he knew what to do, but being *Erickson's* second, was totally new territory.

Sometimes he regretted making the move. He could've stayed with Juanita... the thought of what he gave up for this opportunity was a book chapter he didn't wish to read at the moment.

"If I might be so bold sir, I think it is past time for us to hand over the reins to the next team," A'nurd suggested. Tai thought about telling the Munzalan to go on ahead and he would stay back, but he took a sidelong look at Lieutenant French. The younger man's eyes were drooping despite his best efforts. Perhaps he wanted to zip through this so badly because he needed the rack time, Donar wondered.

Tai had been genetically and chemically altered during the Tarsian War and he had the endurance of five humans at least, hardy humans at that. "I concur," he replied to the engineer. He turned to the junior officer, and the man barely hid his relief. "Mr. French, set a course back to the *Erickson*."

The Angosian took one last look back at the riled, coursing plasma ocean, and felt a profound sense of foreboding. The expanse seemed more disturbed than usual and he could only wonder, or worry, about what might arise from it. But that would have to wait for another time, he thought. "Full impulse Lieutenant."

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## ***The Gift of Fire***

### **Caldera Expanse**

This time the exit was far less thrilling, but just as damaging, as the ship limped toward the barrier into normal space. As a final indignity, a wave of plasma pushed against *The Gift*, throwing it out into the void, as if the expanse was spitting the Aodh out.

Was it an omen of the treatment that was to come? The steersman didn't know. He didn't have much time to ponder such thoughts, while keeping the ship from completely coming apart. Monitors were flashing angrily all around him, and the wheezing of the engines could be heard throughout the ship, as if *The Gift* was sighing her last breath.

Death rattles accompanied the mournful moan as the ship began to shudder uncontrollably, as shields and structural integrity began to fluctuate. He had begun a calculated program of shutting off power, leaving parts of the ship to the ravages of the cosmos, while evacuating the remaining crew to the primary hull. The secondary steersman had been in charge of the evacuation and had reported that all that could be saved had been. They had lost far too many people since they escaped homeworld, and the steersman feared that they would lose far too many more before they found a new home. If they found a new home.

The only pulsing light that he had to admit that he was happy to see was the automatic distress signal he had activated.

He fell into his chair and closed his eyes and prayed. Now all he could do was wait to see if how truly merciful the Universal Hearth was. His eyelids flew open as an alien voice screeched through the intercom.

The steersmen leapt out of his seat and flipped the toggle to activate the communication transceiver. He anxiously waited as the translation matrix made the alien tongue understandable.

*"Alien vessel,"* the toneless voice said, *"we have received your distress call and will be sending rescue ships to your location."* Federation Standard, he recognized. Yet the voice sounded computer generated.

He was relieved that it fit one of the languages of the beings they had encountered along the way. The steersman had always had an ear for language, and if the fates had been kinder, he would've been born in the religious strata so that he could be a scholar or educator, which would've allowed him to pursue that passion.

So despite his trepidation about meeting new sentients, he had at least been anxious to hear their languages. "I will supply the location of our vessel at once," he spoke into the receiver as he transmitted the information.

*"We will assist you within the hour. Enterprise out."*

The steersman's brow wrinkled in recognition. He had heard the name before, from one the knobby headed aliens they had encountered, one who had been freed from the Cold Ones. He wished the ship hadn't broken contact before he could ask them more questions. He thought about attempting to hail them again, but changed his mind. He would see them soon enough, all he had to do was keep the ship in one piece until then. Perhaps the Universal Hearth was as warm as it could be searing to send a ship of such renown to assist them.

He used the shipboard intercom system to eagerly relay the conversation to the Prelate. "Excellent," the high priest remarked, his voice brimming with confidence. "I look forward to meeting this *Enterprise*."

"So do I your Holiness," the steersman said, and for once he meant it.

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Main Shuttle Bay**

"No good hunting Commander?" Lt. Shashlik asked as soon as Donar's boots touched the deck. The tall, bronze Kaylar stood eye-to-eye with Tai. Her frame was leaner, but no less muscled.

"Things were quiet," Donar said, "How about here?"

"No ships came through the corridor, or probes for that matter." The younger woman didn't hide her disappointment. She was still so fresh that she wore her feelings on her sleeve. Emotions had long been pounded deep into Tai, buried so deep that it took him a long time to reconnect with them. Juanita had been a big help with bringing them back to the surface, but she had also reminded him how painful those feelings could be.

He eyed the shuttles *Greenaugh* and *Oyekan*, being prepped for disembarking. Assembled with Shashlik were Science Officer Ramlo, and Ensigns Kittles and Fryer. He nodded tersely to the rest of the quartet. "Good luck out there, and don't take any unnecessary chances."

"Yes sir," they all answered before heading to their respective shuttles, Shashlik and Fryer, and Kittles going with the Arkenite.

A long, slender arm reached up and clapped Tai on the bicep. "I'm parched. I'm heading down to Birdland, care to share a drink?" Lt. Commander A'nurd looked up at him.

"I still have some unpacking to do," Donar replied. "My apologies," he added quickly. The Munzalan shrugged.

"Well the offer stands," he said before pulling away. Tai nodded in understanding, but allowed the man to go on. Lt. French sleep walked by him, followed by Ensign Haile, who had had the likely misfortune of sharing the *Carruthers* with the effusive Munzalan.

If he ever did decide to venture into the jazz themed recreation lounge, he was going to have to order a beverage for the long suffering ensign. Shaking his head at the thought, Donar stepped out into the passageway.

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **First Officer's Quarters**

Though the Angosian had taken detours to the holodeck and then the gym, Tai hadn't been lying about unpacking. He had been on *Erickson* for a month and had long since stored away the most of the sparse belongings he brought with him. Except for a few items that he had left boxed up.

He had wrestled with this decision aboard the *Aegis* as well, because he knew that unpacking the items would mean he was planning to stay for the long haul. With *Aegis*, he had largely accepted the assignment as a favor to Ivan Cherenkov, a fellow brother-in-arms, and being on a ship with a multi-vector assault mode didn't hurt either.

However he hadn't really been able to make *Aegis* a home, a suicidal Cardassian militant had taken that decision away from him.

The loss of that vessel and the crewmen aboard still burned him, in part because he hadn't been there to prevent it. It was no idle boast on his part, he knew. He had been designed to win wars, and he was confident that he would've been able to gauge the Cardassian's intent and enacted an appropriate response.

He had been languishing at Jaros II at the time, his personal effects in one of their storage compartments. That's the only reason they had survived the ship's



destruction. And he had kept them packed up since his release from the stockade, as he sought to find a way in a suddenly chaotic universe.

But now a sense of stability had returned, and he was ready to establish some roots. He placed the box on the coffee table in his living room, and looked over at the imitation fireplace. A photonic fire was roaring. He opened the box and carefully unwrapped the first item. He held the archaic silver picture frame in both hands. He smiled down at his parents, Tiwaz and Caith. The sepia-toned picture had been taken in happier times, before the Tarsian War.

He placed it on the mantle above the fireplace. He returned to the box and sighed before removing the second picture. A beautiful, dark skinned woman, the corner of her left eye marred by the same green and black tattoo strip on Tai's face, smiled back at him. Her thick, braided hair reminded him of Lt. Shashlik. The two women wore it in a similar fashion.

Come to think of it, Shashlik reminded him a lot of his ex-wife. "Andraste," he muttered. Tai shook his head. He hadn't met Andraste during the war, or at the Lunar V prison moon, where many of the veterans had been discarded after the war.

He had met her after the prisoners had been released, thanks to the intervention of the Federation. Both had been undergoing counseling in an attempt to undo their psychological conditioning to make them better able to handle civilian life.

At times the sessions had had Tai longing for boot camp, but both had endured them, often relying on each other. Tai had thought that model might work for their marriage, but in the end, the Tarsian War had still claimed souls long after it had ended, and Andraste had never been able to make the adjustment. After their marriage had dissolved, she had left Angosia III to make her way in the universe. He hadn't heard from her, or about her since.

If she was still breathing she didn't want to be found and eventually he had learned to respect her wish. He placed the picture on the mantle beside his parents. "One more," he muttered, now a little troubled that he was talking to himself. He pulled a round disk from the box and place it between the pictures. He touched it and a hologram of Juanita appeared. He smiled at her, thinking of what she had meant to him, and what he hoped she would mean to each other in the years to come.

Donar was still admiring the photonic likeness when his door chimed. "Enter," he said offhandedly as he turned to greet his visitor. He hunched his shoulders and took on a more businesslike demeanor. He hadn't been on the ship long enough to make friends, at least any that he wanted, and he was hoping that the chief engineer wasn't dropping by.

Captain Wyoma Redfeather strolled into the room. The woman was striking, tall for human, with reddish tinged skin, and shoulder length, obsidian hair. She had an aura of command about her that wasn't heavy handed or suffocating. Tai's posture became even more ramrod. She smiled at him, her almond eyes crinkling

with warmth. "Putting up your personal effects I see, so you are planning on staying for the long haul?"

"Of course sir, I mean yes captain," Donar had to restrain himself from shouting the affirmation. The captain laughed.

"At ease Mr. Donar, please, I entered your residence," she said, taking a moment to inspect the room. "Not a microbe of dust in sight I see. I think I've got you in the wrong position," she said. "You should be head custodian."

"I-I," Tai looked perplexed. "I'm not sure how to take that sir."

Redfeather's smile widened. "As a joke, which is what it was Mr. Donar, or at least a feeble attempt. And please, I already told you about the 'sir' stuff. Ma'am is fine. Captain too."

"Understood captain," he remarked. After an uncomfortable silence threatened to set in, he asked, "Would you like a seat?"

"Thanks for asking," she replied, "but no, I was just paying a visit, on my way to Birdland."

"Commander A'nurd?" Tai's lips drew into a tight line.

"Very perceptive," she chuckled. "I swear the man can't stand to be alone, and I decided since I'm the captain, I'll take one for the team. You guys just don't know the sacrifices I make for you."

Tai's lips curled up a tick. "After spending an extended amount of time with him along the Caldera Expanse, I think I can sympathize."

Redfeather's eyes glittered with devilment. "I think you're going to fit in here alright Mr. Donar."

"I hope so, sir-I mean captain."

"I'll let it slide, this time." She chided good naturedly. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to join us in the lounge? This is crew performance night, and somehow A'nurd has convinced to Lt. Commander Kalnath to treat us to some Andorian Blues. It's not to be missed."

"Commander A'nurd is a persistent man," Tai observed.

"Among other things," Redfeather replied, "So what's your answer?"

"I...uh," before Donar could finish, both of their combadges beeped. The captain tapped hers first.

"Redfeather here," she said brusquely, the levity jettisoned from her voice. "What's up?"

"*It's the Greenaugh sir,*" the bridge officer answered, "*Their long range sensors have detected a distress call, alien in origin.*"

Both senior officers raised their eyebrows as they looked at each other. "Where is the call originating from?"

"*Lt. Shashlik said just outside of the Caldera Expanse.*" This prompted a questioning look from the captain and Tai shook his fist in disappointment. If he had stayed he might have been able to lend more immediate assistance.

"Inform *Greenaugh* and *Oyekan* that they are to proceed to the expanse, but they are not enter under any circumstances."

"Yes ma'am."

"Also inform them that we are on our way."

"Yes sir."

"Finally alter our course and inform Engineering that we are to go to maximum warp."

"Aye."

"I'll be on the bridge shortly, Redfeather out." The woman shrugged. "I guess we'll have to get a rain check on those drinks, eh Mr. Donar?"

"Absolutely ma'am," he replied.

"Let's go make first contact," she nodded toward his door.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Greenaugh***

The shuttles cut through space like Rigellian dagger fish. Lt. Shashlik restrained herself from hectoring Ensign Fryer to increase the speed to the engines. The shuttle was already going at full impulse. There wasn't much else the junior officer could do, short of donning an EV suit and going outside to push it along.

These moments, right before the action started, both frustrated and excited her. Her stomach tightened and her biceps flexed as she mentally prepared herself. She didn't know what the shuttles, or the *Erickson* on their heels, would encounter with the alien vessel.

So far, there had been some peaceful and not so sanguine first contacts made with the refugees streaming from the Delta Quadrant. And the news she had heard of the taskforce that had been sent into the Delta Quadrant had also had mixed results, some unfortunately tragic.

It was her job to prevent tragedy from befalling *Erickson's* personnel. And she would do all that she could to minimize any harm, and Shashlik thought the best way to do that was to put as much time between the shuttles and the starship. If they could scout out the situation first and render whatever aid possible, then it would make things much easier when the *Erickson* arrived.

And if this was some sort of trick or trap, then the shuttles would be the ones to spring it, sparing the loss of an entire starship. Of course that did nothing for the four lives on the two shuttles. But all of them knew the risks, and she better than most.

Growing up on Rigel VII, among the many nomadic clans, death had always been a present companion. Oblivion no longer frightened her, but failure did, and dishonor terrified her.

Shashlik's fears of both had been growing ever since Commander Donar had arrived. He was a warrior far above her, a security officer extraordinaire. She

should've been pleased that such a personage was now her first officer, someone that perhaps could become a mentor for her, and Lt. French had suggested as much, but the Kaylar didn't see it that way.

She couldn't help but view it through a warrior's eyes, and she had to suspect that Tai was taking her measure, and if he found her wanting, she would never be able to earn his respect, and she would never be able to maintain it among the crew. So she had to be better than ever, she had to prove herself, again and again, if necessary.

Rendering aid to the benighted alien vessel would be a good start. "What's our ETA?" She asked the young man sitting in the co-pilot's seat.

"Twenty minutes," Fryer crisply responded, "And *Erickson* should arrive within the hour, at maximum warp." He followed up, anticipating her question. She awarded the cinnamon-hued human with a smile.

"So the alien vessel is within range of short-range sensors?" The security officer asked.

"Yes sir," Fryer said, tapping his companel. The small viewer on the dashboard shifted from the starfield to a dark, hulking shape that resembled a toppled pyramid.

"Can you detect any life sign readings?" Shashlik asked, her eyes narrowing. She didn't like the absence of even running lights. The ship appeared to be a derelict, dead in space. She hoped that the same fate had not befallen its crew.

"No sir," Fryer said, concern salting his voice.

"Try hailing them again," Shashlik ordered. She had long since shut off the repeating distress call. It had been fraying her nerves and she needed to be as sharp and alert as possible.

"Nothing sir," the ensign replied after a few moments. Shashlik nodded tersely.

"Good job Ensign," she remembered to add before sending a message to the *Oyekan*.

"*Yes, we are getting the same non-response,*" Lt. Ramlo answered back. "*And we have been running continuous scans since we got within range, and there's been no change in our readings.*"

"Do you think the ship has been abandoned?" The Kaylar asked.

"*That is a possibility, but from what we can tell from our scans the ship has sustained some significant damage. It's quite possible that the crew died from exposure to the vacuum,*" the Arkenite said, with an alarming detachment.

Shashlik knew not to blame Ramlo for his coldness. That was just his way. He was into his full scientist zone. If he grieved, he would do it later, after the scientific mystery had been solved. They had both consoled each other enough during the dark days of the Dominion War for both to know the other's heart. It was one of the few regrets she had once the guns went silent, that she and Ramlo had drifted apart, back into their work roles.

"Could it also be possible that the ship had been attacked?" Shashlik asked. She had never been one who put too much stock in coincidence or natural occurrences.

*"That is a possibility as well," Ramlo answered, "Though we would need more intensive scans to prove that."*

"And that's what you'll have," she promised. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

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## ***USS Erickson*** **Captain's Ready Room**

The captain's smile was askew. "You picked a hell of a time to continue our session counselor," Redfeather remarked, lifting one eye from the padd she held in her hand. "You do know the ship is on blue alert." The gaunt, pale blue Andorian male smiled at her, completely unruffled. The antenna stalks just in front of his receding hairline undulated gently.

"I know captain and I find the blue lighting on the bridge a better color schema than the usual bright lighting, I don't see how it doesn't contribute to constant eye strain." Though he was smiling, Wyoma knew that Dendron hybrid makeup, part Andorian and part Aenar, an Andorian subgroup of mostly blind telepaths, left him sensitive to intense lighting. It was commendable how he had learned to cope with the situation during his various postings, and at least aboard *Erickson* the captain made sure to dim the lights in his presence. She didn't have to make adjustments in the ready room this time because she generally bedimmed the lighting when she was reading over reports. She thought it added to the quiet that she demanded when she had to absorb lots of data.

"I am so glad you acceded to my request to not sit bridge side," Dendron's smile widened.

"And this is how you repay me?" The captain rolled her eyes before placing the padd down on her desk, otherwise empty except for the baseball signed by all players on the 2373 Cestus Comets Championship team, including her sister. "Please, have a seat." While the man was acceding to her request, the captain continued talking, "I want you to know that I didn't plan this blue alert to avoid getting out of our session."

"Of course you didn't," Dendron chuckled, tapping one of his bulging temples. "I am a telepath after all."

"Very funny," Wyoma joined in the laughter. She knew that Dendron abhorred peeking into others' minds without their express consent. The captain also knew that his pacifistic Aenar heritage had left Dendron vigilant about using his abilities in any harmful way. Sometimes to an extreme degree. It sounded almost like he needed a counseling session himself, but if she suggested that he would just redirect the conversation right back to her.

"How are things working out with the new first officer?" The Andorian asked, waving off an offer for refreshment. "I haven't had a chance to get Mr. Donar on my couch yet, and we've only met in passing." He stroked his graying goatee, waiting for her answer.

"I think Mr. Donar is adjusting well to his new duties," the captain said, careful to choose her words.

Of course Dendron noticed her caution. "And how do you think the crew feels about him?"

"Why don't you tell me?" Redfeather snapped, not meaning to be so sharp. She winced, "I'm sorry."

"No, no, it's perfectly alright, I am being a bit too coy after all," Dendron admitted. "I think most of the crew is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. It wasn't completely his decision after all. He was presented with an opportunity and he took it."

"And what about Helen?" Wyoma decided to cut right to the quick. "She says she is okay with the decision, but she might be more...forthcoming with you."

"If she was, you know I couldn't reveal that to you," Dendron leaned forward, a somber yet sympathetic look on his face.

"Not the details I get that," Redfeather angled, "but what would be your impressions, hypothetically, figuratively, or whatever?"

"I...would think it could be difficult to be in line for the first officer position and then have it snatched away from you," Dendron replied, "hypothetically speaking of course."

"And she's said this? To you?"

"I thought we were speaking in hypotheticals?"

"Oh, yes," Wyoma leaned back in her chair and slouched down, suddenly feeling drained. Helen Norrbom was one of her closest friends, had served *Erickson* with distinction as chief operations officer, and was the captain's pick to succeed the retiring Commander McDuffie. McDuffie had also thought Helen would be an excellent choice, but Starfleet Command, particularly Rear Admiral Glover, had other ideas. And he had inveighed upon her to consider an external selection.

After looking at the Angosians's service record, Wyoma couldn't help but both impressed and worried. He had displayed exceptional courage and leadership with Special Missions, fought on the frontlines in both the Klingon and Dominion Wars, been a senior officer on one of the most advanced ships in the Fleet, taught at the Academy, and also helped turn back the Talarions during their ill-fated incursion. With a record like that, Redfeather was surprised the man wasn't angling for her job, and not just to be her second in command.

Of course his life before joining Starfleet had to have given the admirals pause about promoting him to the captain's chair, as it had given the captain some hesitation about taking their recommendation to be her executive officer. The Tarsian War had been brutal and from what Donar had described, in his own words,

of the actions he took in that war, they had chilled her bone marrow upon first reading.

It made her wonder if the man shouldn't still be on that Lunar V prison moon. She had expressed as much to Admiral Glover. He had expressed understanding before pointing out how Donar had tried to make amends after the Tarsian conflict had ended and how he had moved on with his life and career. Redfeather had then been blunt and brought up that Donar had served with Glover on the *Aegis* and that some cronyism was at play.

The admiral, whom Wyoma had heard could have a mercurial disposition, had allayed her concerns. He admitted to having caring about the wellbeing of the people once under his command-which she couldn't fault him for-but at the same time he thought that Donar languishing and needed a new outlet, a new lease on life, and to learn new skills.

To sweeten the deal, the admiral had then let her in on what was happening with Taskforce Vanguard and the coming refugee crisis, and how Command wanted *Erickson* at the forefront. Glover added that Command, and himself included, felt more comfortable with having Donar out there to greet any potential hostile forces than cooped up at Starfleet Command or on some Starbase.

Taking Donar on would be a sign of *Erickson's* rising reputation in the Fleet, and that kind of word of mouth would improve everyone's careers in the long run, including Commander Norrbom's, or so that's how Glover had put it, punctuating it with a knowing, yet dazzling smile. Wyoma hadn't seen a sign of the man's prickly nature, but she had gotten caught a little in the magnetic field of his charisma.

Still it had taken her several days to give him an answer. Once she poured back over the man's record, and after she talked to him via subspace, Wyoma had to admit that Donar had been an impressive candidate. He was more qualified than Norrbom, she had to be honest with herself, though Helen was more tied into the crew, and Redfeather liked the idea of a close knit unit. Perhaps a bit too much, she had reasoned, and throwing a curveball or two at all of them from time to time was necessary to keep stagnation at bay.

Pulling herself out of the wellspring of memory, the captain glanced at the small sphere, its white surface nearly covered by all of the squiggled autographs. She had clutched that ball before telling Helen the decision and held it while making the call to Admiral Glover.

Once the decision was made she didn't question it, and she would make the same decision again, though she was disappointed that she and Helen had become more distant. Commander Norrbom stayed on top of her duties, perhaps even more efficient than she was before, but gone was the banter on the bridge or the late nights at Birdland.

Wyoma had leaned on Helen heavily after her lover, Lt. Commander Gavin Mohmand, had died in a terrorist attack on Point-Station Epsilon over a year ago. And now it felt like Wyoma had betrayed her, even if it was the best decision. She just

hoped Helen would understand in time and dreaded that one day she would walk into the Ready Room with a resignation or reassignment request.

So far that hadn't happened and Wyoma wanted to pick Dendron's brain to see what she could do to head off what she knew in her gut had to be coming. "I've tried talking to this about her," the captain admitted, "but Helen just says everything is fine and buries herself even more into her work," she shook her head, and bit her lip. "I know she's not fine, but I'm not sure how to get her to open up."

"I think that's going to take some time," Dendron said, "She needs to reconcile all the emotions she is feeling and that process works differently for everyone."

"I understand," Wyoma said, a small sigh escaping her lips. Norrbom's coolness hadn't affected her job one bit, but Redfeather missed her friend. "So this is something I have to sit back and allow to happen."

"Or not," Dendron added with a slight wince, "My apologies."

"No, no, you are right," the captain shook her head. "She might not be able to reconcile her feelings regarding my decision."

"That is a possibility," Dendron stroked his goatee again. "I didn't want to give you false hope."

"Thanks Denny," Wyoma's smile was wan.

"Regarding the rest of the crew's feelings regarding Mr. Donar," the Andorian moved on smoothly, "there is one noticeable holdout."

"Dr. Narsan," the captain said. The counselor nodded, his smile receding. One blot on Commander Donar's record had occurred during a botched rescue mission on Kesprytt III. Donar had been a part of Special Missions Team-9 which had conducted the mission. Scores of Kes had died as a result. One of the Federation casualties had been Narsan's spouse. The Halanan had pulled from his own tragic experiences to help provide solace to Wyoma during her time of grief as well. The captain had made sure to seek out Narsan's advice before making her final decision, and at the time the man had expressed no reservations. But now that Tai had come aboard, Narsan suddenly didn't have time to do anything but the most precursory medical scan on the man.

"I have spoken with the Chief Medical Officer," Dendron said. "He was very communicative. He knows he shouldn't blame Commander Donar for what happened, and in a way, he doesn't, he said that he thought he had moved on, but whenever he sees the man he thinks of his wife." The Andorian stopped, his face contorting with frustration. "There is little I can do to help him at this stage except recommend continued sessions to allow him to express his frustration and anger."

"Anger?" Redfeather asked, shocked; even though she shouldn't have been. She had been very angry herself in the months after Mohmand's murder. She had blamed God, fate, the universe, and especially the Cardassian militants. The anger had become so strong, so poisonous that for a time it had nearly imperiled her career. She had to take a leave of absence and Commander McDuffie had graciously



stepped in, as well as out, when she returned. So she knew how stultifying unchecked anger could be. "Perhaps, I could speak to him as well?" she suggested.

"I think that would be a great help," Dendron nodded.

"Is that the real reason you came to see me?" The captain was finally catching on.

"Absolutely. Not." Dendron smiled. "I came to see that Tenarian Glow smile of yours." The captain blew through her teeth.

"On that note..."

"I'm being dismissed, aren't I?" The Andorian was already standing up.

"You're a better mind reader than I thought." The captain quipped.

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Main Bridge**

The seat opposite Commander Donar was empty. Lt. Commander Norrbom, as acting executive officer, should have been filling it, but the woman had chosen to remain at her post on the deck ringing the command well.

The tall, willowy, ash blond woman was awkwardly propped over her standing console, gazing a bit too intently at her console. Tai knew when someone was avoiding eye contact with him. He had trained enough evasive recruits to know the signs. Of course, it wasn't fear driving the woman's behavior. He also sensed how rigid her body language became in his presence, how her throat constricted, and her expression grew impassive.

If he didn't know signs so obvious that someone didn't care for him he wouldn't long been carrion food. Of course the real question was what was he going to do about it? On Angosia III, disagreements could be solved with personal combat and if necessary, lethal personal combat, but he was a long way from home. He was even a long way from Special Missions, which sometimes also solved disagreements in physical ways.

He knew that was not the appropriate course to take with the operations officer, though she might have been game. He smiled at the thought.

"Something funny Commander?" Captain Redfeather sauntered onto the bridge, a padd clutched in her hand. Before he could get up, she waved for him to remain sitting. "Have you A'nurd's latest status report on multiphasic shield output?"

"Yes ma'am," Donar said.

"Our current shield strength is good, but I think we can do better," she said, "If we have to go into the expanse I want to make certain multiphasic shield generation holds."

"Understood captain," the Angosian replied, shooting out of his seat. "I'll see to it at once."

Both senior officers were drawn to a soft, but noticeable throat clearing. "Something you care to add Helen?" The captain asked.

“Perhaps I can talk to A’nurd,” she suggested, looking only at the captain, as if Donar didn’t exist. “I know that Main Engineering has to be a mad house right now, and could also lend a hand. I did get my start as an engineer.”

The captain nodded, “Of course I remember.” She turned back to Donar. “What do you think Commander?”

Tai pursed his lips as he contemplated his reply. He wasn’t sure what the captain was angling at. He felt put on the spot and he didn’t like it. There was an expectant gleam in her eye, and he knew she was testing him on some level. He didn’t know what answer she wanted, and he didn’t care for obsequiousness. He had never been one for shipboard politics. He liked the direct, blunt approach the best. “Captain I think...”

The captain snapped loudly, interrupting him. The gleam took on a devilish twinkle. “How about you two both go inform A’nurd that I want the multiphasic projection matrix increased by 2000 cochranes to account for subspace compression factor if we for some unfortunate occurrence have to warp the hell into or out of the expanse.”

Tai looked at the operations officer before he replied. Her wintry gaze nearly gave him freezer burn. “We will see to it at once captain,” he said quickly, peeved at his delayed reaction. He met Norrbom’s icy blue eyes again. “After you Commander,” he gestured toward the turbolift.

Norrbom dipped her head and gave a pointed look at the captain before acceding to his gesture. She stalked toward the lift, barely hiding her impatience as she waited on the first officer to step out of the command well to join her. The Angosian couldn’t help but look back at the captain once more as he ascended the steps toward the lift. The woman eased into her command chair, a satisfied smile on her face.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Greenaugh***

“I know,” Lt. Shashlik said, cutting off the science officer, “It looks vaguely Tholian in design,” she finished. The alien ship looked like a large, dimmed pyramid lying on its side. Ensign Fryer tensed at the mention of the reclusive, territorial species.

“I just said it looked somewhat like a Tholian vessel, not that it was one,” she chided him gently, “Cool your thrusters.”

“Yes sir,” he replied, though he now looked at the ship through slitted eyes. The Kaylar took in the darkened, pitted hull dominating the front viewer. The vessel was large, much larger than any Tholian ship or freighter she had seen before, but it had a similar, conical shape.

*“I am not reading any Tholian life signs,”* Ramlo was still on audio. *“And the power readings are totally incompatible with Tholian propulsion.”*

"So what's powering that thing, or did power it?" Shashlik asked, clenching her hands in anticipation of beaming aboard the alien craft.

"*I'm reading residual polaric ion isotope signatures,*" Ramlo said, pausing. Both Shashlik and Fryer shared a confused look.

"Why is that important?" Rarely did Shashlik like to not have the appearance of knowing what was going on around her, but this find was too important for vanity.

"I think we need to get aboard that vessel," Ramlo said instead, quickening her interest. "I'll meet you on the bridge."

"*Oyekan* just beamed down one," Fryer said just seconds later.

"I'm usually the one chomping at the bit," Shashlik grinned as she eased out of her seat, fighting against the bulky white EV suit. Despite a more streamlined design, the suit still hampered her movement. She trudged over to the transporter alcove, snatching up her helmet along with a utility belt with a tricorder and a phaser clipped to it that she had left by the transporter pad in anticipation of an away. Jumping on the pad, she turned to Fryer. "Keep this channel open and be ready for an emergency beam out," she ordered. She slid on the helmet and sealed it before nodding at him, "Beam me down."

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## ***USS Erickson***

### ***Main Bridge***

"I wonder if I should shut off power to the turbolift?" Captain Redfeather wondered aloud, prompting several chuckles from the bridge. "Would that be me being bad captain again?"

"*Bad* captain," Lt. French intoned. "Very bad."

"I know," Redfeather smiled, turning half-way in her seat to the row of consoles behind her. A spry Tellarite was operating Helen's station. "Lieutenant, please shut off the power to the turbolift."

The Tellarite paused, one shaggy, brown eyebrow raising in a Vulcan-like manner. She looked back up at the captain, a curious expression on her porcine face. "Captain the turbolift has already stopped."

Redfeather pursed her lips, nodding with satisfaction. "Somebody on that lift gets it."

"Well let's just hope they both come back in one piece," French muttered.

"Amen to that Tim," Redfeather added.

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## ***Alien Vessel***

### ***Bridge***

"This can't be a coincidence," Ramlo said, flashing the wrist lamp around the room. The walls were filled with polished, orange gemstone etchings of gigantic, six-

legged figures, crystalline in shape. “Those are Tholians,” he remarked, his voice sounding tinny coming from his helmet’s speakers. “And the data that I have downloaded from their computer banks has similarities to Tholian script.”

Except for the elaborate etchings the bridge was largely unadorned. Ramlo was surprised that such a large and advanced vessel as this ship appeared to be only had one steering console, standing at the very prow of the bridge.

“Both of my optical units are functioning Ram,” Shashlik said, bending down, “but it makes no sense,” she said, running her tricorder over the one burned husk on the deck. “These bio-readings do not contain the mineralogical makeup of Tholian physiology,” she said, chancing to touch the blackened corpse. She noticed the plumed hat, its tip reminding her of flames. “They are, were, carbon based life forms.”

“I had already deduced that they weren’t Tholians, chiefly due to the environmental factors on the ship. There are scant traces of the methane-chlorine mix that the Tholians breathe. It was a standard oxygen mix until the air was vented from the vessel due to hull perforations.”

Shashlik stood back up again. “Which brings me to my next point,” she said, her rage starting to simmer. “Who attacked these people and why?”

“A good question and I don’t have the slightest clue,” Ramlo admitted.

“Could it be the Calderans?” The Kaylar ventured. Though not as famously territorial or xenophobic as the Tholians or Sheliak, the species native to this stretch of space weren’t known for being neighborly.

“It is a possibility,” Ramlo conceded, tapping his long chin with the edge of his tricorder. “However, they are a deuterium based, biomimetic life form that generally doesn’t leave the gas giant they inhabit at the edge of the eponymous expanse.”

“So you don’t think it was them?” Shashlik asked.

“It is doubtful, but not completely beyond the realm of actuality.” The Arkenite admitted. “Perhaps a deeper exploration of the ship might yield us those answers.”

“Agreed,” Shashlik said, giving the bridge a once over again before following the scientist out in the pitch black corridor.

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Turbolift**

“This is highly improper, not to mention unprofessional and unbecoming of an officer of your rank!” Lt. Commander Norrbom snapped, folding her arms across her chest, her gaze becoming wintrier.

Commander Donar set his feet as well as his jaw, ratcheting up his determination. But the Angosian did take a step back. He didn’t want to loom over the woman, or give her the impression that he was trying to intimidate her. “Commander Norrbom,” he started slowly, patiently, “we have been tiptoeing around each other too long. Since we have been largely on routine assignments, I was

content to let the situation work itself out in time, but now that we are headed into a potentially hostile situation, I need to know where things stand. Our ability to trust each other might become the difference between life and death in the Caldera Expanse."

Norrbom tightened her arms across her chest, and shifted her jaw, her expression totally unconvinced. "We have to get down to Main Engineering...sir."

"Not until we hash this out," he stated.

"Hash what out exactly?" She asked, her flippancy making his bottom lip twitch with frustration. He exhaled, quickly centering himself.

"I had no intention of denying you this position," he said. "That wasn't my plan."

"But here you are," she retorted, gesturing at him.

"There was nothing perfidious about my placement aboard *Erickson*," he said, not liking his defensive tone.

The operations officer chuckled, the sound harsh. "Sure," she said, her contorted features belying the words, "I can see no cronyism at all in the fact that you're buddies with the newly installed Admiral Glover, a man who has the sympathies of the whole Federation for the loss of his father and for what he himself endured at the hands of the Romulans. The Admiralty would practically give the man anything he wanted, and it seems what Glover wanted to do was hook up his friends."

Tai's face flashed hot, and he tugged at his collar, in a vain attempt to give the heat rising throughout his body a release valve. "I think you have totally misconstrued what occurred..."

Norrbom blithely waved away the man's denial, "Look sir, that's fleet politics and I understand that, and I can't be too mad about it, to be honest, because I know that you've had a distinguished service record. You've got a lot more experience than me."

"Okay," Donar said, cooling down a tick. "If you think I am qualified for the position..."

"I do," she said, interrupting him for a second time. In the interest of furthering the dialogue, Tai let it pass. "Based on your Starfleet service record, I think you could be a great addition to *Erickson*."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Do you really want to know?" Norrbom leaned forward, spearing him with her stare. Her eyes raked over his face and eventually found his head. She held his gaze, as if she was trying to burrow into his soul. He nodded, without breaking the hold.

"Yes, Commander, I want to know," Donar said, trying not to bark the words.

"Despite how gold plated your record is, you're a weapon, designed in a lab somewhere, no better really than the Jem'Hadar!" She hurled the words at him and

he back stepped, feeling stung. It was like the woman had saw into his very soul and uncovered one of his deepest fears.

With a full head of steam, the woman continued, "Sure there was a purpose for a person like you during the war, but what about peacetime huh? You were made to kill, not to explore, not to look over ship reports, or build communities among the crew aboard starships, and *Erickson* is more than a job for me, more than a stepping stone, this crew is family, and having you around them is like having a fully charged disruptor lying around your house. Who knows when that weapon might go off?"

"Weapons generally need someone to utilize them," Donar pointed out.

"Not from what I've learned about your some of the Tarsian War veterans," Norrbom shot back. Her smile was cruel as she plunged the knife in deeper, "Oh yeah, I did some research. I know how they locked you and others like you away after the war. You couldn't cope with the peace, you were a threat to the social order."

"That-that was a long time ago, a different war," Tai looked away from her, momentarily engulfed in sorrowful, terrible memories.

"It's admirable how you have tried to put that war behind you," he heard Norrbom saying, from someplace high above the well he now found himself in. "But what about the Dominion War, huh? Who knows what demons it's conjured in you? Who knows what needs to be exorcised now?"

"I, like every other veteran, have undergone psych evaluations," he said, his voice faltering. Norrbom shook her head, disbelieving.

"Our head doctors might be good, but obviously not good enough. You know that Federation News Service has been all over the rash of mental breakdowns that have affected war veterans, even some 'cleared' by the shrinks."

Tai shook his head, hating the woman's words but despising the truth in them even more. He had been troubled by the news reports, each one reminding him of old colleagues that had not made it home, even though they survived the war, and of his own struggles with adjusting to the hard won peace, then and now.

"I-I didn't know the depth of your antipathy," he said, "but now I do."

"So, what are you going to do about it?" Norrbom was literally hugging herself, her arms were wrapped so tightly around her, and for the first time Tai could see beyond the anger, and he saw the fear that was melting the ice in her gaze. She was afraid of him, afraid of what he might do.

Admittedly Donar had used his size and the reputation of Angosians as super soldiers at times in the past when necessary in Special Missions, but he had often tried to be as nonthreatening as possible aboard Starfleet vessels and for the most part, he had thought he had been successful. He had never encountered this level of resistance on the *Aegis*, and he had even found a second chance at love with Juanita.

He didn't know what to do, or how to allay the woman's fears. Grasping for an answer, he fell back on what he knew, or had observed from a man who he considered a mentor, Terrence Glover. The admiral had shown a lot of faith in him and he wasn't going to let him down. Thinking about how Glover might handle the

situation, Tai formulated a reply. "Well," he started slowly, considering his words, "I do appreciate your honesty, but let me be clear with you. I intend to continue in this posting and give my all to the *Erickson* and her crew. You don't have to like me, but you will respect me, and the chain of command. Is that clear?"

It took Norrbom a moment to work her mouth to say, "Yes sir."

"Further, I don't have a problem with you extant, and I won't have a problem with you if you respect my authority," the Angosian continued. "But if you find yourself unable to do so, I suggest you take another starship posting. And is that clear, Commander?"

"Yes sir," she said more quickly, the chill in her voice dropping to freezing levels.

After ordering the lift to resume to Engineering, Donar said, "I really do appreciate your honesty." He hoped the woman saw his words for the olive branch that they were. "I hope that we can continue this dialogue."

"May I speak freely sir?" Norrbom ventured.

"Yes," he replied.

"Honestly...I don't," she said, just as the turbolift reached their destination.

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## **Alien Vessel**

By birth and occupation, Lt. Ramlo was not one to be swayed by emotion or superstition. However the deeper they traversed into the dead ship, his trepidation multiplied. He was glad that Shashlik was with him. She walked quietly at his side, her compression rifle at the ready.

But even with her there, he couldn't quite shake the feeling of dread resting on his shoulders, and wiggling into his thoughts. Each body they passed, as burned out a husk as had been the corpse they had found on the bridge, only confirmed his suspicions that something wicked had befallen the crew.

Something so terrible that they had preferred self-immolation. "I still can't believe it," Shashlik's voice squeaked through his helmet's receiver. "That an entire ship would commit mass suicide," her helmet shook. Ramlo was surprised, pleasantly so, that his concerns were so transparent. Even though they were no longer together, the simpatico between them remained, an ember of a fire that could perhaps be rekindled in time.

"I stand by my hypothesis," Ramlo said. "The proof is growing incontrovertible," he declared. "My readings indicate that most of the corpses were incinerated, from the inside out."

Shashlik stopped and faced him, a ghastly expression on her face. "But why? How could they do that to themselves?"

"As opposed to being shot or stabbed," the Arkenite didn't mean for his reply to sound so flip. Along the way Shashlik had first discovered a few dead bodies that had been sliced open with blades or punctured with projectile weapons. Their

tricorders even picked up faint disintegrator static, so the unfortunates had been set upon by assailants with a variety of weapons, none that could be traced to a definitive source. Among the few disintegrator markers the devices had noted were Type 3, usually used by Klingons, Breen, or Romulans, Eminian sonic disruptors, or banned Varon-Ts', so the culprits could have been anyone.

"I would have preferred facing a warrior's death, on my feet than taking my own life," Shashlik stated, a note of disgust clouding her concern about the fate of these travelers. "It would have been far preferable."

"From your cultural perspective," Ramlo couldn't help but point out. Despite all of her admirable qualities, her physical strength and strength of purpose, her compassion for her fellow crew aboard *Erickson*, and her sharp military mind, Ramlo often found her cultural bias disappointing. Shash often felt that everyone should think or feel like she, or the Kaylar did, and the universe was just simply too big for that. It was an ongoing debate between them.

"So you agree with this mass suicide?" Exasperation was heavy in her voice.

"I didn't say I agreed, or disagreed, but perhaps these people took what they felt was the best option, as opposed to being butchered," Ramlo answered. "Perhaps it was the most logical course of action."

Shashlik snorted, "Now you sound like a Vulcan."

"Well you do know I spent several years at their Science Academy," he pointed out. The Kaylar leaned in close enough so that he could see her roll her eyes.

"I know, I know, you love to tout that don't you?"

"No, I was just saying," Ramlo replied, feeling a little defensive.

"Yes, you went to the intergalactically prestigious Science Academy," Shash shrugged her broad shoulders, "well why you were learning how logical it was to kill yourself, I was surviving real life and death trials to earn my place among my clan."

"As I have heard before too," Ramlo allowed a wearied tone into his voice. "Are you going to regale me with another tale of how carried an egg unbroken in your mouth while you battled mountain devils and winged raptor-wolves while making your way unaided through the Ingarr Mountains?"

"Well, it was an amazing feat," now Shash felt a little sheepish. "And I did it without food or water, wearing only a loincloth."

"Thank you for that visual at least," the Arkenite smoothly injected. It took the warrior a moment to catch on. Then she cuffed him hard on the back, almost knocking him over.

"Still the same old slime snake you are," the security officer continued laughing. "After all this time, you still amuse me."

"A good thing, I guess," Ramlo ventured.

"Why yes Ram," Shashlik peered down at him again, "because I don't think you want to be on the opposite side of my laughter."

"No, I've seen the results of that," Ramlo replied, "I'm happy where I'm at."

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## ***Shuttlecraft Greenaugh***

Ensign Roland Fryer frowned as he scanned the data rolling across his screen, sent from the *Oyekan*. "How did you pick up this warp trail?"

"More like a reconstruction," Ensign Karen Kittles replied, a satisfied smile on her face. "While waiting on Lieutenants Ramlo and Shashlik to return or make their next report, I isolated all energy signatures that were not naturally occurring in the expanse. It's been the proverbial needle in the haystack, but I think we've got the escape routes leading into the expanse for the monsters that attacked the ship."

"No, you've got it," Fryer said, his furrowed brow smoothing out again. He smiled, "Good job Karen." The fair, freckled woman smiled, and Fryer's heart skipped a beat. He tried to recover by getting back to business, "We need to inform the lieutenants about this."

Kittles' smile dimmed. "I'm not so sure we should do that," she answered, prompting both Roland's eyebrows to shoot up in confusion.

"Why?"

"Well, this is all just speculation, and I don't want to take them away from their investigation."

"But this is something that majorly impacts that investigation," Fryer pointed out, not sure why he would need to, with Karen of all people.

"Maybe," she replied, "however this could just be totally unrelated traffic."

"Yeah," Fryer riposted, "you don't believe that either."

"You're right Roland, I don't," she admitted, "However, you know what they say about me on the ship, how I'm a kiss ass and a ladder climber, well, I don't want to play into that by jumping the gun."

"Or is it that you don't want to make a mistake that might derail your career choices?" As much as Fryer liked the beautiful, red cornrowed woman, he was never one to hide from the truth. Karen glared at him, a pinched expression marring her beautiful features.

"That's not it at all," she shot back.

"Okay," he shrugged, unconvinced, "Then I think we should inform the lieutenants."

"No," she shook her head, "Let me look into this."

"You know the captain told us not to go into the expanse." He pointed out. "And what do you think defying her orders are going to do for your ambitions, whether you find something or not?"

Karen shrugged, "If I find nothing, no harm, no foul, and it will just be between us, but if I do verify the warp trails, I could see me getting a commendation for original thinking."

"You're delusional, you know that right?" Fryer pointed out, hoping to splash the cold water of reality onto his colleague.

"Look Roland, it'll be a quick in and out, I promise."

He shook his head. "Hey I've heard that before."

"You've probably used that line before on one of your many suitors," she smiled at him, a lascivious gleam in her green eyes. The temperature suddenly increased in the shuttle's cabin. Fryer resisted the urge to tug at his mustard collar.

"I wouldn't say that," he managed, after a big gulp.

"Roland, I would," she remarked, "and others say the same thing."

"Stop kidding."

"I'm not, no joke," she said, "I've heard that you've sent a few hearts fluttering around the ship. It's made me curious to see what all the fuss is about."

Roland tugged on his collar, unable to resist any longer. "You know this isn't working Karen."

"Yes it is," she replied, punctuating it with a musical laugh. "I promise it will be quick, and once I have confirmed that they are actual warp trails, I'll be back, and once we're back on *Erickson*..."

"I should back you up," Fryer said, pulling his last card. "What if the Tholians are involved? You can't handle them on your own."

"I don't think even two shuttles could deal with a Tholian warship," Kittles said, "and I definitely have no problem with discretion being the better part of valor. If anything, if there are Tholians hiding out in the expanse I can warn you, the lieutenants, and *Erickson* in case they have an ambush in mind."

"Not buying it," Fryer insisted, "I'll go with you."

"And risk incurring Shashlik's wrath?" Kittles asked. "I don't think so."

"Good point," Roland replied. He sighed, "I know I'm going to regret this but do it quick, and Karen, please be safe."

"Back in a flash," she promised before signing off. Out of his port window he watched the *Oyekan* break away from the shuttle and zip into the expanse's coruscating gases.

Whatever happened going forward, Roland just knew that his own life had just had a major turning point, and he just hoped that Karen got back before the oppressive finality of that thought fully seeped into his consciousness.

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## ***The Burning Claw***

### **First Mate's Quarters**

First Mate Gedrik sat up in his bed, his thoughts finally coalescing into answer for the questions that had been plaguing him ever since they left the alien starship. Stumbling out of bed, he rushed to the communicator attached to his wall. He slapped it hard, and croaked into the intercom.

"Gedrik to Captain Deoch," he nearly shouted.

"*What is it now Gedrik?*" The captain didn't even attempt to hide his annoyance.

"We've got to go back to that ship."

"I told you before that we have a rendezvous with the Orions and we're already behind schedule due to this accursed nebula," Deoch grouched. "We don't have time to satiate your scientific curiosities!"

"Perhaps you wouldn't feel so if I told you that on that ship lies the answer to saving our homeworld."

"Do you take me for a fool?"

"If I did, would I bring this to you now, or even be part of this crew?" Gedrik asked.

"I see," Deoch said slowly, and the first mate could tell his commander was mulling over what the man had said. With Deoch it didn't matter so much what one said, but how one said it. He admired confidence, assertiveness, boldness.

"Are you certain of this?" Gedrik wisely kept silent. He knew any further attempts to bolster his argument would only come across as seeming less sure of himself.

The tactic worked. "Turn this ship around!" He heard the captain bark. Then: "Gedrik, get to the bridge immediately!"

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## ***Shuttlecraft Oyekan***

Ensign Kittles wished she felt as confident as she had sounded with Roland. She was generally good at talking a good game, she always killed during Lt. French's poker tourneys in Birdland, but this was a far bigger gamble that she had just taken on.

It could go wrong for her in so many ways, just losing her life being at the top of a very long list. And she had put Roland's ass on the line too, so she better make good or be quick about returning.

The cabin shook as *Oyekan* brushed against another astral eddy. They had increased the further she went into the expanse and it forced her to readjust her course and speed, slowing down her search.

It was just as well. Her visibility, from the port window to ship's sensors was nearly shot, and all she could see before her was a thick, colorful soup of strong reds, purples, oranges, and blue gases. The warp trail she had detected was fading rapidly, as if being gobbled up by the expanses' roiling stew.

"Perhaps I should just quit now," she thought. Turn back and head back to the alien ship. Roland would understand, she knew. Hell, he would be relieved, and she knew he wasn't the type that would gossip about her failure.

"No," she answered herself. "I'm doing this," she said, pushing forward. If nothing else she would collect as much information as she could and at least have something to show for her recklessness.

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## Alien Vessel Engine Room

"Now this is interesting," Lt. Ramlo remarked as he swept his tricorder over the large octagonal structure dominating the room. Shashlik was no engineer, but even she figured out that the octagon must be the ship's main propulsion system.

And Ram was correct, it was an interesting design, to say the least. Even though she also suspected that he wasn't talking just about how it looked. "What are your readings picking up Ram?" She asked. But the man ignored her. He walked around the structure, his nose pressed against his scanner.

"Ah," he said, "Handholds," he added. The Kaylar trudged quickly after him. By the time she reached him, he was halfway up the structure.

"Do you think that's wise Ram?" She asked, looking up.

"I'll be fine," he said, with a distracted tone. She knew how easily and completely he could get wrapped up in his scientific memories. She thought to follow him, but decided to leave the science officer to his toys.

Shashlik took out her own tricorder and made her way over to the databanks encircling the octagon. Perhaps there was more information she could glean from them.

Finding an access port, Shashlik set the thing to work, and then tapped the combadge attached to her suit's chest plate. "Lt. Shashlik to *Greenaugh*."

"*Ensign Fryer here*," the reply came a slowly for her taste. And did she detect a note of concern in his voice, or was that just her imagination?

"Is everything all right up there?"

"Uh, yes sir, of course, why do you ask?"

"You don't sound so sure. Would Ensign Kittles also say the same thing?"

"*I'm sure sir*," Fryer hastily responded. "*There's no need to ask her*."

"I'll determine that *Ensign*," she snapped. "And I'll do so now, Shashlik out."

"*Wait!*" the ensign's shout made her wince. "*Uh, I mean, sir...*"

"Great Bird of the Galaxy!" Ram's unusual exclamation drew her attention away from the flustered Fryer.

"We'll discuss this later Ensign," she said quickly before disconnecting. She looked up at the octagon to see the Arkenite peering over it, his slash of mouth forming a smile. "What have you discovered Ram?"

He waved the tricorder at her, like he had discovered a Hyterian Lost Relic. "What is it Ram?" growing a bit annoyed. She wasn't sure if it was the science officer's goofy spout of joy or Fryer's evasions that had set her down the bad mood path.

"The magneton scan confirmed it," he gushed. "We've found a stable polaric ion energy propulsion system!"

"Okay," she said, less than enthused. "I'm coming up." She quickly scaled the structure. When she reached the top, Ramlo was still frowning.

"Don't you get how important this find is?"

"No," she admitted. "How about you explain it to me," she said, as she looked around the device. The Arkenite had mentioned polaric ion isotopes before, but hadn't elaborated. Now finally the man might just put her out of her misery.

"Polaric ion particles generate an inordinate amount of power, and many nations have tried and failed to harness this power, including the Romulans. After their research facility was destroyed on Chaltok IV over a century ago, they signed onto the Polaric Test Ban Treaty, which has been in effect since 2268."

He paused briefly, to gauge her reaction. "I guess you weren't paying attention that day in history class huh?"

She shrugged, nonplussed, "It was only the wars that caught my attention. Not peace treaties that the Romulans probably violated even before submitting their signatures."

"That's just the thing," Ramlo said, "Polaric ion energy has been proven to be so unstable, producing subspace chain reactions, in addition to having temporal effects, that the treaty has been one of the few that has held. No one has seemed to want to open that Pandora's Box."

"Until they find out about this contraption," Shashlik pointed out. She looked across the propulsion system. The corners of the octagon contained what she suspected were the depleted power cells. Walkways connected each power cell to a central alcove, and whatever had been inside of it was missing.

"You see it too don't you?" Ramlo said, stepping onto one of the catwalks that led to the alcove. "I believe this is the vinculum or plexus, the nerve center of the propulsion system. It had to have housed the polaric ion stabilizer or processor, which made the use of the energy manageable." He turned back to her, his joy dimming again. "I think someone took it."

"The same people who attacked this vessel?" She said, with equal parts fear and excitement.

"Or maybe some of the crew survived and spirited it away because they knew how dangerous it could be," Ramlo surmised. "In either event, we have to find it. The idea of a hostile power having such power at their command..."

"Now that I get," she said, nodding with confidence. "We need to tell the captain. I'll have Fryer relay the message on to *Erickson*."

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## **Tholian Trade Ship Antedean Space**

Spinel's entire being vibrated as the message trilled through hir. It was of Tholia, but at the same time not, and s/he knew that the questions surrounding that

would be beyond it to answer. Focusing hir mind, Spinel sent hir thoughts out into space, knowing they would skitter along the mind line into the very minds of the High Magistrates themselves and that they would uncover what s/he had found. Spinel knew it was a severe breach of caste to do so, but s/he was certain that what had just happened to hir would be of utmost importance to the rulers on Tholia. And they might even reward hir with greater license to do more business with non-Tholians.

Once that was completed, Spinel continued on hir task. The cargo hold of Tholian silk the ship contained wasn't going to sell itself after all.

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## **Alien Vessel Engine Room**

The tricorder squeak stopped Shashlik from tapping her combadge. She looked down and unlatched the rectangular device from her belt. "The translation is complete?" Lt. Ramlo asked, a curious gleam in his deep, iris-free eyes. Unconsciously he reached out, his curiosity wanting to take the tricorder and the data it had uncovered from himself.

Shashlik wagged a finger as she held up the tricorder and quickly skimmed the readings coursing down its small screen. Her teeth clenched, a growl emitting from her throat. Ramlo's curiosity quickly turned to concern. "What is it?" He asked.

The Kaylar didn't answer. Instead she activated the volume. The halting, modulated electronic voice was a good approximation of a standard Starfleet audio interface program. "Whoever it was has audacity, to pretend to be the *Enterprise*," Ramlo remarked, shaking his head.

Both officers knew that *Erickson* was the only Starfleet ship in this sector. "They did this because of how well known the *Enterprise* was," Shash remarked, teeth still clenched. "They figured whoever fell into their trap would know and be comforted by the fact that they were about to be rescued...by the *Enterprise* itself no less."

Ram dipped his head, his curiosity returning. "Shash, you know who did this?" She shook her head, the tremble running from her neck throughout her body.

"Brigands!" she spat, "I've seen this kind of deception before," she added, "They even had false transponder signal backing up their lie. The practiced eye would know better, but civilians or visitors from another quadrant, they stood no chance. We're dealing with a cunning and brutal foe." She finished, a feral grin slashing her features. Her ferocity made Ramlo take a step back. "I am looking very forward to meeting them."

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## **The Burning Claw Command Deck**

Gedrik winced as the captain's claws scrapped loudly against the metal finish of his armrest. He looked up to see Deoch glowering down at him, black tongue licking the air as if seeking out his fear.

"I'm waiting," the captain hissed, his leathery, pink face pinched with annoyance. The first mate sighed inwardly. He had barely sat down at this station, before the captain was on him. "I still have time to turn the *Claw* around and make our rendezvous if this vital information you have to tell me is rubbish," he said, fondling the disruptor latched to his thigh, "Of course if that is the case, you won't be making the return trip." This statement drew some hisses, clicks, and chuckles from the disparate crew.

Though *The Burning Claw* was manned mostly by fellow Venturi, like Gedrik and the captain, Deoch never refused capable hands, tentacles, or claws as it were. A K'normian sat at the helm and a grim, fearsome Capellan woman hunched over the weapons console. A comely, twelve-fingered Nuvian was curled in the seat beside the captain's, the latest 'captain's prerogative'. The bridge was dank, dim, and cloistered. Normally Gedrik preferred it that way, but now it only made him feel trapped.

Gedrik swallowed down his fear before replying, "The energy readings I detected while onboard the ship, I knew I had seen them before," he paused, remembering where he had seen them. It had taken him so long to realize it because he had tried to bury those memories. "My wife..." he paused, and Deoch respectfully gave him a moment. His eyes flickered as the bridge melted away...to heated meetings among the Venturi Science Council.

As their sun, Alpha Venturi Major continued to cool, and wreaked greater havoc across their planet, the Venturi had turned inward, against a Federation that they had helped to build but had proven ineffectual in their greatest time of need. Gedrik and Berae were among the latest generation of Venturi scientists whose life missions it had become to save their homeworld.

And as solution after solution gave way to the inevitable, looming disaster, the ideas had become more desperate. Precept Qeux had enlivened debate, suggesting the use of polaric ion isotopes to reignite the dying star. Both Gedrik and his wife had argued against it, citing that the Venturi remained members of the Federation, if nominally, and had to abide by the Polaric Test Ban Treaty. Instead he had backed Berae's idea of using protomatter to restore the star. It had been the worst decision of his life.

"Perhaps I didn't recognize the polaric radiation readings at the time, because I just didn't want to see it," he forced the words out, fighting against the clutch of memory. "Those aliens...that ship...it was powered by polaric ion energy, stable polaric ion isotopes," he paused, waiting for the import of his words to sink in.

Deoch looked down at him, perplexed. The rest of the crew was similarly confused or nonplussed.

"None of you learned much about Federation diplomatic history I see," Gedrik replied, "Well, let me make it simpler to grasp. Polaric ion particles can generate power on a massive scale, enough to light up an entire planet, but they are highly unstable and can wipe out all life on a planet in seconds, not to mention causing subspace fractures."

"A superweapon," Deoch's eyes gleamed, and he stroked his leathery chin. He turned to the dark skinned Capellan. "And you knew nothing of this Runt?" She glared back at him and shrugged her massive shoulders. Even though the Capellan was taller than just about everyone aboard *Burning Claw*, she would've been considered small for her size and Deoch enjoyed needling her about it. He had taken to calling her Runt, but no one else dared follow his lead.

"It's more than that, or it can be," Gedrik chanced touching the captain's bare forearm. Deoch often preferred sleeveless tunics to show off his muscled arms. The captain pulled back, his hand ready to strike. The first mate didn't shrink from the gesture. He was too excited now.

"Old Qeux might have been right all along!" he gushed, "Whatever generated that stabilization field could be used, maybe, to save Alpha Venturi Major!"

Deoch snorted, his laughter harsh. "That old foolish dream of yours rears its head again?" The captain shook his head, "I thought you had given up such things after I picked you up off the floor of that bar on Vega Colony? I gave you a new life, new purpose, but yet, you persist in thinking you can change the universe!" He threw up his hands, and stomped back to his seat, drawing more laughter from some of the crew.

Gedrik sat up in his seat, clearing his throat before he spoke, "This isn't an idle dream. This could be the answer. We could be heroes, the saviors of our race!"

Deoch sat back in his chair and stroked the cheek of the eager Nuvian concubine now pressing against him. "Or we could be rich," he retorted.

Gedrik sighed inwardly again. He wished that the captain acted was compelled by more altruistic motivation, but he had to use whatever worked. "That as well, but those riches will remain beyond your grasp until I can retrieve whatever produced that radiation."

"I told you we should've destroyed that probe," the Capellan grumbled. "What if those aliens hid whatever the First Mate here is so ecstatic about inside of one of it?"

Deoch turned halfway around in his seat. "It was a communication buoy, a feeble cry for help that would never be heard in time due to the nature of the expanse. It was a waste of power to destroy it." Now it was his turn to shrug. "But going back to the derelict is a good place to start trying to piece together the direction of that probe, if the generator isn't still there, and was just overlooked by your boarding party."

The Capellan hissed, almost as good as a Venturi. "Never question my thoroughness," she warned. The captain was more amused than threatened.



"Give me a reason not to then," he said, "and I won't. But if you did overlook something on that ship, the generator or not..." He let the threat hang in the air. Even though it had been directed at the Capellan, Gedrik felt it rest heavy on his shoulders.

"We'll see," the Capellan retorted, her competence now in question. It was the one weak spot in her makeup from what Gedrik could see. Now that it had been questioned, she would be as determined as Gedrik to get back to that ship and discover the location of the polaric ion device.

Which was a good and bad thing, great if she was proven right, but if his quest was as foolish as the captain suggested, there would be no place in the galaxy to hide from the Capellan. Of course if he failed Berae again he would cheat the Capellan of her vengeance by ending it himself.

Deoch chortled, "Good show," he remarked, reaching out to stroke another section of the Nuvian's anatomy. "Krendt!" he barked at the helm, "best speed back to that husk."

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## Caldera

They knew of the device before it pierced the sky. *"A weapon?"* The question shuddered the mercurial sea with alarm.

*"Had the organics finally made their true intentions known?"* The suspicion caused another ripple as the ocean began to divide itself against those that hoped and those that mocked such things.

Despite the divisions, the great unison had decided as one to allow more travel through their expanse, in particular more Federation exploration of their space.

It had been a highly contentious debate. There had been no unity for a long time during it, and scarce consensus now. Only the slenderest of threads held the great sea together. And now this intrusion from the stars might rip apart their grand unison for a long time to come. The device crashed on the far side of the planet, causing the sea to writhe with pain as it felt the projectile slam into rusted earth.

From the depths, two shapes emerged, ironically in the humanoid guises of those that both intrigued and frightened them. Silvery figures with vague facial features but articulated arms and hands glided among their brethren until they reached the shore. Each faction had produced a representative.

"We must investigate this device, to learn of its intent," Hope said, its voice deepened by the collective aspirations of its compatriots.

"And what will you be prepared to do if someone has launched a weapon against us?" Fear replied, its voice thickened with distrust.

Hope lowered its head, drawing into it all of the varied thoughts of its faction. When it lifted its head, it gazed at Fear with sightless impressions where its eyes should be. "We will do what is necessary to ensure the propagation of our kind."

"We shall see," Fear replied, even doubting that.

"Yes, we shall," Hope said, ignoring the other's accusation. "Come," he held out an arm and it took on the shape of a silvery wing. His body morphed into that of a creature capable of flight and then he jumped into the air and glided on the hot air currents. He paused, turning to look down at the still grounded Fear. "Let us see who is right." He challenged, before taking wing again in the direction of the downed object.

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Main Engineering**

Commander Tai Donar blinked rapidly, trying to stay awake as his head swam. The exchange between Norrbom and the Phalkerian assistant chief engineer was rapid fire and near enough over his head to task his patience, but he endured it.

Norrbom had proven her worth, helping A'nurd's team increase get just shy of the 2,000 millicochranes the captain demanded. It was that last five hundred that had Norrbom and the assistant chief at odds. He didn't know which one was more accurate so he stood back and watched the match. If anything it would give him an opportunity to see if Helen was as blunt and dagger wielding as she had been with him. If so, that might just be her personal style regardless of how she felt about his arrival on *Erickson*. And if that was the case, Donar was going to have to do something about it.

"Commander, a word?" A'nurd said quietly, suddenly at his side. If the Angosian's heartbeat and pulse weren't chemically regulated, the Munzalan's appearance would've startled him. "In my office?" The furred alien gestured with both hand and tail towards the small office off to the side of the pulsating warp core cylinder, running the height of the ship.

"Of course," he nodded, following the man, and for once pleased to be talking to the loquacious engineer. Once inside the thankfully soundproof office, A'nurd gestured at a bowl of blue fruit dominating his otherwise clear desk. After Tai declined, the Munzalan took one and began to nibble on it.

"Tulaberries," he remarked. "I'm so glad that trade was reestablished with the Dominion so that the Alpha Quadrant can continue receiving these delights," he paused to take another bite. After swallowing, he continued, "Unfortunately the Ferengi have a monopoly on the fruit and they charge exorbitant rates," he shrugged, "but what can you do? What price perfection?" He asked before finishing the snack. He grabbed another, and held it up to Tai.

"You sure you don't want one?" He declined again. "Just as well," A'nurd sighed, putting the fruit back in the bowl. "Addictions can be such nasty things."

Tai softly cleared his throat. "Did you need to speak with me about something Commander?"

“Oh, not really.”

Donar reined in his annoyance. “Then why did you ask me to come into your office?” He kept his tone measured.

“It looked like you were about to pass out there, being battered down with all of the technobabble being bandied about,” the Munzalan said, “I thought a respite was in order.”

The Angosian first officer nodded, not denying that the engineer was correct. A’nurd smiled, “I was right I suppose. I wish my mother was here, so that she could see that my counseling certification did not go to waste.”

Donar raised an eyebrow, “Counselor?” He hadn’t seen that in the man’s service record. A’nurd chuckled.

“I would think you would be the first one on this ship to understand that sometimes people have lives before Starfleet, after service, and shockingly sometimes during their time in the Fleet,” the engineer answered, unable to resist the lure of the tulaberries. He plucked up the one he had discarded just moments early. He sniffed it, closing his eyes to savor the flavor before digging in.

“Of course I do,” Tai said, without elaborating. The memories of Norrbom’s accusatory take on his past were too fresh. “I only reviewed your Starfleet record.”

“I understand,” A’nurd nodded, “but like you, in a way, I had a life outside the Fleet. A career...a family.”

“I didn’t know you were a family man.” There had been no note of that in the records either.

“I was,” A’nurd’s expression saddened and he tossed the half eaten fruit in a waste receptacle at his desk. “A long time ago.” Tai nodded again, understanding intrinsically when to let a matter drop.

“But an engineer was something new, challenging. I had shown an early aptitude for machinery, breaking it apart and putting it back together as a child. My father had worked his way up to craftsman status in one of the major Alshain septs. It’s what allowed me, my entire kin, actually, to escape Munzala and the more naked exploitation of the Alshain there.

“But it also gave me an interest in exploring the nature of sentients, the mental machinery that beings used to exploit and enslave one another. When I returned to my homeworld I became a mental health professional, but my real passion was diagnosing how colonization had damaged the spirits of my people. It, admittedly, was not something that set well with our Alshain overlords or Munzalan collaborators.”

Tai sat back, astounded by the man’s revelations. “Both conspired to stop my research and my kin paid the price,” he looked down, his voice clotting with grief. Summoning back his tears and despair, the man’s eyes bore unwaveringly into Tai’s, and the Angosian saw a fierceness there he hadn’t thought possible. “I was exiled from Munzala. What was left of my life...a shambles, and even if I wanted to go home, there was nothing left there but cinders. So, I had a choice, I could descend or do the

opposite. I've found a new home in the Federation, in Starfleet. And a new career, in engineering," he smiled. "Just putting my hands on tools, it reminds me of those simple times with my father," the man's smile widened. "It's the only thing I have left to remind me of him, and my kin."

"I'm sorry," Donar said, shocked that he had so underestimated the man so. "I had no idea."

"Well, it isn't something I share with everyone," A'nurd replied, "but I felt you would understand. We all carry a secret pain and it's what we do to deal with that agony that determines much of the course of our lives. I would like to think that we both have chosen to do something positive, to lessen the suffering of others by joining the Fleet."

"I, well, I guess so," the Angosian was nearly at a loss for words. He had never heard anyone say what was in his heart so easily, so plainly. This man understood his fears, his doubts; he got the pains and frustrations of reinvention. "I have misjudged you A'nurd of Munzala."

The engineer grabbed another tulaberry and sat back in his chair. He held it aloft, allowing the room's lighting to glint off the fruit's shiny peel. "Rest assured that you are one of the few men who can say such a thing and still draw breath...but that's another story."

Tai chuckled, and it felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He hadn't expected to find a brother-in-arms aboard *Erickson*, but now he knew he had.

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### ***Jov'k Tholis***

#### ***Calcite-class battlecruiser***

Commander Narskene shut hir mind off from the crew at the behest of the Political Castemoot on Tholia. The High Magistrates wished to speak to hir directly, and alone, so Narskene knew that s/he were about to be given a mission of the utmost importance to hir people.

In addition to the Tholian mind being highly advanced and capable of telepathic communication over wide distances in space, their very bodies could serve as communication devices. Narskene's body was purposely stilled as s/he awaited instruction.

Hir head bowed, the information flitted into her mind from the great Lattice that could connect all Tholians across the entire quadrant. Nothing was held back as the High Magistrates revealed their thoughts to hir. Narskene sent them hir response. And then she ordered the *Jov'k Tholis* to reverse course.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Greenaugh***

Ensign Fryer came out of the refresher, a smile spreading on his face as he saw his proximity sensor blinking. "Karen," he muttered, "probably trying to give me a

good rattle.” As if she hadn’t shaken him up already with this crazy stunt of hers. But it was all good now, Roland realized, as he slid into his seat. She got it out of her system and neither of their superiors had to know about it.

He shuddered inwardly at the thought of having to face Shashlik. He was so glad she hadn’t called him. Roland didn’t think he would be able to lie to her if she asked about *Oyekan’s* whereabouts.

The ensign sighed; relieved he didn’t have to worry about that now. Flipping off the alarm, he magnified the shuttle’s main viewer to get a look at the shuttle as it emerged from the beautiful coruscating mass of gases.

“What a minute,” he muttered as an oblong, rust-brown prow poked through the barrier. “That’s not *Oyekan!*” His heart thudded painfully and his stomach muscles clenched. “Karen,” he whispered, fear nearly robbing him of voice. Had something happened to Karen?

Whoever these guys were, they weren’t Tholians, he realized after the ship pulled itself from the mire. He recognized the make as an old *Antares*-class design, with a circular nacelle attached to its aft. Though the ship often reminded him of a space worthy penis, its appearance was generally not a laughing matter. It was a ship popular with Corvallen smugglers. Or pirates!

Fryers stomach muscles unclenched, just long enough for the pit of his stomach to drop. The *Antares* cruiser strode toward the alien craft. He raised shields and brought the shuttles scant weapons online. He tried hailing he ship, but there was no response. “Shit,” he muttered, thoughts racing through his head, as he moved away from the alien ship to confront the larger vessel. “This is the Starfleet Shuttle *Greenaugh*, please respond,” he asked, forgoing a simple hail and broadcasting a message instead. The ship didn’t reply nor change course. “I must warn you to desist from approaching the vessel.” Once again, it ignored him. “If you do not desist, I will be forced to fire upon you.” Still the vessel came on. Fryer shifted his jaw and briefly clutched his bubbling stomach, before sending a glancing blow off the other ship’s bow.

The *Antares* stopped, turning towards the *Greenaugh*. It raised shields and weapons. “Frix!” Fryer cursed. He tapped his combadge, “Lt. Shashlik, we’ve got a situation here.”

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## Alien Vessel

Lt. Shashlik nearly pounded a hole through her EV suit as she slapped the compin attached to it again. “Ensign Fryer? Fryer!” she shouted. But static was the only reply.

“What happened?” Ramlo pure green eyes were alit with fright. “What’s going on up there?”

"I don't know," the Kaylar honestly answered. That's what she wanted to know herself, though she had a good suspicion. She activated her communicator again. "Shashlik to *Oyekan* come in. *Oyekan*?" She didn't even get static this time.

She turned to the perturbed Arkenite and made sure to look him straight in the eye. Shashlik had never been one to sugarcoat things. "I think both shuttles have been destroyed."

"What?" The science officer gasped, taking a step back. "By who?"

"My guess is the same people who attacked this ship the first time," Shashlik spoke calmly, but inside she raged.

"Why?" Ram asked, shaking his head sadly. He was thinking now not only of the ship of corpses surrounding them but of the sense loss of both Ensigns Kittles and Fryer, two very promising young officers whose lives had been snuffed out as quickly as one blew out candles.

"I think they might have discovered what you did, about the polaric ion regulator," the Kaylar determined, "and they've come to claim the prize."

"But it-it's not here," Ramlo was aghast. "And if it were, I would die rather to see those monsters claim it!"

"That's the spirit," Shashlik said as shafts of light emerged around them. She pulled the light mace she carried in the right leg of her EV suit. Though it weighted her down, it always made her feel more comfortable about away missions. And besides she always liked to carry something from home with her, so that no matter where she died, it would be like she had died there, among her clan. Ramlo gripped his phaser.

The beams resolved into a menagerie of masked aliens with an assortment of wicked weapons. Despite herself, Shashlik smiled. She raised the mace aloft and barreled ahead.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Oyekan***

As Kittles guided the shuttle out of the muck, she already knew what she was going to say to Fryer. Her finger hovered over the communications button, ready to beat him to the punch. She smiled, imagining them sharing a laugh...and maybe more after they were both back on *Erickson*.

She could, and had, done a lot worse than Roland. And she had been cooped up in her quarters too long, studying regulations when she wasn't on duty, the gym, or the holodeck. She deserved to let her hair down once in a while, Karen reasoned.

And letting her hair down wasn't the only thing she planned to drop in front of Roland. Unable to stop herself, she hit the communicator. "I know, I know Roland..." she began, her voice catching in her throat, as she took in the wreckage on the main viewer before her. Silvery-white shards and debris were floating around the alien ship. "Oh God, Roland?" she whispered, trying to hail *Greenaugh*. "Roland!" She cried.

She hurried scanned the area, turning to the ship. "Maybe he's onboard," she muttered, "Maybe he beamed aboard, and they're all safe." There were no life signs on the alien vessel." They were all gone. "Oh God," she closed her eyes and fell back into her chair.

What happened? She asked the silent stars. It's my fault this happened, the idea slithered into her brain and took hold, its icy tendrils bundling up her grief and guilt and keeping them at the forefront of her mind.

Something, someone had to have done this, someone I allowed to do this, she knew, because I wasn't smart or quick enough to find them. She ordered the ship to stop scanning for life signs. Instead, she began looking for warp trails. This time, the pathway screamed at her on the small screen. And this time the ship did not go slink back into the expanse. She could find the bastards who had destroyed *Greenaugh* and killed or kidnapped her friends, and she could set right what she had done.

Unbidden, her finger returned to her communicator. She knew she should contact *Erickson*, that she should tell the captain what had happened, what she had done, but Karen couldn't. Guilt, fear, selfishness, and shame all swirled within her. All she had ever wanted was to be a captain and now that dream was over. But if she somehow found a way to stop whoever did this, it could turn a court martial into a promotion.

She hated the calculation, Karen wished her intentions were more pure, but at the moment she didn't have time to beat herself up about it. Every second she spent hand wringing, the bastards were getting farther away.

She angled the *Oyekan* in the direction of the warp trail. Karen glanced back over the debris and mouthed a silent prayer for Roland and the lieutenants, hoping she would find them soon. And then, she activated warp engines.

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## **Alien Vessel**

"*Mr. Donar, do you see any signs of our people?*" The captain's voice was tinny, but still insistent. Tai swept his wrist lamp around the vacant bridge again. He held a rifle in the other hand.

"No sir," he said solemnly. He quickly reported the carnage he had found before exiting the bridge and into similar macabre scenes. The security officer behind him gulped loudly, prompting the Angosian to whirl on the stocky Axanar. The man pushed down whatever was threatening to come up as he quickly stood at attention. Donar held the man's gaze for a few seconds, satisfied he could contain himself, before moving on.

The Orion female accompanying them sniggered, prompting the Angosian to hitch his shoulders. The sniggering stopped in a nanosecond. Tai grunted, before activating his compin. "Commander Norrbom, have you found any traces of our officers in the engine room?"

"No sir," the operations officer crisply replied, her professionalism finally papered over her vehemence. "But we have found something very interesting. I think you're going to want to see this, the captain too."

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Observation Lounge**

Tai was a little disappointed that it wasn't Admiral Glover looking back at the assembled senior staff from the inset wall screen. The last Donar had heard Glover had been overseeing this sector. The man had become increasingly, and uncharacteristically withdrawn, since the death of his father. Before that, he had to contend with the divorce from Lt. Commander Mendes, who had also been a former colleague on the *Aegis*.

It had been a rough time for his former commander and though they hadn't been especially close, he at least wanted to see how the man was faring. If for no other reason than to report back to Juanita. Glover's isolation had been extremely hard on her.

But instead of Glover, they got the wizened, yet surly eminence of Cormac Sullivan, the Federation Security Advisor. When the captain had gotten the word that the former admiral would be addressing the senior officers, she had taken it with aplomb, even though they all knew it meant that *Erickson* had become entangled in something with far reaching and dangerous consequences for the Federation as a whole.

"I've read your report," the white-haired man said, shaking his head, and frowning, even adding more wrinkles to his countenance. He looked no less intimidating in a slate gray civilian suit. "This is most disturbing."

Captain Redfeather shook her head. "I can do nothing but agree with you sir. The idea that a species has found a way to harness the energy of polaric ion isotopes is both heady and frightening."

"I don't see anything to sing songs about here captain," Sullivan replied, wringing more silence out of the already quiet room. It seemed like the normal noises of the ship, the steady thrum of the engines even lessened before the man's voice. "What I see is a quick unraveling of the new, hard won peace. Stable polaric ion energy would make the test ban treaty null and void, it would start a round of disastrous testing among the great and small powers, and it would lead to an arms race that could result in a war that would make the one we just endured with the Dominion look like an intense game of hoverball!"

"Sir," Redfeather said quietly, but with resolve, "I think you are overstating the case here."

"Captain, with all due respect," he snapped, "I'm not only a desk jockey, I've faced off against the Cardassians and Tzenkethi and I saw too many friends bury



their children during this last war, we can't afford another conflict, and the discovery of this stabilizer, regulator, or whatever you call it is just the right kind of match for the tinderbox."

"What about the positive usage of polaric ion energy," she countered. "Properly harnessed, we could solve the energy needs of the Federation and countless other worlds."

"The operative word is 'properly,'" Sullivan riposted. "And you know as well as I do that the opposite is just as likely to happen. Could you imagine what this kind of power could do in the hands of the Romulans? Or even minor powers like the Alshain or the Son'a? They could end their war decisively, at the cost of genocide. We can't allow that to happen. *You* won't allow it to happen."

"What do you want us to do?" The captain said tightly, her lips drawn into an unsmiling line. Tension crackled among the other officers.

"First, I want you to scuttle that ship, there can be no trace of that kind of data left for our enemies to find," Sullivan began.

"But sir, what about those victims? Don't they deserve a proper burial? The preservation of some aspect of their culture? What if they are the last ones left?" Tai was surprised, but pleased, that the heretofore contemplative Dr. Narsan up this salient point. The captain couldn't help but smile. Sullivan's eyes flashed as they focused on the stout hearted Halanan.

But the fire dimmed briefly as the man sighed, "Listen, this might seem cruel, but there is nothing we can do for them now. We have to think about our own survival, and removing all trace of this regulator will make that a bit easier." His gaze shifted back to the captain. "Once the ship is scuttled, I want you to follow those warp trails to their destination, retrieve the regulator, destroy it and any other data about it you discover." *Erickson* had picked up two warp trails leading from the alien ship, one of which had belonged to the *Oyekan*. That strange twist had deepened the mystery surrounding the alien ship and its tragic fate even more.

"And sir, what if people have read and memorized that data, do you wish them destroyed too?" The captain challenged.

The security advisor sighed again. "You can place them into custody and bring them directly to Earth."

"So you can kill them?" The captain asked. Sullivan's mouth twitched with anger.

"How dare you accuse me of such a thing?" His face turned scarlet. "You are burning bridges I suggest you don't..."

"Right now I'm more concerned with the rule of law than my future career prospects," Redfeather said, with more steel than the chief medic. Donar was very impressed with what he was seeing from his fellow crewmen.

"They will receive a fair trial," he said through clenched teeth. "Just do your job and worry about due process later. The main priority is preventing that device and all data pertaining to it from falling into the wrong hands."

"Part of my job is worrying about due process," Redfeather pointedly replied. "Because what good is protecting a Federation that won't protect its citizens."

"The monsters who slaughtered those people aren't worth much protection," Sullivan said, and Tai was forced to agree with the man.

"If they are sapient beings, they will get a fair hearing, not for them, but for all of us," the captain rejoined, "We will find the regulator and get to the bottom of what happened here." She paused and looked at each other senior officers, her twinkle dimming just a pinch, "And we will destroy all traces of the regulator."

"Good," Sullivan huffed, "I'm glad you can see reason captain, as well as respect the chain of command. Good people can disagree about things, but at the end of the day, either you are about protecting the Federation or you aren't. I will be expecting regular updates," he said, before signing off.

"What a peach," Lt. French rolled his eyes. He turned to the man sitting beside him. "Great job Doc," he clapped the impassive physician on his shoulder, "Didn't know you had it in you." Tai hadn't either, but he didn't say so.

"Captain, are we really going to go through with it?" Narsan asked. "These orders are outside the chain of command."

"They are highly unusual yes," she replied, "but not as suspect as they seem. Sullivan never would've addressed us if Command wasn't on his side, and I think the reason he did so was to hammer home how important this is to the administration."

"Yeah, to Satie's reelection prospects," French snorted.

"Can the political talk," the captain snapped, and the helmsmen jolted forward in his seat, as if he had eased back on a live wire. "I don't tolerate that while on duty, and you know that Tim."

"Yes sir, sorry sir," the young man looked chagrined.

"Even though I didn't like Sullivan's tone, I can understand his trepidation," the captain added. "This could be a very catastrophic weapon, on par with the Genesis Device if left in the wrong hands. And we do have to prevent that at all cost."

"Even if that results in death and despair for those that could be saved by this discovery?" Lt. Jilicia, a smooth browed, sallow skinned Boslic, standing in for Ramlo as science officer, spoke up.

"Yes, even so," the captain gently replied. "Perhaps I'm a warhorse, just not as old, as Sullivan, I can't help but see the bad in this." She shook her head in disappointment. But Tai nodded his in agreement.

Jilicia shook her head, her innocence both beguiling and exasperating to the Angosian. "And that's what I had hoped the peace would mean the end to, of seeing the bad in every situation. What happened to the wonders of discovery, of believing in the innate capacity of sentient beings for good?" She asked, not just the captain and her fellow officers, it was as if she was also asking herself.

"We woke up," Norrbom said, with an almost sadistic relish. "You should too Lieutenant."

"Helen," the captain chided.

"I'm only being honest," Norrbom replied, "I'm not the only one in this room who doesn't suspect that whoever attacked that alien ship has also captured or killed our colleagues, our friends, and they've got to pay for that. I am intrigued by this regulator, no lie, but I'm more concerned about getting our friends back safe and sound, and if the regulator has to be destroyed to do so, or in the process of rescuing them, that's square with me."

The captain shook her head, "Not the way I would've put it Helen, but I agree." She clapped her hands and stood up. She eyed them all before saying, "Now let's get to work people."

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## **Somewhere...**

Squat, muscled reptilians, with scaly pink skin and obsidian claws slashed at her. Shashlik threw her arm up to block the toxic blows, the claws ripping through the arm of her EVA suit, but not deep enough to rend her flesh. The Kaylar had no intention of allowing them to do so.

With her free hand she swung her mace, satisfied with the crack of bone and the grunt of surrender. She gave into the rush of battle, the call of hunts from years gone by.

She punched, kicked, and swung her mace like a dervish, her adrenaline pumping faster than her fear, even her excitement.

Shashlik would not fall like the hapless victims littering the decks of their own vessel. She would make her clan proud.

She cut through the throng of brigands that had descended on her, crunching many underfoot. Another short, muscled man stood back, observing. She knew instinctively that he had to be the leader.

She faced him, nostrils flaring, her lungs on fire, her hot breath fogging the faceplate on her suit. Shashlik didn't know how much oxygen was left. She was prepared to fight until her last breath.

Like the others, the man wore a black breathing mask over his nose and mouth, attached to red goggles covering his eyes. "Impressive," his voice muffled behind the mask, and she saw the corner of his mouth inch upward in a smirk. "You shall make good sport."

Shashlik couldn't help but laugh. She glanced down at the broken men before her. "For whom?"

"Spirited too," the man chortled. "I like that."

"Well let's see how you like this," She stepped toward him. The man stood his ground, not even reaching for the disruptor strapped to his leg or raising the black baton in his hand. His serenity gave Shashlik pause.

As her blood lust began to ebb, she realized her mistake. She whipped around, growling low in her throat. A dark-skinned, dread locked woman held a struggling

Ramlo aloft, her large hands gripping his neck, and his smashed helmet was at the hulking woman's boots.

"I would caution you that your colleague only has a few seconds of oxygen at most," he replied, but Shashlik didn't need the prod. She saw that Ramlo's protestations were getting weaker and his skin was becoming a deathly verdant shade.

"Salvation is aboard our vessel," the man replied, "Provided you drop your weapon and come with us peacefully."

Shashlik glanced at Ramlo and the man mustered enough energy to shake his head no, which made up her mind for her. The mace dropped with a dull thud. "Now let him go," she demanded. The woman didn't budge. Shashlik took another step forward.

"Nadeen," the other man called out harshly, "Beam the Arkenite to *Burning Claw*." The woman grunted, flexing her shoulders, before dropping the man. He crumpled at the woman's feet. She pulled out a communicator from her belt and issued a guttural command. Shashlik reached out for Ram, but he had been whisked away before her fingers could reach him.

"Now, what to do with you," the man said before her.

She rounded on him, "I've got a few ideas," she answered, with balled fists. Before she could react, the man sprung, a fierce cry accentuating his leap, his baton clutched in his hand like a spear. Shashlik only took a step backward, a feeble attempt to gather herself, before he was on her, knocking her down with force.

She felt her leg twist awkwardly beneath, the bone giving way, agony exploding like a supernova through her body. But that wasn't the worst...the man brought the baton down with all his might, smashing her faceplate, and digging into her cheek with an electric kiss....

"Shashlik, Shash!" It wasn't just Ramlo's frantic voice, but his frenzied shaking that brought her back to wakefulness.

"What the hell are you doing?" She rasped, for a moment thinking they were back in her quarters. "Why are you in..." She blinked several times, her mind taking in the dark, dank room. "I remember." And then she winced, the pain coming back to her. She reached out for her throbbing leg, surprised it was still attached to her body.

"How are you feeling?" Ramlo croaked, concern etched deeply on his face. Despite a darkened blotch around his neck, the Arkenite looked none the worse for wear. Shashlik sent a silent prayer to deities she suddenly found useful again.

"I've been better," she said, trying to sit up, but Ram put his hands on her shoulders and forced her down. Even though she was still weak and half-conscious, she could've pushed back against the man, but she decided not to. She did need to gather her strength. "What...happened?" She asked, the dryness of her throat made her tongue feel like sandpaper.

"We were taken captive by pirates," Ramlo said, "Who plan to sell you to the Orions."

“Orions?” she nearly spat the word. She hated the slavers and thieves. She wished that Starfleet had at least bent the rules once and rid the galaxy of them a long time ago.

“Yes,” he nodded solemnly.

“And what about you?” She asked, her mood darkening. “What is to be your fate?”

He glanced around the cell and then dipped his head, lowering his voice, “They know about the polaric ion regulator,” he said, fear blanching his features, “They want me to help them find it.”

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## Caldera

They swooped down together, changing before they touched gracefully onto the rocky outcropping. Fear’s guise changed, becoming humanoid again, but this time with further definition, taking on the height and breadth of a tall, muscular human. The brown-skinned, bearded man was the first human they had ever encountered.

Hope donned the same mask. “Captain Terrell I presume,” Hope said, a jaunty smirk inching pushing up his hairy cheek. The salt-and-pepper haired doppelganger smiled in similar fashion. The only thing distinguishing them was that Hope wore a white, long-sleeved V-neck tunic and gray pants whereas Fear was dressed in a brown excursion jacket, of the style preferred during that time in Starfleet’s past. Hope found it ironic that both factions of their species could feel so differently about the same things.

Hope thought that the first contact between the Federation and their kind had been a wonderful thing. Others had tried to exploit their kind, their world, or their system and had paid the price for it. But the crew of Terrell’s *Starship Pacifica* in particular and Federation in general had only sought peace and coexistence with their kind. Though the Calderans were isolationists they hadn’t completely been hermits and they had used their shape shifting abilities to learn as much as they could about potential threats. Hope didn’t consider the Federation to be among that number. Yet Fear felt otherwise even after a century of peaceful relations with the Federation. The humans had respected their wishes to be left alone...and least until recently.

But Hope couldn’t blame them for being proactive to shepherd the course of the massive wave of immigrants that would soon arrive. And Hope had to admit that he preferred allowing the Federation to steer them away from their space as best as possible, if for no other reason to inflame the xenophobes to take to the stars to attack interlopers.

Fear rolled his broad shoulders, the beige jacket pulling tight across his pectoral muscles. He shifted his head, his eyes narrowing. “There,” he pointed. The device was pinched between two rocks on the lip of the outcropping. The device was

oblong and deep orange colored, with something ominously blinking within it, like spouts of flame.

"Do you have any idea what it might be?" Hope asked. He waved his hand in the direction of the device, mimicking a scanning device. His fingers twitched as they absorbed the data, but he couldn't make sense of it. Whatever was inside was extremely powerful.

"It's dangerous," Fear said, as if reading his mind. However Hope knew that Fear would never break such a taboo among their kind. Once one assumed a singular form, they were given privacy for their thoughts. "We must extricate it from our planet. Hurl it back into space."

"So that it can destroy some other hapless starfarer?" Hope asked, aghast.

"Better them than us," Fear shrugged, "Besides you know that there are few innocent creatures who dare to traverse our space. Mainly those seeking someplace to hide." Hope shook his head in disgust, ashamed that a man wearing his face and speaking with the voice that he had chosen would say such awful things. "If they set this weapon off it might be the best thing for us."

"How so?" Hope asked, perplexed. Fear's form changed again, becoming shorter, yet thinner, decidedly more curvaceous, his skin lightning in coloration. Carefully coiffed jet black hair didn't hide Fear's now tapered ears. Hope's comrade had taken on the guise of Terrell's first officer, a woman of the Vulcan species. She wore a blue-gray tunic, with a high, dark blue collar. Fear spoke with a dry, inflectionless voice.

"If the weapon is activated it could be a decisive deterrent to anyone, including the droves that might pour through the subspace corridor or flexure."

Hope stepped back. "Are you serious? How many humanoid lives do you think our isolation is worth?"

"Our continued existence is worth everything," Fear said, countenance completely devoid of emotion.

"This is too extreme, even for you," Hope said, "We don't know what the purpose of this device is. We must take it back to the others and discuss this as a group."

Fear shook his head, "We are not taking this weapon back to the group. That's exactly what they might want us to do."

"They? To whom are you referring?" Hope said, looking around, his tone half-joking, half-flustered.

"I see that you and your side have never been able to make the hard decisions," Fear glowered at him, pointing a finger that took on a dagger tip. Though her voice was flat, her skin flushed a shade of green. Unbeknownst to the *Pacifica* crew the Calderans had studied them down to the molecular level and could turn themselves into perfect replicas of them. "If your faction had its way we would have been under the thumb of the humans a century ago."

"You know that is a falsehood," Hope rejoined, though with no rancor. He knew that Fear could occasionally be the melodramatic sort.

"If you will not save our kind, I will!" He said, shifting again so quickly that the silvery flying creature had taken to the air before Hope could blink. Legs, with sharp talons formed as Fear took hold of the device, yanking it free from the outcropping.

"What are you doing? Get back here!" Hope shouted, looking up as Fear pushed himself higher. "Where are you going?" He screamed again, as wings sprouted from his back. He took flight, but it was too late. Hope had changed again, melting over the device, his form taking on the blocky design of one of *Pacifica's* shuttles.

Fear immediately activated his facsimile impulse engines and punctured the atmosphere. Hope didn't even try to catch him. Instead he rode the currents back to the others. They had much to discuss.

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## ***USS Erickson***

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

"Enter," Captain Redfeather looked up from her data padd, unable to hide her surprised expression. "Helen?"

"Permission to enter captain?" The woman asked, as prim as her formal stance. Wyoma nodded.

"Of course," she said, putting the padd down and gesturing toward either of the two chairs facing her desk. "Have a seat."

"Thank you," the blond woman replied, sitting on the edge of her chair, hands in her lap, the picture of nervous comportment.

Redfeather leaned back in her chair, to hopefully make the woman feel more at ease. "Something on your mind Helen?"

The woman rang her hands, a grimaced expression on her face. Indecision did not suit her. Wyoma thought of something encouraging to say, to hopefully help her friend out, "A'nurd thought you did a great job down in Engineering."

"Yeah, well you know it's my first love," she smiled nervously.

"Engineering your first love? I thought that was..." the captain paused, snapping her fingers in an effort to jostle her memory, "a guy named Erik from the Academy."

"Rydell," Norrbom cracked, "Let's not go there."

"Whatever happened to him?" The captain asked, her curiosity piqued.

"Who knows," Helen said, "I once heard a saying about sinking the boat once you get to the other side, you know, about learning to let things go. Well, when I was finally able to sink my boat, I just wish Erik had been inside it."

"Ouch," the captain winced, but Helen chuckled, her anxiety receding.

"Captain, I-I've been a real jackass lately," she admitted. The captain wanted to nod in agreement, but kept an impassive expression. "And-and I just wanted to

apologize. I've just been so bitter, so angry about things, that sometimes I think the galaxy is out to get me. And I was wondering what side you were on when this thing with Donar went down."

A gasp escaped the captain's lips before she could reel it back. "Oh my God Helen, did you really think that? About me?"

Norrbom looked miserable, but she affirmed the question with a nod. "It's not all the time, but I do have my dark moments. And lately the darkness has been edging out the light. But when I saw you stand up to Sullivan today, I knew how wrong I had been about you. You're still the same friend I've known, person I've respected."

Wyoma smiled, moisture forming in the far corners of her eyes. She wanted to reach out to Helen and squeeze her hands, but she wasn't sure if it was enough trust had been reestablished for such a gesture. "Thank you Helen. That is a lovely thing to say."

"I know now that you aren't just going to roll over for the higher ups, that you still have our backs."

The captain nodded, more than a little stung that Norrbom could ever think otherwise, but with her being so close to having Helen back, Wyoma didn't want her bruised ego stopping their rapprochement. "I know you would never knowingly jeopardize this crew to further your career," Helen added, "something I knew all along, yet things have gotten a little hazy as of late."

"You know I am here if you ever need to talk, Dendron too, all of us really," the captain offered.

"Oh, I've probably peeled back Dendron's antennae from time to time after getting worked up," Norrbom smiled. "And he's done the best he could with me, but it takes time you know?"

"Yeah," the captain said, remembering her own conversation with the counselor. And he had said something to the same effect. "So, are you okay with Mr. Donar as the first officer now?"

In less than a nanosecond, Helen's open expression closed. Her eyes hardened and her lips formed a thin line. "No," she shook her head, "He's dangerous. I can't fault you for your decision, I know it wasn't done for ulterior reasons, but that doesn't mean I have to agree with it."

The captain frowned, and then sighed, "I can't control how you feel, but I do think you need to accord Mr. Donar the proper respect."

"I," she paused, grinding her jaw, "I can do that. So long as he does the same for me."

"Has he not?" The captain didn't mean to challenge, but she had heard nothing of untoward behavior coming from the Angosian.

"No, not to this point, though I'm not so sure after our elevator incident," Helen's eyes gleamed with a hint of her old naughtiness. "He asked me my opinion and I gave it to him, both barrels."



The captain smacked her head, "Oh boy, and he's still standing?"  
"I guess so," Norrbom remarked, not completely happy about that.  
"Then Donar really must be a super soldier," Redfeather remarked.

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## ***USS Erickson*** **Sickbay**

Commander Donar strode into the medical center. On the bed, the younger, lanky Rhaandarite woman sat up straighter, prompting a disapproving low growl from the Chief Medical Officer, who was carefully waving a bone regenerator over her arm. Dr. Narsan looked at Tai with a hooded expression. "Commander," he said, his voice clipped, "How may I help you?" The tall, older, dark skinned man wore his blue medical coat like an elegant cloak. His low cut, graying hair revealed his large ears, which were both split at two points at the top. His ears were the only thing that distinguished him from a human.

"I was checking on the lieutenant, is all," Donar said. He had taken a quick inventory of the small medical center and been relieved to find that the doctor was only treating one patient. He sadly expected that most of the beds would be filled up before this trek was over.

The Halanan nodded his head in the woman's direction, "Lt. Zaylen will be fine, though it will take several hours until her bone completely heals. Just what was going on in those holodeck simulations?" His tone was accusatory.

Tai took it in stride. Knowing what little he did of the man's history, he could only suspect that the medic would think the worst of him. "Though our security team is very capable they are not hardened vets."

Now it was Zaylen's turn to growl. The fair hued Rhaanderite shook her elongated head animatedly, her shoulder length black hair rippling like a water fall. "Doctor, the simulation was my idea." Zaylen was the stand-in until Shashlik returned. "I wanted our security team to get a sense of the very real danger we will be facing in only a few hours."

She paused to look at Donar with golden eyes and gave him a curt nod, "The commander was just there to observe and provide advice."

"And there was very little advice that I needed to provide," Donar nodded with satisfaction. "Both you and Lt. Shashlik are to be commended."

"Well, it seems you went a little overboard," Narsan cut through the mutual praise society, "And maybe that wouldn't have been the case if the commander wasn't there."

"Doctor," Zaylen began. Tai held up a hand.

"It is alright," he replied, "I am sorry that you got hurt."

"It's nothing," the Rhaandarite said, gingerly flexing her arm, and wincing at the attempt. "I'll be alright in time for the mission."

"I would advise that you sit this one out Lieutenant," Narsan said, in a tone that would not brook argument.

Zaylen brooked it anyway. "I'm sorry Doctor, but I'm not going to send a team after Shashlik and Ramlo without me."

"You will if I order you to due to medical reasons," Narsan shot back, "Which I am doing as if this instant."

"Doctor," Donar interceded. "You've done a fine job stitching up her bone. You said it would be completely healed in a few hours."

"Unlike you Mr. Donar, the rest of us are more fragile," the Halanan glowered at him. "The rest of us are...mortal," a pained expression battered his face. Guilt and anger coiled and writhed in Tai's gut as he memories of Kespyrtt III gripped him.

By the time he came back to his senses, an oblivious Narsan was still talking, "And if Lt. Zaylen is put into a hostile situation, especially one that requires hand-to-hand combat, her arm could provide to be a fatal liability."

"But doctor," Zaylen jumped in.

"No Lieutenant," Donar said, "He's right." Zaylen sat back, stunned at the first officer's reversal.

"But sir," she tried again.

"Dr. Narsan's decision is in his purview and I back him on it," he said, and the still simmering Halanan looked confused. It was obvious that he hadn't expected Donar to agree with him. "I'm sure that the captain won't object if I lead the away team."

The Angosian looked at the doctor, daring him to respond. But instead of defiance, the medic looked crestfallen. Clearly he was thinking of another high stakes mission that Donar had been a part of him, one that had ended in personal tragedy. And Tai felt another kind of guilt, one from being vengeful, of being a bully.

Despite whatever meanness had inspired his words, Donar did mean to stick by them. As much as he respected Zaylen's capabilities, this mission would require someone with his experience. Even the bad experiences. But this time he didn't plan on adding to that tragic list.

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### ***The Burning Claw*** **Holding Cell**

The least imposing reptilian stepped forward, his full, striated lips nearly kissing the energy field confining the Starfleet officers. Though he was tall, his limbs were spindly. He had a long, thick jawed face, with rough gray skin and four bony spikes protruding from his face, two right above eye ridges and two longer ones jutting out from the part of his cheekbones right beneath his eyes. He was dressed in a green tunic, with a yellow V-shaped harness-belt bisecting his chest to assumedly hold up his black jodphurs.

Though the man looked completely different from the squat, pink-hued captain and the husky guards accompanying him, she knew them all to belong to the Venturi species. She had served with a gray-skinned Venturi, one of the few left in the Fleet, early in her career. He hadn't been too talkative but he had at least told her that the Venturi species was comprised of two races.

The Venturi's pink tongue darted out, tasting the air, as if seeking out their fear. It took all of Shashlik's restraint, and a steadying hand from Ramlo, to keep her from rushing the forcefield. The humid air thickened with hostile intent, mostly radiating from her.

The Kaylar was at least glad that the pirates had removed their EVA suits because they would've boiled in them assuredly in the sweltering temperatures. Both officers had peeled out of their gray and black jackets, down to their short-sleeve undershirts. But it had been little help, and now the fires of her rage had been stoked.

Shashlik wanted to rip the reptilian's head off and she didn't care about the two barrel chested guards at his sides, their black neural truncheons at the ready. The master of this wretched vessel had wielded one against her. She now remembered what the baton was from the war. The truncheons had been favorite melee weapons for the Breen. And she had remembered reading about how they emitted painful electric shocks, sometimes with enough force to cause concussions or induce comas. Brain damage in victims was not uncommon, and now that she had experienced the agony first hand she could see why.

She wanted to tear through them too, and then get to the captain, and finally the giantess that had nearly murdered Ram. "Don't do it, Shash," the Arkenite hissed, with uncharacteristic trepidation and heart rending concern. His hand dropped from her shoulder to trace down the intricate tattoos running down her left arm.

A new one had been added for each year she had survived after coming of age. She refused to believe that the limb would receive another decoration. He wrapped his hand around hers and gave it a reassuring squeeze. If she wasn't in such a blood red haze she would've thrown the man to the dirty floor and engaged in frenzied lovemaking for his concern. Instead, she did the near impossible and took a step back.

Shashlik knew that running headlong at their captors was suicide and a more cunning approach was necessary. Her anger was robbing her of thinking that way, and she trusted Ram enough to follow his lead.

"What do you want?" Ramlo stepped forward, not so subtly in front of the security officer. The Venturi took a step back and nodded respectfully.

"I am First Mate Gedrik," he said, adding with an ironic smile, "welcome to *The Burning Claw*."

"I think you should stick to the looting and pillaging," Shashlik couldn't help herself, "comedy is not your thing."

Gedrik shrugged, nonplussed. "The crew doesn't complain."

"What do you want with us?" Ramlo asked, cutting off Shashlik before she could get another verbal jab in.

"I wish to discuss my findings...and yours," he said, his eyes bright with excitement.

"I will not divulge such information to you," the Arkenite's voice was matter-of-fact. Shashlik flexed her arms, preparing for a violent reaction.

But the gray Venturi merely waved away Ram's defiance. "There's no need, I am quite adept at hacking into Starfleet computer systems," he replied. "Your tricorder has already provided a wealth of information about polaric ion energy, far more than what we had in our shipboard computer."

The Arkenite twitched slightly, a dead giveaway to Shashlik that the scientist was deeply troubled. "What do you plan to do with that information?" She was proud there wasn't an ounce of concern in his voice as he asked the question.

"That's the part that might surprise you," the reptilian's voice was conversational, his manner open, as if he wasn't talking to a prisoner, but a colleague. "We are pirates, true, but we are also patriots," the man said, "and I think this polaric ion regulator holds the key to reigniting Alpha Venturi Major!"

Ramlo's head swiveled around quickly, his irisless green eyes blinking rapidly. "Did I hear you correctly?" He said, looking at Shash, but the question was clearly directed at the Venturi. Shock and confusion were etched over his face.

"Yes," the other man said. "And I need your help. Will you assist me...Lt. Ramlo?"

"This is a trick," Shashlik snapped, "A lie!"

"I assure you it is no such thing," Gedrik said, briefly recounting his failed attempts to rescue the star and the Venturi homeworld. "I've been researching and hoping...often against hope that one day I might find a way to save my people and this device has come to us...like a divine gift."

"One bought with the murder of an entire ship of people!" The Kaylar gently moved the still stunned Ramlo to the side. She faced the Venturi. The lack of deceit in his manner made her angrier. She hated liars, especially good ones.

"I wish I could say that I am sorry," he briefly lowered his head, "but it is too late for such platitudes. I have done things I am not proud of, I've dishonored myself, my wife, many times over as part of this crew...even before it, and I would gladly do it all again to be so close to this discovery."

"You're a monster!" Shashlik clenched her hands, wanting to place them around the reptilian's scrawny neck. The energy field didn't look like that much of an insurmountable barrier and with him being so close she just might get to scratch him before the feedback knocked her to floor or worse.

"I am worse than a monster," the first mate nodded, his tone sober. "But none of that matters now. I will gladly surrender if you help me."

Shashlik snorted, eyeing the two guards, measuring the surprised looks on their faces. "I'm guessing you don't speak for the rest of the crew?"

Gedrik shook his head, "No, I don't." He looked at her squarely. "I can only answer for my own crimes."

"No deal," the Kaylar said, pointedly turning her back on him, and folding her arms.

"I don't think you are in any position to negotiate," Gedrik said sharply, "You in fact are no value to me at all. It is Lt. Ramlo's intellect that will be of value here."

"Ramlo will never help murdering scum like you!" Shashlik roared, whipping back around.

"Yes he will," Gedrik's confidence infuriated her more, "because he is a decent being. I am sure he is thinking of all the probabilities of what I am proposing because he wants to save millions of people too. And because he can first start with saving one...you." He produced a small rectangular device from the pocket of his pants. He pressed a button.

"What do you..." Shashlik asked before an agony she could never imagine exploded from her chest and spread throughout her body. She hit the floor, her body cracking against the unforgiving metal, yet she was still so gripped in pain that she had yet to feel the effects of the fall. Every nerve ending was on fire, she tried her best not to bite through her tongue as her convulsions overtook her.

Somewhere far away she heard Ramlo shouting and then felt a shadow over her, and the Arkenite had her in his sure grasp, but the pain was too strong and she fought him as she attempted to fight it, bucking and writhing, the room filling with the stink of her vacating bowels.

As suddenly as it started, the horror was over, and she was left to curl in her own filth and drool. Though the fire had stopped, the burning receding slowly, back into her bone and tissue. Ramlo tried to comfort her, but with what little force she could muster she pushed him away. She had never been so powerless or ashamed. The only thing that kept her from the edge was thoughts of the blackest revenge. She would hold on till then, and then she would joyfully go over the precipice.

Above her, she heard the Venturi, a weathered strain in his voice, "The subdermal agonizers were something we picked up from a rather sketchy Cardassian. Our medic surgically implanted four into your friend. Normally we only use one per prisoner, but after her performance on the alien vessel, I thought more would keep her docile enough until we reached the Orions."

"And what about me? I've been in this cell the whole time." Ramlo asked, his voice fraught with anger, disgust, and the customary curiosity. She opened her eyes, the light stabbing into them, but she fought through the new pain and the tears. The Arkenite stood tall, resolute, and in front of her, to defend her and shield her from the prying, leering eyes of their captors as best he could.

"There was no need to implant you," Gedrik replied, "We knew that you would do as we asked if you realized how great the threat to your friend was. Was I wrong in assuming that?"

"No," Ramlo said hurriedly, "I will help you...but on one condition."

“What is it with you Starfleet types?” The first mate was exasperated. “Time is wasting Lt. Ramlo.”

“Lt. Shashlik needs medical attention,” he said, “Get that for her and I will help you.” Gedrik’s words were garbled, but the forcefield shimmered off and the two thickset guards trudged into the cell. They grabbed her arms and hoisted her up, hissing with displeasure at her stench. The woman wanted to fight them off but her limbs felt like rubber.

“Careful,” Ramlo demanded and Gedrik echoed.

Shashlik grinned savagely. She could at least take heart that her bodily waste had been so discomfiting to the guards. The Kaylar promised that it was only going to get worse for all of the pirates from this moment forward.

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### ***The Burning Claw*** **Combat Room**

The air was thick with the smell of blood and sweat. Deoch gripped the hatchet tightly, a hiss building rising from his chest to his throat. He held it there, as he did his anticipation. The small ax was not his preferred weapon. His dagger lay broken on the floor. And the captain had just yanked the ax from the arsenal hanging along the combat’s room walls just fast enough to block a decapitating blow. The fair skinned Nuvian circled him, clutching the circular three-bladed weapon with her good arm. The other hung loosely at her side, blood still flowing from it. Mavaar had long since given up trying to favor it. Both of Deoch’s arms were sliced up nicely too, a casualty of his conceit to show them off at all times. The medic would have his work cut out for him after this session.

The woman’s eyes were concealed beneath her heavily ridged brow. She blew unruly golden ringlets from her eyes. Her once sensuous lips had become a slash across her face, showing her bared teeth. Her skintight black leotard was appreciative of her sinuous, lethal form.

Despite the work out her breathing was steady and despite her injuries, Mavaar had not lost her composure. Deoch wished the same could be said of him.

He had nearly succumbed to blood lust several times during their bout, and his rage had made him sloppy, and became a second ally to Mavaar as she had carved into like a roast. He was amazed that she wielded the three-bladed kligat, a Capellan weapon, even better than Nadeen, a Capella IV native. But the massive woman preferred energy weapons or her own brute strength from what he could tell, and neither had failed her yet.

His first mate often frowned upon personal combat, but Deoch knew that his crew needed such outlets. Even if he could afford holosuites he wouldn’t want to install them. No photonic light displays could ever substitute for the smell of blood or the clash of steel.

Deoch fainted, hoping to draw the woman off balance, so that he could go in for the finishing stroke. Once she was disarmed, she would be his for the taking, in more ways than one. . But once again, Mavaar was a step ahead. "You can't be serious about indulging Gedrik," she said, bringing Deoch out of his battle mood.

"We can have this discussion later," he groaned. He had hoped his offer of combat would cool her thrusters about it, but he had guessed wrong.

"This could be, no it is, the score of a lifetime," Maavar pressed, while still keeping her guard up. She knew him too well, he surmised. Perhaps it was time to sell her, though he knew that was merely a pipe dream, and the worst part of it was that she knew it too.

"How much longer do you think you can keep this ship running or this crew docile? You'll never make as much coin from slaves or acquired merchandise that you can with this regulator device!"

"Yeah," he shrugged, "but we would never catch so much heat for it either. If we went your route, it would be best to unload it on the Orions and let them deal with the headaches. I mean, this is something beyond us, and I have no desire to be pursued by Starfleet, not to mention the Romulans, Klingons, Tholians, Gorn, or whomever. All the big disruptors would want this thing."

"You've slipped out of many a noose since I've been here," Mavaar rejoined.

"Because I've been smart," he shot back. "I know my place in the food chain," he added.

"Can you say the same for Gedrik?" The woman asked, drawing another groan from him. This was a sore spot for him, and she knew it. Though the Nuvian played the perfect courtesan in public, she had a quite formidable intellect, and once Deoch had learned to accept the value of that, *The Burning Claw* had become a far more profitable venture. The fake hail from the *Enterprise*, clipped together from Federation News Service segments of its Captain Picard that had snared quite a few gullible travelers had been just one of her ideas. "Even if, and it's a big if, his idiotic plan works, who do you think will get the credit for saving your homeworld? *You?*" She laughed, "Or him?"

He lunged at her, and she slid easily out of the way, flattening the circular blade to bring down on the base of his neck. Despite her skill, her slender frame could only bring enough force to stun him. If Nadeen had been on the other end of that blow, Deoch's last image would probably be of his headless neck.

As it were, Mavaar's strike knocked him to the ground, black worms wriggled across his vision, and the limbs that bore the brunt of his fall began to slowly capitulate. "Yield," Mavaar's whisper slithered into his ear, and he felt the woman straddling his back.

He grinned, using his remaining strength to throw her off. It was perhaps the surprise that caught her as much as his strength, but the woman fell the deck beside him seconds before Deoch's body gave out. Mavaar provided an unpleasant pillow, but he supposed it was better than the metal plating.

She gasped, the air ripped from her, and Deoch covered her, his hands locking on to her wrists and pinning her to the ground. "No, do you yield?"

He eased up only to allow her to catch her breath. Mavaar managed a smile. "Yield," the Venturi commanded, the time for games at an end. He was the sole master of this vessel and he would make sure that no one forgot that, even favorites like Mavaar. With renewed strength, he pressed her wrists together, satisfied when he felt the bones scraping together in each. Quickly the Nuvian's smile morphed into a grimace and then a wail.

"I yield," she said, defiance etched on her face.

"That is more like it," he laughed before planting a large kiss on her lips. Her tongue slipped through his teeth and found his, pulling him closer to her like a tractor beam. Their hands roved each other, tearing what they couldn't unfasten or unzip.

Their lovemaking was as furious and complete as a fast moving storm, made the more intense by their shared injuries. After it was done, they lie in a pile of tangled limbs, their blood commingling beneath them.

"You know that I am right," Mavaar ventured, her words pulling Deoch back from the cliff of dreams. "Your people will never accord you the honors that they will give Gedrik if you hand over the regulator to them. You are not horned."

Deoch hissed, "Don't you think I know that woman!" The gray skinned, "Horned" Venturi had been the elite of their civilization, until the ecological disaster had made all Venturi equally endangered. However, old prejudices lingered and it was just one of many reasons that Deoch had left homeworld as soon as he could. Though many of the other pink "Unadorned" wished to accept a way of life that kept them second class even among a doomed, and eclipsed people, Deoch had sought the freedom of the stars.

But Gedrik's plea had had an unintended effect on him, and since the man's revelations, he had been thinking about homeworld and the kin he had left behind there more and more. "But this is a chance to save my homeworld! If Gedrik is right, and he is a science brain, this could make us heroes on a galactic scale. All the warrants against us would be dropped, we could become celebrities, think of the riches in that?" He couldn't help gushing, but the idea of making money so easily excited him.

Mavaar frowned, clearly skeptical. "You're talking about maybes. I'm talking about real power."

"And you know the problem with real power?" Deoch asked, his voice wearied with experience.

"What's the problem?" The Nuvian was as defiant as ever.

"People like to take it from you," he answered, not cowed at all, "and in this case, people with fleets of starships at their disposal."

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***USS Erickson***



## Birdland Lounge

Lt. French was already sitting in the opposite empty seat before he asked, "Care if I join you?"

Lt. Jilicia shrugged slightly, barely acknowledging him. When she wasn't looking out of the window she was staring into her half-filled mug of Takarian mead. The dark haired human flight controller wrinkled his nose at the deep amber beverage. "How can you drink that stuff?" He asked, drawing her attention away from the mead. The helmsman was still in his gray-black uniform, and had probably just gotten off duty. He must have come to Birdland for a drink or two before nodding off, but then again, with Tim French, who knew?

It was quite possibly that he had homed in on her due to the kaleidoscopic blouse and matching breeches she wore. Neither was revealing, but both were snug in the right places.

French held up his own glass. The drink was purple, with dark chunks floating within it. The Boslic science officer looked askance. She had never seen that concoction before, and her curiosity was piqued. "What is that?" She asked.

"Oh, this?" He waved it under her nose and she got a full whiff of heavy spice and nearly gagged. "Phalkerian spice punch," he proudly replied. "Phalow down in Engineering turned me on to it," the young man smiled, and Jilicia had to admit that he did have a nice smile, along with a pleasant face and piercing blue eyes. Of course if only his maturity matched his physical attractiveness, alas...

"Hey, what's up with the funeral music?" He remarked, looking around for a waiter. Duke Ellington's mournful piano melded with the piquant saxophone of John Coltrane to combine into a sad, reflective tune that matched the pall growing over the ship.

She hadn't known much about Earth music before attending the Academy, and hadn't had much interest in it since her introduction, however, there was something aching and yearning about this duo's "Sentimental Thoughts" that spoke to her. She couldn't help thinking about their missing crewmen nor the ship that they had been ordered to scuttle, the final indignity for those tragic travelers from beyond the stars.

"Hey," French said, finally getting the attention of one of the waiters, "a little something more up-tempo please?" The Dopterian attendant nodded, hurrying back to the bar. The jaunty sounds of Louis Armstrong erased the darkness as if someone had flipped on a light switch. Jilicia had to admit that the mood brightened almost instantly and the conversations around the lounge became less muted.

She guessed she would have to be morose elsewhere. The science officer pushed back from the table. "Where you going Jil?" French asked, a perplexed look on his face. "I thought we were having a conversation?"

"Is that what you thought?" She asked, guiltily enjoying being a little mean. She needed a punching bag right now. "I guess you thought wrong."

"Hey," he said, a hurt look wreathing his face, "That was uncalled for." Jilicia could've come back with a dig about him intruding into her private time, but she relented. It was not fair for her to take out her frustrations on the helmsmen.

"I'm sorry," she said, hovering over her chair.

"I won't accept it, until you sit back down," he said, with a half-smile. She rolled her eyes and retook her seat. Tim looked around again, finding another waiter, a human this time. "My good man, could you please refill the lady's drink?" The attendant rushed to comply. After he returned, both officers thanked him. Jilicia took a sip of the fresh drink and savored the sweet taste.

"Now this is more like it," French chuckled, amazed at his handiwork. A few crewmen had cleared out tables in the middle of the room and turned it into an impromptu dance floor. Lt. Commander Kalnath was whipping Ensign Haile around like an Andorian ushaan-tor. Jilicia was surprised but the woman's squeals seemed to be from pleasure, not mortal terror.

Sensing her concern, Tim filled her in. "It's an Old Earth dance, called the "Lindy Hop"." He held out a hand. "Care to try?"

"I would not," she said, not meaning to sound so cold, but the human seemed not to take offense. He had become entranced again by the skill and prowess of both Kalnath and Haile. A small circle had formed around them, clapping and cheering them on. "Well, at least you can join me in the circle?" He asked, "I don't want to miss out."

"Sure," she relented, with a small sigh. The young man was as worrisome as Gasparian gnats.

She allowed the eager French to lead her into the gathering. Some crewmen clapped, others hollered, and still more danced along with the dazzling couple. The synergy between them was perfect, as was their joy in keeping alive an ancient cultural expression.

Realizing that she was still holding Tim's hand, she pulled away from him and backed out of the circle. Suddenly feeling stultified, Jilicia sought the fresh air of the corridor. "Hey," the ensign called, catching up to her at the door. Once outside, the Boslic forced herself to turn around, to face him.

"I just can't do this," she said.

"What's wrong?" The flight controller was genuinely hurt. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," she smiled sympathetically, "It's not you at all, it's just, I can't...I can't celebrate culture after we just extinguished one."

"Oh," for once, French had nothing to say. His expression became drawn, sober. "We had to do that," he offered.

"I know, we were following orders," she said, with surprising bitterness. "How many monsters have used such phrasing to justify their actions?"

Tim stepped back, stung, and Jilicia quickly covered the distance between them. She clutched his forearm. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean you, I just meant...I don't know, it was just so callous, so wrong."

"Listen, I understand," he replied. "But we did have our orders and I think it ultimately was for the good, we couldn't allow any knowledge of that regulator to fall into the wrong hands. The war might be over, but we still have a lot of enemies out there, and some are emboldened because they think we are weak. Like the Talarians for example," he pointed out, "even the Alshain are rattling their sabers or baying at the moon or whatever they do."

"I know," she quietly agreed. The Talarian Incursion, while thankfully short, had been brutal and had briefly awakened fears of another war. She shuddered at the thought of how much more devastating the incursion would've been if the Talarians had had polaric ion weapons at their disposal. Perhaps there was something to Advisor Sullivan's bellicose response after all.

"And those aren't even the big guys," he added, "I mean, it seems like things have reverted with the Romulans, which unfortunately dried up our supply of Romulan ale."

Jilicia couldn't help but laugh. French was trying really hard to lighten her mood and she appreciated it. "What's your deal with alcoholic beverages? Do you need to talk to Counselor Dendron?"

"Hey, who do you think had the best Romulan ale on the ship? Much better than Birdland," French joined in the laughter.

After catching her breath, Jilicia's hand shifted from the human's arm to his shoulder. "Thank you, I really needed that." She loudly exhaled. "I just, I'm just afraid of what we're becoming sometimes."

"That's a good thing," French said.

"How so?"

"If you weren't worried about that, then that would be the problem," he smiled jauntily, "Are you sure you don't want to come back in?" He asked chucking a thumb at the lounge's door.

The Boslic weighed her options. Beyond the door she heard the din of the crowd. It was a lot of noise, and she really wasn't up for that. "I don't know," she said. She did want to be alone, but she also knew that she had spent too many nights alone lately, and all of that solitude hadn't shed any more wisdom on the problems bedeviling her. Perhaps a different approach was in order...

The human's shoulders slumped, "Hey listen, we're all feeling anxious you know, and we're all trying to find some way to relieve it, to get outside of ourselves for a few hours, or minutes at least, until we find the regulator." His stare pinned her. "It might be the last time we get to do so," he said glumly, and something in his gloom spoke to her and pulled her toward him. The bravado was just the surface, Jilicia realized. There was more to Tim French than she had thought.

The scientist carefully wrapped her hand around his. "I've changed my mind," she said, "I will accompany you back into Birdland."

French did a bad job hiding his surprise, "Are you serious?"

"When have you known me not to be?" She asked, with a glimmer of a smile.

"Good point," the helmsman replied, squeezing her hand as he led her back into the raucous lounge. "Besides, my mother often told me never to look a gift horse in the mouth."

"Are you calling me equine Mr. French?" Though she didn't do it often, Jilicia knew how to needle and she did like doing it.

"Oh, umm, no, of course not," Tim stammered, tugging at his red turtleneck collar. She enjoyed watching him squirm. "It's just a turn of phrase, Earth vernacular and all that."

"I thought you were raised on Mars?" She stuck it to him again.

"Oh my, is it warm in here, or is it just me?" He squeaked, making a show of looking around. "I'm thirsty, you see a waiter anywhere around?"

She laughed, letting him off the hook. Jilicia tugged on his hand, "Come along Lieutenant, we have a circle to rejoin."

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## **Beyond Caldera**

The faux shuttle sped through space. Fear knew that compatriots had restrained Hope and the other misguided by now. They had surely made them see reason and for that Fear was glad. The device, the dagger that had been plunged into the heart of his world, was now secure within its folds.

Now all Fear had to do was find the appropriate area to drop it off. Preferably far enough away from Caldera so that the world would not suffer any effects if the infernal contraption exploded. But that wasn't enough for Fear. The Calderan also wanted to send a message, to warn organics or others away from Caldera.

Fear knew it needed to do more than simply jettison the device; it had kept its world pure from offworld contamination. Fear's mind raced with possibilities, and eventually settled on one. It changed direction, toward the Calderan Corridor. If Fear set this device off inside the corridor it might collapse it, shutting off the easiest way for the refugee horde while also ending the Federation and other's interest in Calderan space.

Inside the shuttle a piece of him pinched off, taking on humanoid form again. The olive skinned woman looked similar to the *Pacifica's* first officer, with tapered ears and severely upswept eyebrows, however her forehead bore ominous ridges. The woman knelt down beside the device and began searching for an access panel.

To gain speed, he changed form, becoming more streamlined and sleeker, with two warp nacelles jutting from its sides, its dull green finish contrasted by a fiery predatory avian on its belly. Though the *Pacifica* had reached out to the Calderans first, contact hadn't initially been their goal. It had been to thwart the Romulans who

had been intruding into Calderan space, and incurring the wrath of the Great Tide. Fear had led one of the earliest assaults on a ship such as the one he had morphed into. Even though Fear didn't trust the Romulans anymore than the humans it did admire their suspicious mindset. And it was in honor of that first blood that he would sever all ties between the Calderans and the rest of the galaxy.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Oyekan***

Ensign Kittles's eyelids fluttered and she awoke with a strangled curse. She pounded her console, mad at herself for falling asleep. She did her best to rub the grains from her eyes, a part of her secretly relieved that her body had found a way around the nightmares that had kept her awake.

For the longest time, every time she had closed her eyes, Roland's face had emerged from the depths of her thoughts, his lifeless gaze damning her for eternity. With her tongue, she dabbed her dry inner walls of her mouth. It was drier than a desert, and made worse by the feverish perspiration coating her skin. Karen couldn't remember the last time she had eaten or drank. She just hadn't been up to it.

"I can eat after the job is done," she muttered, blinking rapidly to get her eyesight into focus. Kittles stifled a yawn as she looked over the data from her scanners. She held back another desire to attack her terminal.

"Nothing," she groused, "It's like they've completely vanished." So far her hunt for her missing colleagues and Roland's murderers had yielded nothing. "What am I going to do?" She asked aloud, afraid that someone would finally answer her. And they would tell her the likely truth, that the ship had already been lost to the lethal vagaries of the expanse.

It was the last thing she wanted to her, so she just couldn't accept it. The ensign would strive on. If she couldn't find them soon she would have no choice but to contact *Erickson* and admit what she had done, of how her ambition had allowed her friends and fellow crewmen to be assaulted by marauders.

"It's not just your fault," another voice, one more defensive, issued from her lips. "One more shuttle, with minimal firepower, would've done little against a warship or pirate ship."

She shook her head, letting that argument go even as part of her wanted to desperately cling to it, to use it to beat back the baying guilt, nipping at her mind, gnawing her soul.

"No," she closed her eyes, Roland still there, still damning, "I should've been there. It's my fault. I-I should've died with Roland, or sacrificed myself for him and the others. That was my duty and I...I shirked it."

She hung her head, allowing her guilt to have at her, to clobber her. She wanted it to beat her into oblivion. Karen dropped her hands from the piloting controls, giving *Oyekan* to fate. She just wanted this hell of her own making to be

over. Maybe she would fly into the same anomaly that had probably gobbled up the kidnappers' ship.

And maybe, just maybe, she can be with Roland on the other side...if he could ever forgive her. She knew he was a better person than she was, and she smiled at the thought of being forgiven, of the accusatory Roland in her mind's eye finally opening his arms to embrace her...

The beep drew her back. One eye cracked open, zeroing in on the insistent beeping from the multiphasic scan she had activated to aid in her pursuit. Karen knew that a multiphasic scan would help cleave through the intense interference resulting from the expanse's radiation.

It had been seeking any unusual energy readings, and had just found a mother lode. The scan was spiking off the charts. "What is that?" She asked, before imparting the question to the ship's computer.

"Oh my God," she murmured, after the computer dryly recited its entry on polaric ion energy. *Is this what those monsters were looking for?* She wondered, chasing that with another, even more terrifying thought. "Could they be testing it right now?"

"Data insufficient to answer your inquiry," the computer dutifully responded. Annoyed, Karen jabbed the vocal interface off. She needed to be alone with her thoughts right now, and her ghosts.

It didn't take long for either to drive her to redirect the shuttle's course toward the disturbance.

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### ***Jov'k Tholis***

#### ***Calcite-class battlecruiser***

The trigger had been pulled. Narskene skittered backwards, assailed by the shock that ran from the High Magistrates directly into hir brain. S/He used both arms to push away one of the more eager subordinates rushing in to help. In hir weakened condition s/he was fearful that the zealous underling might peer into hir mind, or sense hir revulsion which would be nearly as bad.

Narskene had been careful to mask whatever disagreements she had with her superiors as she scaled the lattice to hopefully sit among the High Magistrates herself. S/He had become a dutiful soldier that her superiors could rely on, and s/he wasn't about to derail their faith in her now, especially when s/he could use the information they were chattering madly about to assist her ascension.

When s/he found hir voice again, she barked, "Altered destination. Full warp!"

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### ***The Burning Claw***

#### ***Armory***

First Mate Gedrik's voice sounded nearly an octave lighter as he addressed the bridge via intercom. "Yes, yes," he said, in answer to Deoch's skeptical question. "By seeding the area around the polaric ion torpedo and the star with chroniton particles we hope to heighten the temporal properties of the polaric ion isotopes, thereby causing a temporal rift upon impact."

*"And that's supposed to do what exactly?"* Deoch asked. Ramlo noted that the Venturi captain didn't even try to mask his ignorance, nor did Gedrik hide the look of exasperation on his face. Though he did strip it from his voice.

Gedrik sigh was almost inaudible. He paused, and began very slowly to re-explain what he had just told the lead pirate.

*"So, you're saying you can create some kind of temporal shift that allows the star's fuel from the past to bleed into the present sun that's running out of fuel?"* The captain was still disbelieving.

"Exactly," the first mate replied, with obvious relief. "The chroniton particles will also work to briefly link the two suns together in the same time period."

*"And you Arkenite, do you think this is possible?"* Deoch had already dismissed his subordinate.

The scientist swallowed the lump in his throat. He hadn't expected to be called upon. He nodded as he spoke, "It is theoretically possible." Gedrik gave Ramlo a withering glare.

*"I see,"* Deoch said, clearly mulling over his course of action. After a beat, he said, *"Who am I to argue with one of homeworld's best scientific minds and a three-brained Starfleet science officer!"*

"I am certain captain that this is a turning point in history, this is when we become legends, and your decisiveness has made it possible," Gedrik remarked, laying it on thick.

*"We'll get that regulator, and when we do, make sure you can back up everything you just told me,"* Deoch warned. *"Bridge out."*

His Venturi's counterparts glare quickly morphed into a relieved smile. "You should be more assured of your hypotheses Mr. Ramlo!" He clapped his hands together, "I can't believe we are going to do this! That we are going to make history!"

Lt. Ramlo ran a hand over his smooth, three lobed head, clipping one of his pointed ears as he brought it back down to the dull black oblong plasma torpedo. He blinked several times, doing his best to absorb all the possibilities. "Temporal Investigations would probably violate their own rules to go back in time to make sure I never attended Starfleet if I am party to this," he replied, though his heart throbbed with excitement over the idea. It nearly made him forget that he was a prisoner, stuck in a dim room filled with lethal weapons, with his jailers his only companions.

"Temporal violations be damned!" First Mate Gedrik replied, exclaiming his point with another loud clap." The tall Venturi was on the opposite side of the

torpedo. One burly guard stood watch at the door, the disruptor in the holster on his leg within easy reach.

The Arkenite tempered his delight at the results of their brainstorming session. He tapped his long fingers against the hard casing of the torpedo, remembering what it was, and what it could possibly do. Alone the disruptor torpedo could kill hundreds or thousands, but equipped with a polaric ion warhead, the death totals could escalate exponentially.

"We can't make this decision," he said, the warmth that suffusing his cheeks diminishing. "We don't have the right, the authority to take millions of lives into our hands."

His smile losing only a little wattage, Gedrik asked, disbelieving, "You can't be serious!" He exclaimed, throwing up his hands. "I don't get you Starfleet types. You claim that you live to explore, to find new things, life and civilizations and all that, that you want to make life for the citizens of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants better, and when you've found a way to do that, you get all self-righteous."

"This is a decision we can't make on our own," he held his ground, "We should take this to the Federation Council and Venturi authorities."

Ramlo was rattled by the other man's full throated, head thrown back, bitter laughter. Once Gedrik was eyeing him again, the reptilian snorted. "We could do that, and while they dithered, Alpha Venturi Major would move one step closer to stellar death."

"But what we are proposing," the Arkenite tried one more time, "It could have unforeseen consequences way beyond the Venturi homeworld. What if the experiment goes awry, what if it accelerates stellar death? What if it destabilizes the sun completely? What if the temporal and subspace effects ripple across space?"

"That's the risk with science," the other man shrugged.

"How can you be so flippant about this?" Ramlo's temperature began to rise, and not from enthusiasm this time.

The Arkenite winced as the other man's claws dug into the torpedo's finish, causing an unpleasant scraping noise. Gedrik leaned over, nearly head butting the scientist. The Venturi's eyes bore into him. "I know the sacrifices some have made for science, for the greater good," he said, his voice barely a whisper, but clear enough for Ramlo to hear and be chilled by its restrained fury. "My wife, my beloved Berae died trying to re-ignite our sun. I can do no less," he declared.

"This is insanity," Ramlo refused to back down, despite his growing fears. "This has to be tested first."

"I assure you it will be," Gedrik confidently nodded his head, "On Alpha Venturi Major."

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## Rim of the Calderan Corridor



Fear paused at the gaping, coruscating mouth of great pathway, roiled by momentary doubt. It could be that some caravan was inside of the space tunnel at this very moment, pulling pulled inexorably to what they might feel is a new life.

The device resting within Fear's folds would destroy them as it collapsed the corridor. He could be the cause of thousands, millions, of deaths. As much as he hated outsiders, as much as he wanted to keep Caldera pure, Fear was not sanguine about the prospect of what he was about to do, now that the moment had come upon him.

The act would brand the Calderans pariahs on a galactic scale, destroyers of one of the great wonders of space. It would be isolated, but of such a reviled sort that the name of his kind would be sullied perhaps for eternity.

Swarms of doubt scuttled across his mind as he gazed into the maw. His form began to waver as he wrestled with the decision, ashamed that his resolve was weakening. But it was one thing to destroy actual interlopers, quite another to slaughter innocent refugees.

Uncharacteristically he laughed, a harsh, scraping sound even to his own auditory senses. It was as if a tiny Hope had manifested inside his head with all of these doubts. There could be innocent refugees inside the corridor, but there could also be invasive species, like the Borg. And for those 'innocents' how long might it take them before they had designs on Calderan space? Or brought more quadrant powers to Caldera's door in an effort to help or fight them?

If there were any species inside the corridor they were well aware of the risks of space travel. He pulled his form away from the device, grabbing it before it drifted into space. With metallic fingers he activated it and threw it into the gigantic gullet before him.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Oyekan***

"Great Bird!" Ensign Kittles's gasped, her eyes widening at the spike in polaric radiation. The disruption had occurred in the opposite direction of her trail, but her gut was telling her that it was tied to the bastards that had killed Roland.

Biting back miniscule doubts, she whipped the shuttle around.

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### ***Jov'k Tholis***

#### ***Calcite-class battlecruiser***

#### ***Caldera Expanse***

"It's started," Narskene muttered, as the crystalline bulkheads flashed a variety of colors as ship's sensors detected the polaric radiation pulse. "We don't have much time!" he snapped at his pilot. "Get us to the cause of that disturbance at once!"

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Main Bridge**

Captain Redfeather swept onto the bridge from her ready room. She glanced at the main viewer before turning to her first officer. Commander Donar was already out of his seat. The large man had a grim expression on his face.

"Status report Mr. Donar," she curtly requested, standing in front of her seat. The larger Angosian hovered over his.

"Sensors have detected a massive increase in polaric ion radiation," he said, turning slightly in the direction of the science console on the upper deck of the bridge. Lt. Jilicia rattled off the location. The Boslic woman took a quick breath before adding, "Scans are also detecting the emergence of several subspace ruptures emanating near the Calderan Corridor."

The captain's stomach tightened. She knew there could have only been one thing that would cause such a massive spike in polaric ions or those spatial ruptures. She eyed her XO. The man's lips drew into a thin line, and his dark eyes alit like burning coals.

She nodded at him, reluctant soldier to bred one. And then she turned around to gaze at the starscape streaking past them. Out there somewhere, beyond the stars, was the polaric ion regulator and a hell that it had just created. And they were galloping headlong into it.

"Do we know the status of the corridor?" She asked. The Boslic looked down at her console before answering, her features screwed in displeasure. It was all the answer she needed to know.

But the dutiful young woman answered anyway, "No sir. There is just too much radiation, the polaric ions in addition to the normal radiation stew to get definite readings."

"Alter our course," Redfeather ordered the Aurelian flight controller. For once, she glad it wasn't Tim at the helm. He would surely have tried to leaven the moment with a joke, and the serious import of what was about to happen didn't need any inadequate attempts at levity. The gravity of it needed to be appreciated and the calm of the storm needed to be reverential. Because soon everything, and everyone aboard *Erickson* would change, and Wyoma couldn't promise for the better.

"Red alert," she added, "and modulate our shields to account for intense polaric ion radiation."

The captain took her chair. Commander Donar sat down seconds afterward. She leaned over to him and lowered her voice. "Do you think the corridor was damaged?"

"Impossible to say," He quietly replied, "However with the polaric ion eruption being so close to it, as well as the ruptures..."

The captain wistfully shook her head, "One of the great galactic wonders, possibly destroyed, an avenue of exploration perhaps closed forever." She paused,

her gaze and tone becoming mournful, “and if the Calderan Corridor itself couldn’t withstand...”

She didn’t finish, but she could tell that Donar got her meaning. She was a bit taken aback that his expression didn’t become sorrowful, but predatory. He replied to her with soft, harrowing, lethality, “If such a tragic fate has befallen our crew, I promise you that an accounting will be made for it.”

Redfeather merely nodded uncomfortably and sat back in her seat. There was much to do before they reached the center of the disturbance, and it all needed her full attention. However her worries about the radiation and ruptures were now joined by her fresh concerns about the man sitting beside her.

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## **Rim of the Calderan Corridor**

Fear hung transfixed by the beautiful destruction. The regulator had fractured the corridor, spreading coursing orange ruptures like fiery spider webs through space, chasing the shockwave that roared in all directions. Fear had assumed the guise of the Romulan *Bird-of-Prey* he had helped destroy a century ago. He felt it appropriate.

Even though he was eager to return to Caldera, to be lauded as a patriot for closing the corridor and keeping the Great Tide pure from contaminants, he couldn’t take his sensory organs away from the device. Its crystalline shell floated unscathed in the midst of the devastation.

He was half tempted to retrieve it, once it was safe to do so. A weapon of such power would be of great value to his people...but also to others.

Fear decided against it. What he had done here was cut off Calderan space to interlopers and potential settlers. If the Alpha and Beta Quadrant powers were foolish enough to attempt to claim the device, let them fight amongst themselves to do so; if anything they would bypass the Calderans.

Satisfied with his logic, Fear arced around slowly, gathering his power to return home and to immortality.

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## ***The Burning Claw*** **Command Deck**

Captain Deoch dug into his armrests as the ship came roughly out of warp. The entire framework of the bridge shuddered as a structural integrity alarm went off.

Normally that would concern him, but his eyes narrowed instead on the sight before him. "A Romulan warship?" Nadeen asked, disbelieving, "and old one at that." Splayed across the viewer was an old style, silvered warship, with two nacelles jutting from its saucer primary hull like wings, hence its namesake. The old bird seemed to roost over the hell surrounding it, riding the waves just before catastrophe. Well, it appeared that the Romulans' luck had just run out.

"But still dangerous," Deoch hissed, "Power weapons."

"Why would the Romulans be here?" First Mate Gedrik asked. "And why would they be in such an ancient ship?"

"What does it matter?" Deoch barked, "Where there is one Romulan there are bound to be more. We must stop them from contacting compatriots." He jutted his chin in the direction of the operations console, "Gotash," he called on the slender female Venturi occupying the station, "Jam their communications."

She moved to do so, frowning seconds later. "They aren't attempting to send any messages...in fact; I'm not getting any readings that the ship possesses communicative capability."

"I'm also getting anomalous readings," Nadeen replied. "This is a most unusual vessel."

"I...recommend we hail them," Gedrik said, "And find out what they are doing here?"

Deoch pounded his armrests. He didn't like being second guessed. "And give the Romulans time to attack us, or even worse, slip away and alert a bigger ship or a group of them?" He shook his thick head, "Nadeen, aim our weapons at the vessel and fire at my command!" The large Capellan grunted but complied.

"Ship is turning!" Plask, at engineering, gasped, stating the obvious as usual.

"What's the status of their weapons? Shields?!" Deoch asked, doing his best to tamp down his fear. Even if the *Bird-of-Prey* was over a century old, who knew what kind of tricks the Romulans had up their sleeves. And he really didn't want to find out.

Before Nadeen could answer his questions, he jabbed a finger at the screen, "Fire! Fire! Fire!"

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### ***Shuttlecraft Oyekan***

As a reflex, Ensign Kittles threw a hand over her eyes. The bright flash dissipated by the tint on the forward shuttlecraft window, but it still left spots in Karen's eyes. She tried to blink them away rapidly as she brought the tiny vessel's shields up.

*Oyekan* had come out of warp to the unexpected sight of a Romulan *Bird-of-Prey*, an old one that had been around in her grandmother's day and a low slung, lethal vessel moving in on it. And then, seconds later, space had become ablaze, and now only the menacing ship remained.

Sensors detected that the ship had locked weapons on her. Kittles knew in her gut that hailing them would be a waste of time, and she also was certain that this ship was responsible for murdering her colleagues.

Part of her wanted to run, but she knew her colleagues deserved more than that. Ronald deserved more than that. Karen set her jaw and poured all power into her engines. Biting her lip, pushing down her fear, the ensign engaged warp drive. She would get them, before they got her.

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## ***The Burning Claw*** **Command Deck**

Deoch nearly jumped out of his seat. He was dumbfounded. “Wha-what is that madman doing?” He hadn’t even had a second to savor the destruction of the Romulan warship before more prey showed up. But this time, the Venturi didn’t know which would be prey or predator.

“It looks like they intend to ram us,” Nadeen calmly replied, a hint of admiration in her voice.

“Evasive maneuvers!” He hissed, restraining himself from bounding out of his seat to the helm. He blinked furiously as he watched the smaller craft getting larger in the main viewer. Gasps and hisses filled the suddenly claustrophobic room.

“The shuttle’s impulse engines have just been activated,” Nadeen replied, still calm, “It’s at full impulse now.”

Deoch’s heart thudded in his chest as Krendt pounded furiously at his control panel. The ship creaked with the strain as he attempted to move out of the way. *Burning Claw’s* struts howled in protest, but the ship lifted just above the barreling shuttle.

The sigh of relief had just left his chest, on the way to his lips, when the ship shuddered so violently that it nearly pitched him from his seat. The bridge filled with a horrific screech that made him clamp his hands over his ears. He shivered, as if feeling the skin of his beloved ship being shorn off. Lights blinked maddeningly as the deck plates trembled and klaxons joined the cacophony. Aft consoles sparked with smoke and fire, prompting quick thinking personnel to grab fire extinguishers hanging from the walls. Within seconds the calamity was over.

“What happened?” He asked, choking on the thin film of acrid smoke now permeating the bridge, “Where’s that shuttle?” Deoch wiped tears from his eyes as he waited for a response. He was hoping that its foolhardy pilot hadn’t gotten himself killed because the captain dearly wanted to shred that space scow.

Gedrik looked up from the hood of his console, his eyes brimming with tears. He sniffled, before answering, “The shuttle...is gone.”

“Status,” Deoch barked, standing up. He wiped snot from his nose. “How bad did it hit us?”

“The initial reports are not good,” the first mate said after looking down again.

"How bad?" Deoch clenched his fists as he stomped over to his second's station. He really had the need to throttle something, or someone right now. Sensing his mood, Gedrik took a step back before answering.

"We avoided a head-on collision but the shuttle accelerated before we could bypass it completely."

"That much is obvious!" The captain shrugged his broad shoulders before sweeping an arm around the room. His temperature began to rise as he looked at the blackened, burned out terminals. It would cost a lot of credits to replace them, and he shuddered to think about additional repairs.

"The collision took out part of our nacelle ring, we've lost warp power as a result," he answered, his voice cracking. "Impulse engines are also offline." Deoch flexed his shoulders, trying to hold on to his calm.

"How long for warp?" The idea of being stuck in this maelstrom, not to mention the regular dangers of the chaotic expanse, twisted a knot into his stomach.

Gedrik shook his head, "Engineering says they will not be able to restore them. Serious repairs are needed and they don't have the tools onboard to do it."

"Engineering?" The captain sneered, "Patch me through to Grebinold," he demanded, "I have no time for his obfuscations!" Though the Pakled engineer was one of the best Deoch had ever hired, as typical with his kind, he his childlike speech and behavior masked a deceitful, cunning mind.

The first mate swallowed hard enough for Deoch to hear it. "Grebinold is dead." He said.

"Well, who in the Five Hells is down there running the show?" Fear bubbled just under the cauldron. Grebinold understood the ship's cantankerous propulsion system thoroughly.

"What about the Zibalian?" He asked, hoping that Grebinold's assistant was still alive. He had bought the boy on after finally acceding to Grebinold's demand for more skilled expertise than the brutes doing the dirty work he required.

"Yes," Gedrik replied, breathing easier. Deoch's hand swung out, ripping into the man's too forgiving pebbled skin, his claws tearing easily through his cheek. Their soft skin was another sign of Horned weakness.

Clutching his cheek, blood seeping through his fingers and running down his arm, Gedrik stifled a cry, but his eyes blazed anew with old resentments. He saw the man's eyes flick to the disruptor hanging from his holster. The captain smiled, daring him to.

"Do you know what that was for?" Deoch asked, wiping his blood stained hand across the chest of his tunic. The first mate wisely didn't reply. "Don't think you can breathe easy around me, not when this ship is in shambles."

Gedrik bit down a retort. Deoch wished the first officer had the guts to speak his mind, because he really wanted to let loose. "Stay on the Zibalian like I will on you if you don't get impulse back online as quickly as possible."

"But captain," the first mate gingerly ventured, "what about the polaric ion device? Readings indicate that it is nearby."

"This vessel was nearly cleaved in two by some psycho and all you care about is that damned regulator?!" Deoch fumed, holding up his bloodstained hand, his razor claws protruding. Gedrik shrank back. "Your first duty is to me, to this ship! Do your duty, and then we'll see about your littler regulator. For all this trouble you've put me through, that regulator better earn its weight in latinum!"

"But...I thought we were going back home?" Gedrik said, his face falling along with his faltering voice.

Deoch laughed, a discordant, grating sound even to his own ears. "Nobility has its place and all, but it doesn't pay for new nacelles or whatever else we've lost. You can run your studies on it, see if you can replicate it, I don't care, but I'm selling that piece of trouble to whoever can cover our expenses." Done with the absurd scientist, the captain turned his back on him.

Deoch stepped away, to check the rest of the ship, when Gedrik's voice pulled him back around.

"Captain?" He called, after clearing his throat. Deoch snorted as he turned.

"What is it now?!"

"You've been relieved," Gedrik said, clutching his disruptor in his shaking hand. Deoch looked at the barrel of the weapon and then up into his eyes. Their color had changed, as had their intent. He had survived enough duels and brawls to recognize that look anywhere.

"So, you're finally one of us now," he chuckled before lunging. Gedrik pulled the trigger.

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### ***Shuttlecraft Oyekan***

Was the universe spinning or was it just her head, Ensign Kittles wondered as she blinked rapidly and swallowed just as furiously to keep her gorge from escaping her lips. Soiling herself was the last thing she needed right now.

Chancing vertigo, she opened her eyes and peered out of the front window. The galaxy was spinning, the shuttle was out of control. She breathed a sigh that *Oyekan* was still in one piece before her fingers flew over her terminal, desperately trying to right the ship. The young woman was grateful that her seatbelt was keeping her from being slammed all around the shuttle's environs.

Karen glued her eyes to the console, her mind racing, her heart thundering, as she scoured the status of the vessel's systems. It wasn't looking good. Structural integrity was almost shot, shields were nearly gone, the ship was venting plasma, warp engines were offline, but the warp core was on the verge of breaching. Behind

her she could see cosmic tendrils from the sheared ceiling. Only the thin, fading bubble of the shields were keeping atmosphere inside the cockpit.

"I've got to right this ship," she muttered, not caring that she was talking to herself. She would rather hear her own voice than the shrieking of klaxons or the rending of alloys as the integrity field failed and *Oyekan* folded in on itself.

"What a way to go," she sighed, crushed inside a can like a sardine. "I'm so sorry Roland," she shook her head, tears sprouting from her eyes. "I tried," she blubbered, "I-I really did." She had almost gotten revenge for Ensign Fryer's death, she had almost died with dignity. But the pirate vessel shot upwards at the last minute. Unable to stop the shuttle from spinning, Karen devoted some of the ship's dwindling power to a wide sweep for the marauder vessel.

She hoped that she had clipped something vital at least. "Damn," she spat, as the scans revealed that the ship was still intact. She quickly did another scan to ascertain its status and was at least pleased to know that she had damaged it enough that it wasn't going anywhere for a while.

"Maybe I can still make amends," she thought, inputting the location of the enemy ship into a communications buoy. Kittles grunted with some satisfaction after ejecting it. Perhaps *Erickson* could finish the job she started.

Her moment of relief was short-lived. Seconds after the buoy plunged into space, a new alarm joined the chorus. The structural integrity field had collapsed.

Karen shrugged, surprising herself at her calm. It was over, truly over, and she hadn't done nearly any of the things she had wanted to do, she would never sit in the captain's chair, she would never make first contact with an alien species, she would never become a Starfleet legend. And she would never fall in love or raise a family.

"I tried," she said, her stoicism starting to crumble, "Damn it I tried." Another alarm sounded: the shields were gone.

With admirable serenity, Kittles unbuckled her seatbelt, and let icy fingers pull her into their cold cosmic embrace.

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## ***The Burning Claw***

### **Command Deck**

On unsteady legs, Gedrik stepped from away his console. He felt the eyes of the crew on him, the air heavy with expectation. The horned Venturi struggled to meet their gazes. He continued to be drawn to the dark patch where Deoch had just stood, had just been alive, minutes earlier. The man's anguished screams would echo in his ears forever, as would the horrific sight of the watching him writhe briefly before the beam dissolved him. Later perhaps his scientific mind would look at the event with dispassion, but at the moment his emotions were too raw.

Realizing he was still aiming the disruptor, now at empty air, the former first mate placed it at his side. He didn't want to put it back in the holster because he



might need to wield it again soon. He inhaled, taking in the thick smell of ozone and a whiff of fried flesh. Coughing, Gedrik stepped over to the captain's vacant chair.

He was hoping that no one else could hear his heart thudding against his chest. It pounded so fiercely that it thought it would rip free from his ribcage. With dark humor, the image reminded him that there were doubtless others among the crew that would gladly do the honors. The scientist stood in front of Deoch's chair, unwilling to claim it just yet. He had to establish his authority clearly first.

Gedrik pinned his stare on the most likely candidate. "Nadeen," he injected as much authority in his voice as he could muster. "I want you to rouse the prisoners. Bring the Arkenite to me and then I want you and the Kaylar to retrieve the device."

All eyes shifted to the hulking Capellan. The dark-skinned woman glared at him. Gedrik's trigger finger twitched. He wasn't sure he would be fast enough to get off the first shot; even if she didn't have a pistol within easy reach, she was lethally fast and accurate with the *kligats* adorning her belt.

Time stretched into infinity. It started to weigh on Gedrik's shoulders like boulders. He would have to force a response soon if she didn't obey. The longer he allowed the silence the deeper, the greater the level of disrespect and insubordination he could expect from the rest of the crew. "Well," he finally asked. He had been able to hold the woman's gaze, knowing if he failed to do so he would have no chance to survive the next few seconds, not even contemplating returning to his homeworld as its savior.

The woman silently shrugged and turned toward the bridge's exit. For the briefest of moments the new captain thought about shooting her in the back. But even among thieves there had to be some honor.

Besides he had just won a victory here, his biggest threat had acceded to his wishes, the mighty, fearsome Capellan had obeyed him. Perhaps... He looked at one of the unadorned Venturi standing idle at a ruined console. "Assist Nadeen," he commanded, "make sure she carries out my orders explicitly." The man jumped to attention, nodding as he rushed to catch up with the Capellan.

Gedrik eyed the bridge personnel once more, as if daring them to challenge him. Many broke their gazes, looking down or finding something suddenly interesting on their consoles, even the broken ones. He smirked, the rush of power flowing through his veins like fresh oxygen. So this is what Deoch felt, Gedrik wondered.

But still there was one more threat. He lifted up in his chair and pinned the Dopterian at the communications terminal. There was no need for anyone to man that post. Who were they going to call for help? "I want you to go to Deoch's quarters, and bring Mavaar here, to me."

"Aye sir," the Dopterian replied with an appropriate level of obsequiousness. He scampered from the bridge. Finally Gedrik leaned back in his chair, squeezing the armrests and breathing easier. Soon the device would be his and he would make history.

After that he would gladly give the ship to any of the vultures strong enough to possess it, but not before. First he had to consummate his date with destiny.

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### ***Outside The Burning Claw***

Lt. Shashlik wanted to break from the tether that yoked her to the accursed pirate ship, and use the cord to choke the woman floating beside her. She had been holding back her rage, quietly stoking the fires within. Only Ramlo being held hostage by the brigands aboard stayed her hand, as it had since they had first been accosted, but the Kaylar didn't know how much longer even her concern for her friend could still her warrior's blood.

"I know what you're thinking," the Capellan's voice sounded smug, even though the helmet's tiny receiver. "I can see your body twitching, your muscles tensing, you want to strike at me, and you want to kill us all."

Shashlik said nothing; instead she kept her eyes on the device drifting before them. Even though the device was roughly the size of a photon torpedo, yet far more crystalline in appearance, she found it hard to believe that it contained the kind of power Gedrik gushed about. But she had no reason to doubt it, far too many people had died because of it, and Shashlik knew that she couldn't let a weapon fall into the hands of outlaws.

The Capellan, Nadeen, chuckled. The harsh sound made Shashlik wince. "I know, I know," she said, "You're a warrior like me. And to do the bidding of one such as Gedrik..." She slid beside her, "It curdles the blood. I promise you though that when this is over, I will give you the warrior's death you deserve."

"Should I be grateful for your promise?" Shashlik couldn't help but scoff.

"No, just prepared," Nadeen replied, before roughly pushing off Shashlik's shoulder. The Kaylar fell back while Nadeen shot forward. She reversed the thrust on the ill-fitting space suit to stop her descent. The Capellan grabbed the tip of the regulator, to stop her forward momentum. Shashlik reached her moments later. She didn't hide her glower. Nadeen laughed. "Oh, our battle will be one for the ages," she declared.

"You can count on it," Shashlik promised.

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### ***The Burning Claw*** **Command Deck**

This was going far easier than Gedrik had anticipated. "I told him all along, that the honest profit that could be made from becoming heroes would be far more than what we could get from the Orions, Valerians, or other scum," Mavaar said smoothly, the picture of sincerity.

If Gedrik had any sense he would know it would be best to unload another disruptor bolt right into the center of her gentle forehead ridges. But the woman

offered no challenges to him, her words might even convince the still skeptical among them. Plus she practically was prostrating before him, the zipper of her skintight violet tunic parted just so tantalizingly.

And it had been so lonely since his wife...Gedrik cleared his throat, as well as thoughts of his beloved Berae. He stood up, to better look down at the supplicating Nuvian. "As always you speak with wisdom Mavaar," he said charitably, "and I look forward to you...serving me...as ably as you did the previous ship's master." If he could afford her, he did intend to keep Mavaar with him. He didn't care about the rest, though he said loudly, "Continue to do your duties as you have before and I promise we will all continue to reap profit, in fact, more profits than you could dare dream to imagine!"

Not known for being a boaster, his words dissipated the fog that had enveloped over the bridge in the wake of Deoch's demise. The crew went back to repairing damaged stations with renewed vigor.

"Mavaar," Gedrik said, with a shot of new confidence himself, "Move your things to my quarters, and I will be there when I can."

She gave a curt bow, making sure her cleavage was prominently displayed, "Of course my captain."

Satisfied, he sat back down and swung his head opposite of the departing Nuvian. A morose Lt. Ramlo stood beside him, his anxiety evident. His iris less green eyes were glued to the main viewer. Before them both Nadeen and the Kaylar clung to Gedrik's glittering jewel. The horned Venturi smiled, hoping it would reassure the man, but certain that it wouldn't.

Pleased that at least the grapplers still worked, Gedrik ordered, "Haul them in." His stomach fluttered as the device was slowly reeled back in. Unable to sit still, or bear his excitement, Gedrik leaped from his seat. "We have to go down to the cargo hold, to see it with our own eyes," he said, grabbing Ramlo's arm and pulling him forward.

The Arkenite's boots remained planted on the deck. Gedrik gave another encouraging tug, and then a frustrated snort. Whipping around to glare at the recalcitrant fellow scientist, he made certain the man saw him reaching for his disruptor. Still unmoved, Ramlo matched his stare.

Gedrik didn't need this test of wills, not after he had just scored a major psychological victory with Mavaar. The Arkenite needed to be reminded of his place. "You will accompany me to the cargo bay now."

"Or what?" Ramlo asked, disdain reeking from his pores. "You aren't going to vaporize me like you did Deoch, you need me." After the Starfleet officer's brazen admission, Gedrik realized his mistake. He had been too kind to the Arkenite, he had treated him too much as an equal, and that simply wouldn't do on a buccaneer ship. There had to be one law, one voice of authority, and it must never be questioned.

"I do need you," Gedrik admitted, "but not in one piece."

“What?” Ramlo blanched, a terrible recognition dawning in his verdant eyes. He took a step back. Gedrik advanced on him, issuing orders.

Ramlo looked around him, realizing he was cornered. Two colossal Venturi were closing in on him. “Vorvi, Nolun,” Gedrik said softly, smiling all the way in spite of himself, “Grab the good scientist by the arms, and one of you, hand me a knife.”

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Captain’s Ready Room**

Lt. Commander Norrbom barreled into the captain’s office. She pulled up right before ramming Wyoma’s desk. Breathing heavily, her voice ragged, her bangs askew, the red-faced woman said, “Captain, you’re going to want to hear this!”

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Main Bridge**

Captain Redfeather stood behind Norrbom, looking over her shoulder. One hand was behind her back, the other tapped her chin as she listened to the message again. A tense Commander Donar stood to the side. Wyoma still couldn’t believe it. Ensign Kittles was still alive, or at least she had been long enough to give them exactly what they needed, the location of the bastards who had started all this trouble.

Wyoma knew in her marrow that apprehending them would get her one step closer to securing the regulator.

She turned slightly, regarding the big Angosian. He nodded tersely, the lines etched into his face deepening. Without even being told, he ordered the helm to alter course. Wyoma nodded with satisfaction before squeezing Norrbom’s shoulder. “Good work Helen.” She faced the main viewer, her breath catching as the stars started to streak by. Beyond the dashes of starlight was a gathering storm of chaotic space, made more so by the release of the polaric ion energy. “Mr. French, make sure not to drive us into one of those spatial ruptures will you.”

“Do my best ma’am,” he swiveled around, to grace her with one of his devilish grins.

“Eyes forward Mr. French,” Lt. Jilicia said, stealing the words from the captain’s mouth. The helmsman looked wounded, for all of a second, before his smile broke through again. But he did turn back around to face his console. The captain looked, with some surprise, at the usually quiet Boslic. The woman blushed, her cheeks a slight shade of purple.

“Lt. Jilicia, I couldn’t have said it better myself,” she remarked, punctuating the statement with a laugh.

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### ***The Burning Claw***

## Cargo Bay

The bay doors closed with a loud clang. Shashlik felt eyes on her back, and she was certain disruptors were aimed there too. Fighting her instincts, she didn't turn around. She detached the seal of her helmet instead, gulping in the cold, fresh air. "Don't make another move," Gedrik commanded.

Shashlik bit back a retort. She couldn't wait to have her hands around his head. She would crush it like a melon. Beside her she saw Nadeen flinch. "What did you do?" The woman asked.

Ignoring his warning, the Kaylar turned around. The surprise, and reproach, in the other woman's voice drew her like a magnet.

"No," she snarled; anguish robbing her speech, as she saw Ramlo, being propped up by two burly pink-skinned Venturi. Her eyes scoured every inch of him, his rubber legs, his pallid complexion, the dull green of his eyes, before alighting on what had prompted Nadeen's question. His left hand was missing. In its place a mangled stump, being attended to by a scowling Tantaran medic.

Reading her expression, Gedrik waved his disruptor. "Don't worry Kaylar, our good scientist will recover. He just had to be taught a lesson. Now that it has been learned, we can..."

The roar that ripped from Shashlik's lips even frightened her. But it didn't slow her down. Despite the weight and bulkiness of the suit, she charged the still talking gray Venturi. She threw herself at him.

The man stopped with a start, blinking profusely as realization dawned. He aimed his gun at her, but for him it was too late. Leading with a shoulder, she crashed into him, pleased to hear the satisfying crunch of bone and the wet sound of emerging blood. Her hands wrapped around the man's spindly throat while she straddled him.

Shashlik began pounding his head onto the deck plate. Unable to get a shot on her, he feebly began hitting her shoulders and then the back of her head with the all but useless disruptor.

His blows lessened in severity and then frequency, his body began to go limp. Though Shashlik could puncture his throat with her gloved fingers, the Kaylar had another idea in mind. Seizing both sides of his head, she began to squeeze, prompting another round of wheezing gasping cries from the man.

Shashlik felt the bone starting to give way and she threw her head back in triumph, finally pleased to release her pent up rage. She heard the whistle and barely caught the blur as it descended down at her, neatly removing her head from the rest of her body.

There was a sting of pain and then the world swirled around her, as blood and life sprayed from her severed neck. And then she bounced against the deck. Before the darkness smothered her, Shashlik saw a grim Nadeen standing above, a circular, bladed weapon in one hand. It dripped her blood, her life.

She tried to reach out, but her hands wouldn't respond. She tried to speak, to call Ramlo's name. But there was no answer. She tried again, but her lips wouldn't work, her lips had gone numb, her tongue swollen. She closed her eyes, to concentrate on making her lips move again, to let Ramlo know that she was his last thought. Shashlik never opened her eyes again.

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## ***USS Erickson***

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

"Enter," Captain Redfeather said, not bothering to look up. Hands clasped in front of her, Wyoma's attention was riveted to Ensign Kittles's message playing on her desktop computer. She shook her head, pained at every strain of desperation and fear she heard in the woman's voice. And beneath that was an expectant, clinging desire for revenge.

Wyoma knew in her gut that the woman was dead, that she was lost to them, but perhaps more tragically, by the anguish in Karen's voice, she had been lost long before her physical demise. Too many good people, *her* people had died already. And she knew that more would likely perish when they found the marauder vessel. Those deaths would be on top of the innumerable refugees already slaughtered.

The true immensity of that genocide would never be known since they had scuttled the remains of the ship, on Sullivan's orders. Redfeather rubbed her aching eyes; they felt dry, grainy, as did her mouth. Her shoulders slumped with the burdens of command. She hadn't faced this much death since the Dominion War ended. When Wyoma had first heard that the Founder had surrendered, she had hoped, foolishly perhaps, that it would usher in a new era of peace, but the Alshain, Talarians, Son'a, Cardassian extremists, and too many other belligerents had already burned that dream into ash.

If she couldn't save the galaxy, Wyoma resolved to do her best to protect the people in her charge to the best of her ability. To that end, she finally glanced up. "Helen," she said, punctuating it with a curt nod.

Concern was evident on Lt. Commander Norrbom's face. "Captain," she ventured. Redfeather held up a hand, and Helen stopped talking.

"Kittles is gone," Redfeather said, disappointed at how detached she sounded.

"You don't know that for certain Captain," Helen couldn't keep herself from interjecting.

"Call it captain's intuition," Redfeather glumly replied, briefly touching her stomach, and wishing she could untie its knotting entrails. Enduring the discomfort, the captain replied. "Just like I feel that some of our crew might still be alive. I want them back, still alive."

"Of course Captain," Helen said, a determined cast to her expression. "We'll do all we can to get them back."

"I know," Redfeather replied, with a scant, humorless smile, "and that's why I want you to accompany Commander Donar on the rescue mission...if one is required."

"But I thought Donar had a hand-picked team," the operations officer looked at her askance.

"He does," the captain nodded, "but even though they are the best we got, doesn't mean they couldn't use someone with your skills."

"You don't trust Donar yet, is that it?" Norrbom asked. The knots tightened so suddenly in Wyoma's stomach that she almost doubled over. The captain grimaced. She couldn't lie to her old friend, but she didn't want to admit the truth.

Helen was more than happy to fill in the blanks. "You're still not sure of his priorities, if he will become consumed in fighting the abductors and not ensure our peoples' safety first."

More than a little irritated that Helen read her so well, and a whole lot more ashamed that she entertained such feelings, the captain tersely nodded in affirmation.

"Of course I'll do it," Norrbom answered, "I don't think he's going to like me tagging along though," she paused, and a mischievous smile spread across her lips.

"Helen," the captain reproached, frowning. "I thought you two had buried the hatchet." The operations officer shrugged.

"It's a work in progress," she admitted. Wyoma sighed.

"Just get our people back, alright?" The captain wearily asked, the weight on her shoulders now about to knock her to the desk.

"We'll get them back, sir," Norrbom said, the mischief in her voice now replaced by steel. "And if anything has happened to them, the ones who did it are going to get it paid back twice."

"Helen, I want you to accompany Commander Donar to be a check on him if his emotions get out of hand," she finally admitted. The confession didn't bring her the relief she hoped for. "Do I need to send someone to watch after you?"

"No Captain," Norrbom stood at attention, "I won't do anything that will jeopardize our captured personnel."

"See that you don't," Redfeather snapped, harsher than she had intended to be. "Now, I think you have a meeting to crash."

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***USS Erickson***  
**Armory**

Commander Donar slowly walked down the row, eyeing each member of the assembled Hazard Team. The team had been a concept that Lt. Shashlik had suggested, and which Tai had wholeheartedly supported. Though the Kaylar had taken her inspiration from the *Voyager* logs which detailed how their security chief, Lt. Commander Tuvok had created the Hazard Team to deal with the Delta Quadrant's myriad threats; the concept also reminded Tai of Starfleet Special Missions.

Looking at each determined soldier, the Angosian nodded with approval. Lt. Shashlik had very good judgment. The biggest drawback, besides her absence was that of Lt. Zaylen, who was blocked from joining the rescue mission by Dr. Narsan. They were six strong. Two humans, a Farian, one Bolian, a Dimoran, and a Tiburon made up the team.

Each stood at rigid attention, bedecked in special black and gray hazard suits that were equipped with tactical eye displays, universal power adapters, personal transporter buffers, and other cutting edge devices. Each also bristled with a variety of weapons, some not Starfleet standard issue.

Donar paused and patted the Klingon tetryon Gatling gun slung off the shoulder of the beefy Bolian. Looking down, speaking more to the gun than he was its owner, Tai murmured, "I haven't seen one of these things in a long time." The man beamed with pride.

"I saw these chew up many a soldier during the Tarsian War," Tai coldly remarked, "Stow the pride Ensign Lott. This is not a prize, or toy, its weapon of war. It kills, nothing more."

The younger man quickly swallowed his smile. "I'm sorry sir," he said. Even though the man's hue was deep blue he was as green as an emerald Orion.

"It's alright," Tai said, more gently. He patted the man on the shoulder. "Just being an old warhorse is all. I was eager like you once...wanted to test out all the weapons in the armory until I really got that chance. It wasn't quite as much fun as it was in practice."

"I...uh...see sir," Lott awkwardly replied.

"No you don't, but you will," Donar ominously warned. He moved on past the chastened youth. "Lt. Brocc, is the team ready?" Brocc would be serving as Donar's second-in-command if the hazard team had to be activated. The small, hirsute Dimoran stepped forward. He reached up to Tai's navel. What the sapient lacked in height, his sniper skills made up for a thousand times over.

"Aye sir." He replied, his whiskers twitching in likely eagerness. Donar looked at the group again, and nodded his acceptance.

"I believe you're right Mr. Brocc," he said. Before he dismissed them, the armory door swished open. Lt. Commander Norrbom sauntered in. Tai wasn't the only one looking at her quizzically.



"You got a hazard suit in my size?" She asked, with a smirk. Before Donar could respond, the operations officer added, "And if you ask me my size, you won't live to regret it."

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## **Caldera**

The Great Tide roiled with anger...and anticipation. Hope, most of all, awaited Fear's return. Not only did Hope want to castigate Fear, but he also wanted to believe that Fear would return with the device or at least found some way to dispose of it safely.

Even though Hope knew that destroying the Romulan vessel a century ago had been the prudent thing, guilt still ate at him, over any loss of life. Hope couldn't accept that all gentle beings couldn't be reasoned with, with enough time, patience, and respect.

Perhaps it was a foolish notion to expect such behavior from aliens, when even half of his kind didn't exhibit such probity. Even now the fearful stood apart from the hopeful, cleaving a divide between them of barren rock that Hope didn't know could ever be traversed again.

It might take decades, centuries even, of contemplation and then argument to restore the Great Tide. But it might be better if the hopeful just left their paranoid kindred to stew in their own isolationism.

The thought had barely surfaced in his consciousness before it was snatched and spread across the entire group. The great expanse undulated in rapid agreement. Hope was barely conscious of it before he felt himself lifting, as part of the great sliver of the tide. Beneath them, the fearful roiled in disbelief and contempt. Perhaps it was better to leave that morass after all.

The hopeful coiled together, forming a great spire, kindred beneath Hope taking on the shape of nacelles. Once they were free of the planet's pull, they would imitate a warp reaction and soar among the stars.

The hopeful had just broken from the embrace of their home when they buffeted by astral winds strong enough to almost disperse them. The coil held together, forming solar sails to harness as much of the wind as possible. It was rough going.

The coil morphed into a sturdier facsimile, mimicking the *Starship Pacifica*, and the pelting against their skin was much less thundering. Hope rose from the new deck of the hastily formed bridge, taking on the guise of the barrel-chested Captain Terrell. Other hopefuls had taken on the guises of Terrell's crew.

"Investigate those winds," Hope requested of the science officer, now pale skinned, green-eyed, and with a bald elongated head. The subordinate nodded, looking down into the scope jutting up from his console.

"Captain," the troubled science officer said, seconds later.

"What's wrong?" Terrell's brow lined with concern.

The science officer shook his head, "It's...too late...the subspace fracture will reach Caldera in less than a minute."

"Subspace fracture?" Terrell's countenance began to melt.

"Once the fracture impacts the planet...Caldera will be destroyed," the science officer said.

"We must return," Hope declared.

"To warn the others?" The science officer still retained his alien form. "To help them escape?"

"No," Hope replied, shaking his head, knowing there was no time, "To perish with them."

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### ***The Burning Claw***

The hand left a stinging mark on Gedrik's cheek. He awoke with a start, automatically touching the burning cheek. He blinked to clear the cloudiness from his eyes. He tried to speak but his throat felt raw.

"You're awake, good," Nadeen stood over him, flexing the fingers of one of her leather gloves; a nasty-looking Romulan disruptor aimed dead at him. Beyond her, he noticed the dull gray walls of the holding cell. His disloyal crew had mutinied on him already.

"What is the meaning of this?" His anger and fear pushed question through the fire in his throat. He tried to stand up, but the hulking Capellan shoved the muzzle of the disruptor into his nose.

He yelped, but kept his place. The indignity of the action hurt as much as the physical discomfort.

"Did you really think I was going to let *you* run this ship?" She laughed, shaking her head.

"I have the loyalty of the men," Gedrik protested, "I have Mavaar, and nothing gets done on this ship without those two things."

"The men don't respect a brain with no guts for battle," Nadeen retorted, advancing on him. "A fool who vaporized his only protector." To his shame, Gedrik scooted back, his claws clicking on the cold metal floor. "And as for Mavaar..."

Beyond the Capellan, Mavaar slithered into the holding cell. She pressed herself against Nadeen, who stood rooted like tree in the middle of the cell. The Nuvian smiled, "Sorry lover but I decided to place my things in Nadeen's room."

"Brigands, reprobates, scum! The lot of you!" Gedrik hissed, "I gave you, I gave all of you a chance to be heroes, and you can't even conceive of how much money you would make off of that!"

"Oh yes, yes I can," Nadeen replied, "We're going to sell this device to the highest bidder."

"No, I won't allow it," he declared, "You need me, you need me to operate the device," he added, playing the only card at his disposal.

"I had a feeling you would draw that line in the sand," Nadeen replied, a knowing smile on her face. She cocked her head in Mavaar's direction. "Mavaar," she said softly.

"Way ahead of you Captain," the Nuvian pulled out a small controller. Gedrik's eyes widened. He knew exactly what that device was, what it could do.

He shook his head, waving his hands in obeisance, "Okay, okay, I'll do it!"

"I had the good doc do a little surgery on you while you were out," Nadeen grinned, "Mavaar."

"No," he pleaded again, as the Nuvian stepped from behind the ship's new master, thumb over the controller button. "No," he began, the word stretching out into infinity as the agony took him.

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### ***Jov'k Tholis***

#### ***Calcite-class battlecruiser***

#### ***Caldera Expanse***

Narskene skittered onto the bridge, hir eyes flashing as s/he took in the scene unfolding on the main viewer. A massive whipcord of twisted cosmic energy lashed into the planet Caldera slicing it two before the planet broke apart in large chunks. S/he stood in stunned silence, along the rest of hir crew, as the terrible hand of fate had swept the planet and what had been the life there to the astral winds like so much dust.

Slamming into the planet had not slowed the energy ribbon's course. It was headed right for them!

"Reverse engines!" Narskene was so frightened that s/he didn't use telepathy. Jaskeel, at the helm, clicked a rapid reply and the ship jerked around, engaging the warp engines seconds later.

"Full warp," Narskene spoke again, hir eye on the screen and the quickly advancing ribbon. "It is gaining on us!"

"It will overtake us if we continue on the present course," Jaskeel replied, also forgoing telepathic communication.

"What are the physical dimensions of that anomaly?" The weapons officer asked. Narskene turned to pin the lead scientist with a scolding stare. The science officer quickly replied.

Narskene next turned hir withering gaze on the weapons officer. "Well, Kokara?" The weapons officer calmly met hir captain's burning eyes.

"If we can't outrun the anomaly, perhaps we can fly above or below it." Narskene nodded, appreciative of the logic of Kokara's suggestion.

"Make the necessary adjustments Jaskeel," s/he commanded without asking if it was feasible. With a more deliberate pace, Narskene left the bridge. Once inside hir

domicile she collapsed in a shivering mess of jointed limbs, her entire frame quivering.

S/he wanted to project an air of confidence, but s/he really didn't want her crew to see how badly she was rattled. Even if they survived, the secret that the High Magistrates had ordered her to protect at all cost.

It was all s/he could do to keep her mental guards up while the bridge watched the destruction of Caldera. Narskene knew exactly what had caused the extinction level event and the Federation and the other quadrant powers would figure it out as well once they came to investigate what befell the Calderans.

The best way Narskene felt s/he could salvage the situation was to first survive and then find the culprits responsible for the cataclysm before anyone else did.

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### ***The Burning Claw*** **Laboratory**

The guards pushed Gedrik through the doors. Legs still rubbery from the torture, the deposed ship's master stumbled across the threshold and fell to the floor. "Oh, how the mighty fall," the mocking voice drew his attention.

While clambering to all fours, Gedrik looked up. Mavaar, now in a skintight, V-necked lavender catsuit, leaned against the crystalline device, stroking its dull orange exterior tenderly. Gedrik's eyes shifted to the device, unable to resist its mesmerizing pull, as he stood up.

"What are you doing? Don't touch it!" He snapped, lurching towards her. The Nuvian threw back her head and laughed.

"What a foolish snoot you are," she replied. "You think I'm merely a plaything for whoever controls this vessel? I'll have you know that the Alshain lord that first purchased me sent me to some of the finest academies in the quadrant. He liked his harem well educated, better to show off at his parties," she added, her eyes darkening, her laugh turning bitter.

"He thought the tracking device and the poison capsule he had implanted inside his slaves was enough to keep us under his thumb, and it was, for most of them," she shook her head, her focus on the past. He pondered rushing the distracted woman at that moment and slashing her throat. It would not help him escape, but it would certainly make the scientist feel better. "But not me," she snapped back to the present. "Oh no, during my studies, I also took courses on medicine and anatomy, I performed surgery on myself, removed both shackles and force fed my master his own poison. Stealing one of his shuttles, I sold *myself* to the Orions. I knew the last place the Alshain would look for a murderous runaway was an Orion slave processing station."

"Touching biography," Gedrik sniffed, forcing his claws to retract. "But none of that equips you to toy with a device of such..." his words caught in his throat as he gazed upon its jeweled casing, "immense power."

Mavaar, completely nonplussed, chuckled a thumb toward the back of the room. "That's what he's here for," she said, "and now you." Gedrik tore his eyes away to follow where the Nuvian pointed. Ramlo hung in a darkened corner, cradling the stump where his hand used to be. The man was bent over, broken.

"The death of his compatriot has stricken him profoundly," Mavaar said, "It has been like squeezing blood from a stone to get him to cough up as little as he has thus far, so I suggested to the captain that perhaps you could pull him out of his shell."

"And what if I can't?" Gedrik asked, his mind flashing back to severing the man's hand with a borrowed knife. The digits had continued twitching even after the hand fell to the deck.

"Then you will die, most painfully," the Nuvian promised. Gedrik gulped, knowing she meant every word. "If you had been able to divine the secrets of this contraption alone you wouldn't have kept the prisoners alive. Both of your intellects are necessary, and I'll be here to assist."

"And to insure that we don't escape?" Gedrik asked.

"Ah, your wits are returning," Mavaar smiled, pulling a small controller from the cleft in her ample cleavage. "I would so hate to activate the neural servos...on either of you."

"I'm sure you would," Gedrik didn't hide the sarcasm he felt. Their Nuvian overlord chuckled, while tucking the controller back into her bosom.

"You and the Arkenite need to get to work," she ordered, "because your lives really do depend on it."

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### ***Jov'k Tholis***

#### ***Calcite-class battlecruiser***

In deep solitude, away from the madness just outside the too fragile hull, Commander Narskene's thoughts leapt far beyond the Caldera Expanse. Hir thoughts rushed across the mindline of the Lattice and into the deepest reaches of the Ruling Conclave's Castemoot. Narskene sent an update, but also s/he requested information in return. S/he wanted the truth, the whole of it.

Narskene waited agonizing minutes before a flood of shared memories flooded into hir cortex....

S/he inhabited the mind and body of Ambassador Lelrene as s/he stood in a great, yet chilly, alien hall, surrounded by a gamut of other sentient beings as held a special stylus to commit the Tholian Assembly to the Polaric Test Ban Treaty more than a century ago...

...Those thoughts swirled into those of High Magistrate Pernox reporting before the Ruling Conclave, hir spindly arms held wide, in her oft noted dramatic fashion, "Though the non-aggression pact has been signed, I fear it only a temporary measure. After the Alpha Quadrant organics have been defeated, the Dominion will turn all of its might on us...and it is not a war we could survive," s/he had concluded to thunderous reaction, both verbally and telepathically. Pernox had withstood the mental pummeling to conclude, "We must be prepared for the imminent victory of the Dominion."

"And what would you propose?" The typically skeptical High Magistrate Zezrene, sitting back comfortably on hir haunches, had interjected. Pernox didn't hide hir distaste for hir old rival.

"That we continue developing polaric ion energy," Pernox had replied, causing another disruptive row across the Conclave.

"You cannot be serious?" Zezrene had scoffed. "To do so, to violate the treaty we signed with the Federation, the Romulans, it would unite them against us."

"The Federation is already against us," High Magistrate Cylax had replied.

"No, the Federation is fighting the Dominion," another Magistrate, Mokena had then interjected. "We are out of this conflict."

"It is foolish to think that we can stand by and remain untouched from the conflagration," Pernox said.

"We are not alone in being foolish then," Zezrene had riposted, "The Miradorn, the Romulans, and even the Bajorans have all taken the same action that this assembly has."

Pernox had pinned hir rival with a blazing stare. "The Miradorn only seek to side and reap the profits from the Dominion since their tide is currently cresting. The Miradorn are a short-sighted species. The Bajorans have little choice but to remain neutral, since their planet resides near the wormhole and would doubtlessly be the first conquered or razed by any invading Dominion force. As for the Romulans...they are merely biding their time, studying the Dominion for weaknesses, as we should do. I spent years serving on Romulus, I know its people and its leaders well."

"Then perhaps we should seek their counsel, to form a secret alliance with them against the Dominion?" suggested Magistrate Bethor.

"As I said, I know the Romulans...and they cannot be trusted, not at this stage of the conflict," Pernox had replied. "We are in this alone and only we can defend ourselves."

"I have not seen enough of the purported prowess of these Jem'Hadar to believe that our Chakuun warriors would fall so easily against them," Zezrene had declared.

"Then your eyes have been closed," Pernox had shot back. Laughter had filled the chamber. Even Zezrene had nodded hir head in acknowledgement that s/he had been bested.

Holding his arms forth again, Pernox had implored the conclave, "We must begin polaric ion energy exploration and we must begin posthaste!"...

...Magistrate Pernox had pressed his hands against the frigid window, gazing out at the sleek, crystalline vessel hanging in front of the space station. High Command had named it the *Eye of Tholia*. His eyes had traced along the triangular vessel's three tapered nacelles, and imagined the power from the polaric ion drive that would soon flow through them and propel the ship's pilots into galactic history.

All of his efforts of the last several years had led to this moment. Despite the relatively rapid conclusion of the war, the project had continued. Too many resources had already been invested in polaric ion energy exploration for it to stop, and so many of his comrades had been seduced by the power residing within polaric ions that even more funding and support had come after the Dominion collapsed.

Now all the weakened powers were scrambling to hold on to their empires while reasserting themselves. In this chaotic situation, the Tholians were primed to step onto the galactic stage in a way never before seen. Further who could stop them, even if they brazenly broke the test ban treaty? Neither the Romulans nor Federation was in any position to oppose them. Certainly the foolish Klingons might, and they would snarl and charge their way to their destruction.

*"Your pride radiates through your carapace,"* Arezene's voice had trilled in his mind, before the Tholian spoke aloud. "The deep orange flush quite suits you."

Pernox had turned from the window slowly, to try to appear unruffled by Arezene's sudden appearance. "What brings you from the bowels of Chronological Defense Corps Headquarters?"

The temporal agent's eyes had narrowed to slits. "You know exactly why I am here." The Chronological Defense Corps, charged with protecting against temporal incursions, had opposed her push for polaric ion usage. They had argued that the temporal properties of the energy could have unforeseen and destructive consequences. Wisely, the Ruling Conclave had ignored the hysterics from the self-important pseudo-scientists.

"This is a proud day, for all Tholians, even the naysayers," Pernox had offered, with as much charitableness that s/he could muster, which wasn't much.

"The sun has not set yet," Arezene had replied. "May I watch the disembarkation with you?"

"Do I have a choice in the matter?" Pernox had asked.

"There is always choice," Arezene had said, with some good humor. "What happened between us Pernox, we were once hive-mates."

"We were...of one accord, before you chose temporal investigations," Pernox had spat, not hiding her scorn. "All of that breeding, for naught."

Arezene had shaken his head, "I wish you understood how important my work is."

"You never let me," Pernox had rejoined.

"Perhaps that was my mistake," Arezene had offered. "A mistake that can be corrected. As we say in the Chrono Corps, 'there is always time.'"

Pernox had shuddered. "I see that you have not lost your penchant for questionable humor." Arezene had chuckled. As the sonorous computer voice of the countdown began, the two former hive-mates quieted and turned their attention back to the ship.

Pernox had allowed Arezene to touch her hand as the ship broke from the docking ring, gracefully turning to face, and acknowledge Pernox for his efforts. The High Magistrate had beamed with pride as the assembled guests joined in congratulating him. Pernox turned from the ship to bask in the praise. Even a begrudging Zezrene had bowed in respect.

Unable to mask the rush of color throughout his body, Pernox had barely heard Arezene. S/he had continued soaking up the adulation, until the temporal agent had roughly pulled on his arm. "Something's wrong," Arezene had declared.

Pernox had rounded on him, pulling her hand out of his. "How dare you!" S/he had hissed. As a member of the Ruling Conclave s/he could have anyone, even one of the protected professions, executed on the spot. Four-legged Chakuun soldiers, dressed in dull green environmental suits, tensed, their hands reaching for the ceremonial disruptor rifles slung over their shoulders.

S/he had quickly waved them to stay back. "Something is wrong," Arezene had repeated, completely oblivious to how close s/he was treading to execution. The temporal agent had pointed out the window.

Violent colors clashed within the transparent strips of the nacelles. The ship had stopped, and even from this distance, Pernox could see that it was shaking badly, as if the structural integrity field had collapsed. Pieces of hull blew from the ship, venting plasma. Some of the brave and curious had rushed to the windows to view the tragic malfunctions. As the ship had imploded, Pernox could only liken it to her career.

"Grand Admiral Gadol, what's happening?!" S/he had whipped around, to pinion the project lead. The heavy limbed Tholian had lumbered forth. Gadol didn't immediately answer, instead s/he cocked his head to the side.

"The command center is trying to hail the prototype," s/he had replied, "But the pilots are not responding...to either verbal or telepathic entreaties."

"There must be some way to stop this!" Pernox had declared, "We must save the lives of the pilots and prevent the ship from being destroyed. We can salvage this." S/he left unsaid that Pernox hoped the actions would also save his career.

*"I think we have bigger problems than that now,"* Arezene had projected the thought into his mind. Seconds later the station rocked and a blinding light overpowered the dimmers on the viewport windows. When Pernox's eyesight returned she saw nothing where the ship had been. The explosion had been all consuming....



.... "Or so they had thought," Narskene replied, breaking free of the past memories. She accessed those of the Chronological Corps next, to confirm what s/he suspected.

"The Eye of Tholia hadn't been destroyed," she surmised, "It had merely fallen through the cracks of time."

The High Magistrates were so desperate to possess the alien device because it wasn't alien at all, it was Tholian.

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## **Chronological Defense Corps Headquarters Tholia**

The temperature chamber was held aloft by a hover sled. It coasted quietly into the room. Trapped within the chambers tight confines, the former High Magistrate Pernox shifted his head as best s/he could, trying to absorb as much information as possible, to better effect his release.

Deep down s/he knew it was futile, but what else could s/he do? S/he had been bred to be a survivor, to triumph. And what should have been his crowning achievement, the decision that propelled him to first among the Magistrates, had led to his downfall.

"Sled stop," commanded the solemn voice of Commissioner Onnorax, the head of the Defense Corps. The sled complied immediately to the voice command. Pernox groaned. It was frigid inside the chamber, his cramped joints hurt, his breathing was restricted and each breathe drew as much ache as it did methane. His jailers could've easily transported him from his dungeon to the Chronological Defense Corps Headquarters, but they chose a slow and painful form of transportation instead. Through the small translucent screen, Pernox saw Onnorax, colored a deep crimson standing in front of a large display screen, with an energy web splayed across it. With the commissioner was High Magistrate Zezrene, trilling with barely contained glee, and a far grimmer Arezene. Zezrene burned with a confident solar orange while Arezene's carapace was a sorrowful gray. Pernox was certain that the hover sled had been Zezrene's idea.

Nearly beyond Pernox's vision, blending with the shadows were the night colored Assessors. S/he could not tell how many there were, their dark forms indistinct and ran together, mixing with the dimness ringing the room. His crystalline form tingled at their appearance. It was always a fateful sign whenever the law bringers appeared.

Making sure s/he was within Pernox's eyesight, Onnorax pointed one long arm back at the screen. "Do you have any idea what that web represents?"

Pernox took a few moments to answer, biting back an insolent retort. "No," s/he finally said.

"It is time," Onnorax replied, "Or better, it represents time," s/he paused, tracing a skeletal finger along one temporal strand. "Do you see this strand here? It

is not perfect, there are small, very small fractures between the strand. It is like this across the web, broken lines...everywhere. Do you know why that is?"

"No, I do not," Pernox said, not hiding the disdain in his voice.

"Each fracture represents a disruption in the space-time continuum, a rupture caused by *us*," Onnorax hissed the last word. S/he paused, shivering noticeably as his coloring turned from red to a deep violet. "Something I have sworn to prevent, your arrogance forced me to abrogate. We altered time because of your hubris, committed multiple temporal incursions to hide our violations of the test ban treaty."

"Will it be enough?" Zezrene asked. Onnorax shrugged his shoulders.

"Only time will tell," Onnorax soberly answered.

"May I speak?" Pernox interjected.

"Your words have already led us to the precipice of intergalactic pariah status," Zezrene ripped, "Haven't you spoken enough?"

"Let her speak," Arezene said, with force. S/he finally looked at Pernox, his gray pallor lightening. "Say your piece Pernox." She was stung that Arezene no longer prefaced her name with her title. Before her fall, to commit such a faux pas would have been inviting harsh punishment, maybe even death.

"I will never regret or apologize trying to put the Tholian people first," Pernox declared. "The ship was lost, along with its entire crew; there was no need to destabilize the timeline. Your actions have likely drawn the attention of your counterparts from the other powers."

"We were surgical, precise," Onnorax declared, with utmost assurance. "Our incisions were small and only involved episodes concerning our people."

"Unfortunately the commissioner was not allowed to merely erase you from the time stream," Zezrene interjected, none too pleased, "The other Magistrates remain pleased with your service on Romulus and your negotiations with the Dominion that kept us out of the war."

"But nearly everything else has been revised," Onnorax reasserted himself. "Except here," s/he scuttled over to the screen and tapped the center of it. "The locus of the disturbance." Pernox's eyes followed the commissioner's finger to the starburst within the center of the web. "There was too much temporal disruption. We could not simply erase the failed mission from time itself, the chroniton fallout was too great to get our agents close to." A sickening green overtook Onnorax's raging violet. If Pernox didn't feel such discomfort s/he could sympathize with the commissioner for having to betray his oaths to preserve the timeline.

"So there is a possibility that Starfleet's Department of Temporal Investigations will intervene?" Pernox asked.

"They already have," Onnorax flushed red again.

"I spoke with two of the humans, Lucsly and Dulmer via subspace," Arezene said, "I tried to allay their fears about the disturbance and the minor ripples. We doctored data to make it appear like a naturally occurring phenomenon. They seem mollified...for now."

"Then all should be well," Pernox said, "Release me at once so I can continue serving the Assembly."

Zeze's laugh screeched through the chamber's audio receiver. "You are not getting off so easily."

"If you think this imprisonment is easy, why don't we switch places?" Pernox retorted.

"It's far from over," Onnorax was now colored obsidian, as black as a starless void; as pitch as the Assessors. "The *Jov'k Tholis* has uncovered a massive polaric ion energy outburst in the Caldera Expanse...of Tholian manufacture."

"That's...that's impossible," Pernox shuddered.

"The *Eye of Tholia* wasn't destroyed," Zeze couldn't stop from gloating, "It was hurled backward into time, and across space. Now evidence of our furtive activities has returned to the Alpha Quadrant, literally at our doorstep."

"If we do not recover the polaric ion device, the Federation or another power will and they will discover who created it and falsified readings will not suffice the next time they seek an audience," Arezene said sadly, still not looking up.

"Commander Narskene is capable," Pernox threw out, after searching her cortex for information about the military officer. "Narskene's record is most impressive. From the Expansionist campaigns to testing the Federation's mettle this midcentury, Narskene had proven his worth. S/he will not fail."

"S/he will not," Zeze dipped her head, "you on the other hand..."

"Your consciousness will be deleted," one of the Assessors had slithered forward, so quickly that Pernox had not even seen or sensed movement. S/he blotted out Onnorax and the others. "Your memories will not be available to your successors."

"That is unconscionable!" Pernox bellowed. If her consciousness was not placed in the crystal memory upload to enter the Lattice that meant that not only would all of his knowledge be denied future generations, but also the wisdom that she had received.

"I know what you are thinking," Zeze's thoughts crawled into her mind, "But the Assessors have a way to separate your tainted engrams from your predecessors. They will live on, you will not."

"You can't do that!" Pernox pushed against the unforgiving confines of the chamber. The Assessor sunk back into the shadows, oblivious to his pleas or his pain.

"The decision has already been made," Arezene said, meeting her gaze one final time. "I am sorry."

"Let us begin then," Zeze remarked. "Assessors...."

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Private Quarters**

Commander Donar flinched at the momentary flicker of doubt. He had thought about contacting Juanita, but he didn't want to bother her, and the idea of calling her merely to vent felt unseemly.

Sighing, he pressed the door chime. The doors swished open immediately. The Angosian stepped from the cool, sterile corridor into a rainforest.

If he didn't know any better, he would think that Commander A'nurd's domicile was a holodeck. He touched one of large leaves, hanging from the trees, lining the room. Despite the sophistication of photonic technology, Tai had spent enough time in real jungles to know what real plants felt like. He rubbed the leave's dampness from his fingers, onto his pants leg. Droplets of warm, wet air splashed his face.

"Hello, hello Mr. Donar! This is a most welcome surprise!" Through the canopy of leaves, somewhere along the ceiling, he heard the Munzalan before he saw him. He caught glimpses of a series of bars spread along the ceiling as he saw A'nurd breaking through the brush and landing neatly on all fours before him. The Munzalan's uniform was disheveled and he worked furiously to correct that.

"My apologies for my appearance Commander, but I wasn't expecting company, and I like to hmmm...I prefer to tramp around my quarters au natural," he said, giving Tai a mental image that was not asked for.

"If I am disturbing you," Donar began, hoping that the engineer would provide him an easy out.

"No, no, not at all," the Munzalan replied. "Please, follow me to my living area."

"Oh, I thought this was your living space?" Tai asked.

"No," A'nurd shook his head, "This is my work area, I do my best thinking, problem solving and designing here. The living space is more Federation standard."

Tai nodded in understanding. "Lead the way then." Once ensconced on a comfortable keres hide couch." The Angosian patted the sofa pillow. "Keres hide, Chin'toka IV, how did you come by this?"

Sitting on the edge of his chair, opposite of Tai, A'nurd smiled, "I've got my ways," he grinned. "I picked it up after the war, while I was assigned to Engineering Corps crew doing clean up in the Chin'toka system."

The Angosian ran his fingers over the soft exterior, "Very rare indeed." A'nurd shrugged.

"I like rare things, reminds me of how rare and unique we all are," the Munzalan offered. "Care for some refreshments."

"No," Tai said after a pause.

"So, how can I help you sir?" A'nurd asked, his large golden eyes gleaming as he waited expectantly.

"I...uh...don't know how to say this," Donar found himself stumbling over his words, "Perhaps I shouldn't have come here." To that, A'nurd said nothing, maintaining the same serene expression on his face. He was content to let the

commander work it out at his own time and pace, or not at all, and Tai appreciated that.

Rubbing his legs and patting his knees, his nerves fluttering in his stomach, Tai croaked, "I needed...to...ah...I needed," he paused, scowling at himself, "I wished to talk to someone."

A'nurd cocked his furred head to the side, "I'm all ears."

"You know what we are likely to face once we reach the location of Ensign Kittles' last message," Donar said, referring to the information the captain dispensed at their last briefing. The Munzalan nodded in understanding.

"And you know as well that I will be leading a hazard team to storm the marauder vessel, if need be." A'nurd nodded again. "Well, it's...is this a confidential conversation?" Tai forgot to ask from the beginning.

"Absolutely," A'nurd replied with rock solid assurance.

"I am concerned about the placement of Lt. Commander Norrbom on the team," he finally admitted, feeling both a weight lift off his shoulders and his stomach muscles contracting at the same time.

"I see," A'nurd stroked his chin, "What is the cause of your concern?"

"Though I didn't put this team together, they are a tightly woven unit. They trust each other implicitly, and I had no qualms about taking over from Lieutenants Shashlik or Zaylen," Tai began, "But with Norrbom on the team now, it just adds a combustible element."

"So you think she will be destabilizing?"

The Angosian nodded his head, "It is a possibility. She is too much of a loose cannon, and though I trust the rest of the team to follow my orders without question, I can't say the same of her yet."

"It certainly doesn't help that Helen is well respected among all of the crew and that she might sow dissension even among the hazard team," A'nurd chimed in.

"I had that concern as well," Tai admitted.

"Have you talked to the captain about this?" The Munzalan asked. Tai grimaced, before shaking his head.

"It was the captain that made the decision to place Commander Norrbom on the team," Donar replied. "If I approached her with my concerns, it would be like I am second guessing her decision."

"Which you are," A'nurd gingerly pointed out. The Angosian scowled at the smaller man before shifting uncomfortably on the sofa.

"I know that," he snapped, "but I don't like the idea of voicing those concerns to the captain, of making my...discomfort known. I was trained to follow orders."

"Ah," A'nurd sighed, throwing his head back, "I understand now."

"You understand...what?" Tai asked, with mounting suspicion.

"You were trained to follow orders, in the Angosian military," the Munzalan began, "and perhaps later as part of Special Missions, and more than likely in the Security Division, but you are no longer in any of those things now. You are a first

officer. It is important to share all of your views about things vital to the safety of the ship and crew with the captain, even if they go against what she thinks is best."

"That is easier said than done," Tai admitted.

"But yet it must be said *and* done," A'nurd pressed. "Captain Redfeather is a great commanding officer, but she is just as fallible as the rest of us. I am certain that she thinks placing Helen on the hazard team will be a bonding experience. But if you feel that it could be too much of a distraction, it is your duty to inform the captain. Lives will be at stake when hazard team boards that outlaw vessel."

Donar nodded, the tension in his stomach easing. "You're right," he said. He gave the wise lemur-like engineer a closed mouth smile. "I guess...I am still adjusting to my new role. I have been so used to following orders, of just internalizing the decisions of my superiors, and been so intent on simply carrying them out, that I forgot how important the advisor role of my position as first officer is."

"Sounds like you didn't forget, so much as merely misplaced it," A'nurd chuckled. He shrugged, "It happens, you got a lot on your mind."

Tai grunted in acceptance of the man's characterization. "Thank for this A'nurd."

"Anytime," the Munzalan said, "Sure you don't want something to drink or eat? I have tulaberries, lightly chilled in the refrigeration unit."

"Perhaps some other time," Donar said, meaning it. "I need to speak with the captain."

"Understood," A'nurd said, standing up. Tai followed suit. The Munzalan held up his hand and Donar grasped it firmly. Before either man could disengage, the lighting in the room flashed red seconds before a klaxon blared from bulkhead speakers.

*"Red alert! All hands to battle stations!"* Captain Redfeather's voice commanded, *"Red alert! All hands to battle stations!"*

"I guess the talk is going to have to wait," Donar said, now all business.

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## ***The Burning Claw*** **Laboratory**

Still cradling his injured arm, Lt. Ramlo held the spanner aloft, contemplating whether he should crack it into the base of Gedrik's skull. The lanky Venturi was hunched over the polaric ion regulator, completely entranced by each groove in its crystalline shell and completely oblivious of the danger he was in.

Of course the horned reptilian feared Mavaar far more than he did Ramlo. The sultry Nuvian stood propped against a wall near the entrance, arms folded over her sculpted midsection, the position only making her cleavage more noticeable.

The Arkenite science officer was far beyond any base feelings the woman's suggestive pose could elicit. Shashlik's head flying through the air ran through his

mind on a constant loop. He couldn't block it out; it filled both his sleeping and waking hours, a scream that could find no release building within him.

He briefly pondered unleashing that scream on Mavaar first, to eliminate her as a threat before turning on Gedrik. Then his wild thoughts went to the device itself, cracking open its plating, igniting its fire, and consuming all within its flames.

"Spanner," Gedrik rasped, holding up an insistent hand, fingers wagging. The man wasn't even looking at him. But Mavaar was. Her violet eyes narrowed and she pushed off from the wall.

"Something wrong Lieutenant?" She asked. Ramlo gulped, his throat bone dry.

"Scanner," Gedrik demanded, his eyes now raking over the science officer. He snatched the device from Ramlo's hand. "What's your problem?" He grumbled, arching back over. Mavaar continued to approach, and Ramlo found himself rooted in place, buffeted by fear, hate, and revulsion at his own cowardice. While his emotions surged, Gedrik ran the scanner along a seam on the regulator's hull, and gasped with delight seconds later. "Ah success."

This drew both Ramlo's and Mavaar's attention. "Soon the secrets of the regulator, of my people's salvation will be known to me," Gedrik promised, seemingly more to himself than the others in the room.

"It's kind of like stealing fire, wouldn't you say Lieutenant?" Mavaar asked, suddenly beside him, her voice melodious.

The Arkenite didn't respond, instead he stared dully at the circuitry behind the open paneling. "What is that Mavaar?" Gedrik looked up, clearly annoyed that someone had spoken and broken the spell the regulator had on him. Ramlo was surprised that the Venturi had seemingly forgotten the torture he had just recently endured, but agony was all Ramlo could think about, when he wasn't assaulted with memories of Shash's death or the blood drenched thoughts of vengeance.

"I thought the Starfleeter would catch the reference," Mavaar said, not hiding her disappointment, "Since he has spent so much time among the humans. It comes from one of their myths. Prometheus was a deity who stole fire from his fellow gods and gave it to mortals. A seminal event, the discovery of fire, explained in a religious parable."

"I see, a primitive tale for a barbaric species," Gedrik sniffed. "What does that have to do with this regulator?"

"The danger of knowledge and the destructiveness inherent even in great engines of progress," Mavaar replied, "Especially in great engines of progress."

"Only if they are in the wrong hands," Gedrik replied, "which they no longer have to be."

"What do you propose?" Mavaar asked.

"There's still a way for you to make this right, for us to save a world," Gedrik pleaded, standing up again. Mavaar moved a hand to her bosom. The Venturi flinched and stepped backward. "Please, there has to be more to life than money. Help me save my home."

Mavaar laughed, "You silly, sentimental fool. There is more to life than money that is true. It's called leverage, which a lot of money buys a lot of. And you have neither."

"I will no longer help you," he declared.

"Oh really," her fingers inched closer to the crevice. But this time Gedrik stood his ground. Ramlo, wracked with torment, numbly aware of the exchange.

Gedrik balled his fist around the spanner. Mavaar smirked at the gesture. "Try it," she challenged. "Get back to work," she said, turning her back to him. A raw cry ripped from Gedrik's lips as he charged the Nuvian, the spanner held high.

Mavaar moved quickly, her boot arcing around to connect with Gedrik's chin. His neck jerked back with a sick snap and the man crumbled to the floor. Her eyes widening in surprise, the Nuvian rushed to check the man's pulse. After a few moments, she looked up at the barely sensate Ramlo. Her eyes had clouded over. "He's dead," she announced calmly. "Nadeen is not going to be pleased."

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### ***The Burning Claw*** **Laboratory**

Nadeen indeed was displeased. Ramlo stood against the wall, watching the large woman fuming; anger building inside her like a pressure cooker.

"You killed Gedrik?" Her broad nostrils flared as her eyes took in the man's corpse, crumpled like discarded trash at her feet. "The only person who could divine the secrets of that infernal device!" She jutted a dagger-like finger at the crystalline regulator.

"We still have the Starfleet scientist," Mavaar offered, from the other side of the regulator, smartly out of punching range. Nadeen's smoldering gaze found Ramlo next. The man wanted to both shrink from it, and also put her eyes out.

"Look at him, he's almost catatonic," she scoffed. "You've screwed us over majorly Mavaar," Nadeen declared. "I don't know how I'm supposed to get top dollar for a device we can't even explain how it functions."

"Leave that to me," Mavaar's voice took on a calculated sultriness. "I'm well versed in speaking a language that any Orion slaver or merchant can understand." She stroked the device and purred.

Unfazed, Nadeen glared at her again, "You better." She warned before activating the door panel. Turning around, in the threshold of the door, she pointed at Ramlo, "And do something with that," she said, "If he is of no use to us, then jettison him like the rest of the trash." She glanced at Gedrik, shook her head, and spat on the dead man before leaving.

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### ***USS Erickson*** **Main Bridge**



Captain Redfeather forced herself not to sit on the edge of her seat. Her body strained against the comfortable back of her chair, but she forced herself to stay there. She had to look cool, not only to her crew but to whomever mastered the marauder vessel.

"Increase magnification," she ordered ops again. Lt. Commander Norrbom quickly complied. Wyoma still squinted through the thick haze of gases veiling the cruiser. "So, that's an *Antares*-class freighter eh?"

"Yes sir," Helen replied. The ship's tan bumpy hull was attached to a singular circular warp nacelle.

"I'm not going to even ask what the standard weapons and shields are for it, because I know that they've doubtlessly made changes," Redfeather surmised.

"An apt decision," the taciturn Commander Donar said from her side. Wyoma briefly regarded him. She was surprised that the man had spoken at all. His focus seemed completely on the ship before them, his dark eyes gleaming with predatory anticipation. It reminded her of a Le-matya she had once seen in captivity on Wrigley's Pleasure Planet; a bound animal hungry to break free of its cage and devour. She shivered slightly at the comparison.

The captain couldn't help but look back at Norrbom. Momentary doubt struck her about the decision to put Helen on the hazard team. She had thought that if anyone besides herself could rein Tai back, if he broke his leash, it would be the operations officer. Now the captain wasn't so sure. But there was no going back on her decision. She needed to trust both Helen and Tai that they could pull this off.

"Our readings are inconclusive regarding the full complement of weapons aboard that ship," Helen remarked, "but it is doubtlessly bristling with them."

"What about our people?" the captain asked, "Are you picking up any Arkenite or Kaylar life signs?"

"There is a faint Arkenite life sign," Helen replied, "but it is...flickering...diffused by polaric ion energy."

"So they do possess the regulator," Tai stated, grinding his teeth.

"It appears so...sir," Norrbom answered.

"And what about Shash?" Wyoma asked, her heart in her throat.

"Nothing," Helen said grimly, "I'm not picking up anything." A pall fell over the bridge as the possibility that they had lost one of their own began to sprout in their minds. The idea that Shashlik was gone tore at the captain's façade. Though they had never been chummy, she had personally picked Shashlik to be a part of the *Erickson* crew and had been impressed with how much the woman had grown in her position and as part of the extended family aboard the ship. The woman had saved her life more than once, and many among the crew could claim the same. After all they had been through, the thought that she would meet her end, here, at the hands of grubby criminals, it was nearly impossible to contemplate.

"Isn't it possible that the readings could be off, that maybe they have Shash somewhere that screw up our sensors?" Lt. French asked hopefully. Thankfully the

man's question broke the dark cloud forming over the bridge. It was a long shot, but plausible enough for the captain to clutch on to.

"It is...possible," Helen admitted, obviously doubtful.

Sitting up in her seat, she tugged down on her tunic. It had been a habit since she had saw Captain Picard do it at her commencement. She thought emulating great captains sometimes might allow some of that greatness to rub off on her. "We are in communications range," she replied, more of a statement of confirmation than a query.

"Aye sir," Helen replied.

"Hail them," Redfeather said. While Norrbom followed her orders, the captain coughed to clear her throat. She wanted to sound as in command, as in control as possible.

"The ship is not responding to our hails," Helen remarked seconds later, with obvious annoyance.

"Try again," the captain commanded, "And Mr. Holcus," she addressed the Tygarian manning the tactical console, "power our weapons. Be prepared to fire at my mark." The rangy, leathery reptilian briskly nodded.

"Aye captain," he rasped.

"Still no response," Norrbom said, a pinched tone in her voice. She definitely fuming now, Wyoma realized. Tugging her tunic once more, the captain spoke up.

"Unidentified vessel, this is the *Starship Erickson*, Captain Wyoma Redfeather in command," she stated with authority, "We know that you have two of our crewmen. Return them and hand over the polaric ion device, or we will be forced to take more aggressive action against you."

"No response," Helen said after a few moments. Tension ratcheted up on the bridge.

"Mr. Holcus," the captain's voice felt tight, even to her own ears. "Prepare to fire a glancing blow, off of their bow, at my mark."

"Captain, wait," Helen interrupted, "They've just ejected something. Something very small."

"On screen," Redfeather said, "And more power to forward shields." Once Helen directed the ship's sensors to pinpoint the object, at maximum magnification, loud gasps filled the bridge, as did Norrbom's vocal curse. Tai growled deep in his throat. Unbidden, her hand covered Wyoma's mouth in shock.

Shashlik's severed head, neatly sliced off at the neck, rolled endlessly through space, toward them.

"Helen," Redfeather said, finding her voice again after several seconds. The shields opened up just enough for a shaft of light envelop the murdered security officer's head. Wyoma pledged to recover the rest of her body. Now she was on the edge of her seat, not caring how it looked.

"It appears that the pirates have given us their answer," she said coldly, now devoid of doubt...or charity, "Mr. Donar, I want you and the hazard team to reply in kind."

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## ***The Burning Claw*** **Command Deck**

Nadeen wished she had established visual communication with the Starfleet vessel only to see the look upon it's master's face once they recognition dawned over the gift she had sent them. The woman chuckled at the thought, her imagination providing a good enough facsimile. "Helm, back us off, one-quarter impulse," she ordered. She didn't want to leave, just yet.

"The *Erickson* is matching course, and charging weapons," Gotash said from ops, a tremulous tone in her voice. The Venturi could be such cowards, Nadeen thought.

"Let them," the woman said, "That's exactly what I want them to do. Lure them in."

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## ***USS Erickson*** **Main Bridge**

Captain Redfeather rubbed her chin. "Their behavior is peculiar," she said.

"That's an understatement," Helen remarked. "Let's just wipe the floor with these scum buckets and be done with it."

"It's almost as if they are taunting us," Tai surmised, equally perplexed and concerned. "Why haven't they gone to warp? Or even full impulse? Why not institute full evasive maneuvers?"

"All good questions," Redfeather concurred.

"Our scans, for what they are worth, don't indicate any damage to their propulsion engines," Norrbom offered, "so they could try to outrun us. I'm surprised they haven't scurried off."

"Surely they know that we can catch up to them," Lt. French chimed in. "No way I'm going to let that garbage scow beat us."

"They want a fight," Donar said, "There can be no question of that. And they are trying to lead us into a position that could be advantageous to them."

"How so?" Redfeather asked. "I don't care how souped up that tub is, it doesn't have our armaments or shielding. If not for Ramlo and the regulator I've would've sent a quantum torpedo up their exhaust minutes ago."

The Angosian tapped his chin, formulating his reply. His eyes widened and he slammed both fists on his armrests. "Pull back, pull back, now!"

Without asking why, the captain joined the man's chorus. "Do as he says Mr. French!" But before the younger man could comply, the minefield erupted.

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### ***The Burning Claw*** **Command Deck**

Nadeen gave into the cheers that broke out across the bridge. She savored the triumph as the antimatter mines exploded like fireworks around the Starfleet vessel. The Starfleeters had been so stricken by their headless colleague and so intent in scanning for the Arkenite that they hadn't paid more attention to the Klingon antimatter mines that Nadeen had spread around *The Burning Claw*.

It had been one of her first orders upon assuming command. Deoch had always been stingy in their usage, due to their expense, and Gedrik had been ignorant to their potential. Nadeen knew enough about Starfleet to know that they never left their compatriots behind and that a starship was doubtlessly on their trail.

Thankfully the *Erickson* had waded perfectly into her trap. And she had made sure to add to the potency of the mines by using all of them to increase their destructiveness. Once the intense flare dissipated, Nadeen jumped from her seat. Still glowing, the crew now looked upon her like they might a deity. Even Deoch had never taken on and defeated a Federation starship before.

"What are your orders now captain?" Gotash asked. Nadeen looked at the viewer. The *Erickson* listed, it's battered hulls half darkened by power outages and perforations.

"Gather a boarding party," she ordered the too fragile Venturi. "We're going to raid that boat."

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### ***The Burning Claw*** **Laboratory**

Mavaar pushed him against the wall, her body pressing against Ramlo. In the distance he heard a terrible rumbling, but thoughts of what was going on beyond this ship, outside this room, were secondary. With one hand she stroked her inviting cleavage. With the other, she caressed the Arkenite's bald head. "Pity that Gedrik didn't implant neural servos in you." She purred, her breath warm and soft on his ear. Even her smell was intoxicating. "Perhaps there are...other ways to compel you to continue working on the device." The woman pressed her body against him, her breathing becoming husky. Her hands cradled the back of his head and she pushed him towards her open, moist lips.

"Boarding party to the cargo bay," Nadeen's voice squawked through the room's intercom. "*The Erickson is ours for the taking!*"

*"Erickson,"* Ramlo muttered, the name of his ship, the memories of his colleagues breaking through his haze. "They are in danger." He tried to break free of the woman, but her grip was too strong. His green eyes water as a heavy musk exuded from the woman's pores. What little scientific mind he had left made him realize that Mavaar was using pheromones to cloud his mind, to weaken his resistance.

"The only thing you can do to save them is finish learning about this device," Mavaar whispered. "This can be the leverage you need to purchase the life of your friends." She kissed him forcefully, setting his mind and body on fire. It took all he had to pull away from her. He gasped hungrily for air and Mavaar laughed.

"You have admirable restraint," she conceded. "But no one, save the most asexual being, can resist me for long."

"Pheromones," he said, "You're using pheromones against me."

She cocked her head to the side, a quizzical look giving way to one of appreciation. "You continue to impress me Arkenite," Mavaar replied. "During my time among the Orions I learned a lot about their irresistible 'slave' women. Their beauty was obvious, but that isn't what bent so many of their purported masters into lapdogs. Orion women secrete a pheromone that affects the metabolisms of males of many species, turning them into obedient stooges. One of the Orion women 'donated' a gland that I had surgically implanted." The Nuvian smiled with satisfaction.

"So even your charms are fake," Ramlo surmised. The woman frowned and the air grew heavy with her scent.

"We'll just see how well you can resist this time," she said, her mouth opening again, her ripe lips beckoning. Ramlo's knees began to buckle. His lips puckered, wanting to join with Mavaar's. Unbidden, his arms embraced her, and she gasped in delight at his roughness. Mavaar closed her eyes, preparing to sink him with her kiss. Ramlo, not wanting to see the oncoming doom, closed his eyes as well.

In the darkness of his mind, a towering figure formed: Shashlik. The Kaylar was dressed in gleaming ancestral blue armor and flowing golden robes, her arm-length tattoo resplendent. Her eyes shone like stars as he gazed upon her. She looked down at him, through him. Her lips parted and he waited eagerly to hear what she would tell him from beyond. "Just head butt the whore already!" The fearsome Kaylar bellowed.

When Ramlo's eyes blinked open, Mavaar's lips were just brushing against his. He reared back and before the woman noticed, lunged his head at her. The heavy cranium that supported his three-lobed brain cracked into the woman's head. Even her own ridged forehead provided little protection.

She woman screamed as she fell backward. One hand automatically reached for the bloody indentation on her forehead. Her face painted dark red from the seeping blood, Mavaar glared at him, her succulent lips now becoming a violent slash. "I'm going to take that reconstructive surgery cost out of your hide."

As if hearing a voice in his ear, Ramlo bent low, trying his best to remember the combat moves Shash taught him. To the raging Nuvian, he simply replied, "Bring it tramp."

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## ***USS Erickson*** **Holodeck One**

Lt. Brocc was roused by the screaming. The Dimoran had sought to get in just a spot more of training before he was called into action. Accessing his favorite training program, safeties off, the Dimoran had immersed himself in a Tzenkethi War scenario. Perhaps it had something to do with racial memory, but he loved besting felinoid opponents; one of his few regrets being that he was too young during the Tzenkethi conflict to see if the reality would be as satisfying as his fantasies. Brocc had just been about to separate the Tzenkethi Autarch's furry head from his equally hirsute body, with the felinoid brute's own scimitar, when his universe had turned upside down. When he awoke, his whole body was in pain. He blinked rapidly, spots flashing before his eyes. He lifted up, grimacing in pain. His arm hung loose and useless at his side. The lighted grid running crisscrossing the room was dim, which told him the *Erickson* was running on auxiliary power.

With his good hand, he tapped his combadge. There was no accompanying chirp. "The communications system is down too," he mumbled. His eyes now adjusted to the wan lighting, Brocc recovered his phaser. Grunting with every movement, Brocc stuck the phaser in the belt of his uniform and stood up on shaky legs, one bruised knee especially protesting. He lurched to the door access panel. First he tried the intercom, hoping that the problem with his compin was localized. Not even getting static, he knew it was much bigger. "Door open," he tried. Nothing happened. "Damn," he grumbled, tapping in the code for a manual override.

The door screeched open, and the Dimoran jumped back instinctively as a shaft of sizzling crimson light passed by the door. He heard a sickening sizzle and then a thump. He didn't know who had been hit, but the security officer knew right off that the gunman was an enemy. Starfleet weapons didn't emit red beams.

Yanking his phaser out of his belt, Brocc took a quick peek down the hall before he let off several shots. He had spotted two buccaneers and was pleased to hear two shrieks and thuds. Exhaling, his weapon at the ready, Brocc chanced taking another look out into the hall. Two dark lumps lie before him.

His weapon steady, the Dimoran slowly approached them. They could be trying to deceive them. One was a Draylaxian and the other a stout Attrexian. But as he got closer, he saw that their weapons, one a Klingon-style disruptor, the other a Valerian compression rifle, were just out of reach of both men. To be certain though, Brocc shot them both again, on a harder stun setting. Turning from them, he eyed their victim.

His anger was stoked as he saw that the victim was an unarmed Antaran female, her blue uniform connoting that she was from the sciences division. Brocc said a quick prayer for her. He hadn't known the fair-skinned humanoid, but she had been one of the nurses that had administered the hazard team's final checkups in preparation for this mission.

A mission that had come to their doorstep, the Dimoran realized. "These bastards don't know what they just stepped into," he promised the dead woman.

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### ***USS Erickson***

#### **Main Engineering**

Chief Engineer A'nurd didn't hesitate. With a war cry, he jumped on the console, turning quickly and used it to leap at the Gorn marauder. With claws and teeth bared his fingers dug into the startled reptilian's large eye sockets like he was searching for plumb fruit. The massive lizard shrieked in agony, which only encouraged A'nurd to dig deeper. Ripping the wet orbs from both holes, A'nurd had only a second to celebrate his triumph before he was thrown from the wildly, thrashing, deeply wounded pirate.

He was still clutching the man's eyes when he slammed into a bulkhead with such force that he could feel his skull cracking. Holding the gristly gift close to his chest, the Munzalan sank into oblivion.

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### ***USS Erickson***

#### **Main Bridge**

Lt. Commander Norrbom groaned in pain as the beam was lifted off her. Commander Donar bent down, his eyes roving her body, checking for injuries. "Commander Norrbom, can you move?" Besides a fine scarlet scar running across his face, the man appeared none the worse for wear. Now, she on the other hand...

Helen tested her limbs, grimacing with each movement. "Yeah," she said after few seconds. "Brace yourself," the Angosian said, grabbing the woman with surprising tenderness. He stood her up, and when her legs started to buckle, held her firm.

"I'm okay," she said after too long a period. Helen pushed off from him. He steadied her after her body became wracked with coughs due to the thick smoke on the bridge. "The captain?" She asked, searching the dim bridge. The emergency lighting was veiled by smoke. Even the main viewer was opaque. The fires spread across the bridge provided the most light.

The operations officer halfway didn't want the few bridge crew on their feet to put them out. Though she saw a harried Lt. French ably doing his best with a fire extinguisher. "The captain?" She asked again, scouring the bridge, before looking squarely at Tai.

The man's broad chest constricted. He looked away. "Oh no," Helen gasped. "No." She saw a pile of wreckage entombing the captain's chair.

"Commander," Donar touched the woman's shoulder. "The captain...is not dead." He said.

"Oh thank God, where is she?"

"She is propped by her chair," Donar said. "From what I can tell she's suffering severe internal bleeding. I don't know how much time she has."

"Beam her to sickbay," she snapped, just remembering to leave off, "You idiot."

"Shipboard communications are down, almost everything else is down as well," Donar said, "And the ship and the rest of the crew must be my prime concern."

"Like hell," Helen said, limping past the man. She would take the captain to Sickbay herself, even if she had to limp all the way. His hand shot out, grabbing her shoulder, and this time not so gently.

"Your first duty is to this ship as well," Tai's voice was like steel. "I'm assuming command and you are now the first officer."

The woman swallowed her anger. "What are your orders," she gritted her teeth, forcing out the words, "*Captain?*"

"Getting this ship's systems back online, and finding out where that pirate vessel is, and being prepared for what they are going to do next," he said. "Then we'll see about Captain Redfeather, I promise."

Norrbom wanted to argue, but she knew that the man's logic was sound, and she suspected that Wyoma would be disappointed in her if she bucked the man's orders.

"Can you walk unaided?" The Angosian asked.

"I think so," she said, favoring her right leg. "I can hop just fine."

"Good," he nodded, "Find an operational console and do what you can to get shipboard communications back. We need to get in touch with Engineering to check the status of warp containment and main power."

"Got it," She said, using the consoles to steady herself as she hopped in search of a working console. "Found one," she said, a bit too relief, because she took in more smoke-filled air. Bending over hacking, her eyes watering, Helen was completely defenseless as several red beams of light whined into existence on the bridge.

"What in the nine hells?" Donar gasped. Norrbom jerked up, surprised to hear fear in the Angosian's voice. A tall, muscular dark skinned woman faced him, holding a disruptor dead at his chest.

"Funny meeting you here husband," the woman smirked.

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## ***The Burning Claw***

### **Laboratory**

Lt. Ramlo refused to cry. Mavaar bit down hard into the stump where his hand used to be, drawing blood. Fueled by pain as much as anger he pushed forward,



ramming the woman into the wall. She let go, along with a gush of air and a spray of blood, his blood flying from her mouth.

He punched her repeatedly with the stump, howling in rage and pain each time it connected with her face. Feeling the woman slacken beneath him, he slid the stump under her throat, pressing hard against it while he continued to whale on her with his good hand. Guided by Shashlik's demanding voice, the Arkenite continued driving his fist into the woman's face, ignoring the cracking of his knuckles or the blood running between his fingers.

Feral, her survival instinct activating, Mavaar began kicking at his knees and shins, while her fingers raked into his face, drawing blood, ripping skin. But still Ramlo held on, drawing on adrenaline and his formidable strength.

Despite the Nuvian's prowess, Arkenites were gifted with a natural strength, and coupled with the fighting techniques Shash had taught him, the woman stood no chance. A small part of him hated what he was doing to the woman, demolishing her face as his forearm found her carotid artery.

Desperate, Mavaar released a cascade of pheromones, creating a fog so heady that it made Ramlo's head spin. He released his hold on her, stumbling backward, trying to clear the air with both hands.

Grinning savagely, moving with feline grace, the woman pounced. She went for his eyes, her fingers digging into one. Ramlo yowled, smacking her hand away, the wild gesture smacking her face. Mavaar fell away from him. The Arkenite's tears were mixed with blood. Glaring at her with one eye, he approached her.

Mavaar circled him, her beautiful throat bruised from his forearm, her hair askew; the beautiful façade she had constructed had fallen away. "I'm going to kill you," she said, through ragged gasps of breath, her whole body heaving, "I don't care whether you figure out the device or not. And if Nadeen has a problem with that, that's her issue." On the edge of his vision, Ramlo caught the tip of the device behind him, pointed like a dagger at his back. The Nuvian had carefully maneuvered him into a bad position.

"If you thought I was going to help you, you're not a complete accessory," he said, hoping he found the right insult. The woman snarled and lunged at him. Ramlo nodded with brief satisfaction that he had found a sore spot.

Unlike what she wanted, he didn't jump backward and spear himself on the device. He moved to the side and allowed her momentum to thrust her past him. With a sharp elbow to her back, he assisted in driving the woman into and through the tip of the crystalline device.

Mavaar sighed, gurgling blood as her body twitched spasmodically, pinioned to the device. The Arkenite flinched at the awful wet sound of sliced through flesh.

Ramlo spent little time admiring, or regretting his handiwork. Hopped on adrenaline, he rushed to a computer console and accessed the ship's main computer. The Arkenite shook his head, not completely surprised by the pirates' lack of security protocols guarding their central computer. What corsair would expect an

attack coming from inside their ship, through their circuitry? “Well, they are about to find out,” he muttered.

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Armory**

Vorvi slapped the Osaarian plasma charge on the door, thumbed its activation button, and ran around the corridor. Joining Nolun and the others, he covered his ears and closed his eyes as an intense flash and terrible rattling filled the corridor. Nostrils twitching from the acrid smell of scalded metal and burned plastic, Vorvi led his party back into the corridor, toward the room. For him this was the true treasure aboard the ship. He didn’t care about hostages or slaves, but access to Starfleet weaponry would make *Burning Claw* one of the most fearsome pirates around.

The boarding party gasped with childish delight as they ran their fingers across the assortment of phaser pistols, compression rifles, and Starfleet issue plasma charges, stuffing as many as the could into the large sacks hanging from their sides.

“Hurry, hurry,” Nolun said, “We must return these to *Burning Claw* so that we can return to procure more bounty.”

“Such as?” Bargan, a pallid Ornaran, asked, as he continued stuffing power cells into his already bulging bag. Vorvi would be surprised if they just didn’t have to beam the man directly from the armory instead of the agreed exit point. “This here alone, should net me, I mean, us plenty felicism.”

“Well, I’m not leaving until I get me a replicator,” huffed Grisso, the Tellarite being as thickset as Bargan was gaunt. “I’m tired of our malfunctioning one.”

“Do you have any idea how long it would take to uproot one of those things?” Chided Rothal, a surly bearded, red Orion. “Do you really think that this crew isn’t going to rally or restore this ship’s power soon?”

“Sindull has taken over Engineering by now, we control this vessel,” Bargan shot back. “Hells, we should just take this ship and leave the Starfleet crew on *Burning Claw*.”

“They can’t all fit on *Burning Claw*,” Grisso loudly snorted.

Bargan chuckled, “I know,” he replied. “It would be fun spacing excess crew members. Would insure compliance.”

The Tellarite grunted, “I got to admit, that does make sense, and sounds like great entertainment.”

“Shut up you two!” Vorvi snapped, “Let’s go.”

“Well, look at this?” The hulking Ktarian Najok came from the back of the room, his sack empty, but the man held two stylized duty uniforms in his hands.

“What is that?” Nolun asked.

"Some kind of armor, very high-tech," Najok said, his eyes gleaming with avarice even in the wan lighting.

"How many more are there?" Bargan asked, his hands twitching.

"A whole locker full," Najok said. "These are probably worth more than all of the bounty we've seized thus far."

"Let's get them then," Vorvi ordered the others.

"Stop where you are," a voice bellowed from out in the hall. The pirates turned slowly to see a lithe Farian standing in the doorway, his compression rifle aimed and ready. "Drop everything and put your hands up."

Nolun's laughter sounded like nails on a chalkboard. "You can't take us all."

"Perhaps not," the dark haired man said, cocking his head to the side. "But my friend Lott here, that's another story."

A strapping Bolian stepped into view, a large, multi-barreled weapon hanging from his shoulder.

"Frinx!" Bargan said, dumping his bag as his hands went up. Most of the others followed suit. Except for Vorvi and Nolun. Both Venturi dropped their bags, but grabbed their weapons. They aimed them at the Starfleet officers.

"What are you doing?" Grisso cried at his compatriots.

"Shut up coward," Nolun barked, "If we were back aboard *Burning Claw* I would space the lot of you for giving up."

"That's right," Vovri said, his finger curling around the trigger of his Vendikan sonic disruptor. He glared at the Starfleeters, seeking to find their fear, but he found only resolve. Despite that, he still boasted, "It looks like it's a standoff."

"No, it's not," the Bolian declared before he angled his monstrous weapon and unleashed its fury.

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## ***The Burning Claw*** **Laboratory**

Once Lt. Ramlo gained access to the main computer, he sealed the doors to the lab, and placed a forcefield around them. Feeling secure, he pounded in more commands, his speed slowed because he could only type on the archaic console with one hand.

"Here goes the shields," he said, deactivating the cruiser's main defense. "Now, the weapons," he said, almost gleeful to switch off the ship's offensive systems. Now the ship was prostrate before the *Erickson*.

He next took over the ship's propulsion systems, locking out access from the scow's engineer. "Now, time to talk to the bridge," he muttered.

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## ***USS Erickson*** **Corridor**

Lt. Brocc bit down so hard that he drew blood from his bottom lip. "The joint is back in the socket," Ensign T'Fal told him seconds later. The Dimoran, ignoring the pain, rotated his shoulder, testing out the Tiburon's assertion. It throbbed, but he would survive. And he was grateful to have more mobility.

The two Hazard Team members pressed themselves against a wall, keeping out of the throng of crewmen coursing through the halls like a chaotic river of flesh. The mass had pushed them together, and they had spent a moment trying to corral the flood, to get the crewmen into the relative safety of their quarters. Some had listened, some had not. Brocc could no longer concern himself with either.

"Did you see any of the rest of the team on your way here?" He asked the elephantine-eared Tiburon; nearly yelling to make sure the man heard him.

T'Fal winced slightly, and Brocc apologized. "It's okay sir," the Tiburon flicked one of his floppy ears. "These things pick up sound pretty well, even in a cacophonic environment like this."

"So, you saw no one?" Brocc repeated.

"No sir," he said, "I was headed to the armory when I ran into you sir. Maybe the rest of the team is there?"

"Perhaps," Brocc said, "But we'll save the reunion. I need you to go down to Engineering. I'm going to bridge. If there are two areas these brigands are going to want to gain control of, it would be those."

"Aye sir," the younger man said without reservation. Brocc nodded with satisfaction.

"Be careful Ensign," he barked, through with sentiment, "That's an order."

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Main Bridge**

"Andraste," Commander Donar shook his head, blinking several times. The thin peel of smoke hanging in the air wasn't the cause because his eyes had already adapted to the smoky environs. The reaction was more him wanting to wake from this dream, or nightmare he had stepped into. But it was his wife, his Andraste, here in the flesh. Rich chocolate complexion, long, carefully plaited hair, her beautiful face hardened by time. She was dressed in a tight fitting, brown leather tunic and pants, with a furred sash purple bisecting the tunic. The sleeveless getup showed off her toned arms, always one of her best physical features. The retro style clashed with the modern utility belt she wore.

The nasty looking Breen pulse gun aimed at his chest finished off the ensemble. Seven more pirates had accompanied his wife, coming in two waves via transporter beam. They had quickly fanned out across the bridge, three on the upper

deck and four in the command well. With practiced efficiency they had pinned the crew against the walls.

He took a step toward her and she waved the gun, her finger tightening on the trigger. "I wouldn't if I were you," she warned, and he knew the woman was lethally serious.

"Your tattoo," was all Tai could muster.

She traced the unmarked strip of skin running from her left eye. "I got it surgically removed," she answered, with a shrug. "I see you still kept yours, hanging on to the past." Andraste shook her head, in mock pity.

"But-but why?" Donar hated himself for asking such unimportant questions, but his brain was still reeling, trying to process why his reunion with Andraste, something he had once dreamed about, would occur in the middle of such carnage, carnage he no doubt knew that she had caused.

The woman grinned before coughing lightly. Her gun hand never wavered. "If people knew I was an Angosian, if they knew I was a super-soldier, they wouldn't underestimate me. Which can be fatal in the mercenary game. However, there has to be some accounting for my size, so I tell most people I am a Capellan, a small one. A 'runt' if you were. No one really questions that."

"All this time," Tai shook his head. "You left Angosia...you left me...for this?" He gestured at the wreckage around him.

"I left you because you just didn't understand," Andraste said. "You denied what you were, what they made us. I couldn't think of anything else but killing after the war. The thought of what I had once wanted to be...an artist," her laughter was harsh and heartbreaking. "After the war, they said my paintings were too disturbing. No one would buy them, you remember that."

"I do," he closed his eyes, remembering holding the shaking, sobbing woman after she had lit a match to her artwork in a bon fire. She had left him a month later. Little had he known at the time that she was setting fire to her entire life, to who she had once been.

"I couldn't be Andraste Beyoro anymore," she said, "The war had taken that young, naïve woman away." Her eyes hardened, "And I couldn't be Andraste Donar either, or at least the wife you deserved."

"I never hated what they did to us more than I do at this moment," Tai admitted, his heart thudding painfully in his chest.

"It's too late for that now Tai," Andraste said, her eyes narrowing on the three pips on his collar. "You're not the master of this vessel," she surmised. "Where is your captain?"

"What are you planning?" He asked.

"To take your command crew as hostages while we pillage this ship for weapons and other valuables," Andraste bluntly answered, "even now I have teams taking over your Engineering and Armory rooms. We're going to make quite a bit of profit off of this ship."

"No, you won't," he declared. "It doesn't have to be this way." He took another step forward, oblivious of the threat. He reached out to her again, "There is still a way to turn this around," he offered.

Andraste stepped back. She laughed, "You are not seriously going to ask me to surrender are you?"

"If you want to live," Tai said.

"Oh really?" Andraste challenged, "You think you can take me?" She said, shoving the gun into his chest. With lightning, Tai grabbed the barrel and yanked it upwards while throwing an elbow at Andraste's face. The woman's cheek shattered inward as the elbow hit home. The pulse gun went off, the recoil burning his hand. But the deadly discharge demolishing a piece of the ceiling above.

A yowl came from above and the grating over an overhead bulkhead popped open. A small furry blur leapt out, taking everyone by surprise. Hitting the deck in a controlled roll, Lt. Brocc began firing before he got to one knee. He picked off at least two pirates in just that many seconds.

Taking advantage of the man's timely intervention, Tai yanked the gun completely from his ex-wife's grasp. She snarled, spitting bloodied teeth at him before she unleashed a flurry of blows on him. Tai backed up, alternately trying to protect his head and his body as the woman unloaded her fury on him. From his periphery, he could see that Brocc's action had inspired the other bridge crew.

Even defenseless, some charged the would be captors. He heard a spray of fire suppressant foam and a squeal from one of the pirates. Tai's heart leavened as he withstood Andraste's barrage.

They had often sparred when married and despite the much higher stakes, Tai was able to keep the woman from landing a knockout or lethal blow. And if he could keep her dancing along until he could get to the bridge's weapons locker, he could waylay her and then completely retake command of the bridge.

Cursing him, she pulled a circular, three-bladed weapon from her utility belt. "Kligat," Tai said through gritted teeth. A nasty smile spread over Andraste's face.

"Hate to cut this short lover," she said, "But you and your merry band are really starting to piss me off." She tried to outflank him, slicing the air in front of him as she maneuvered him away from the weapon's locker. He took a look back at it, and Andraste's smile turned knowing. "I know a thing or two about Starfleet bridge design. You didn't think I was going to make it that easy for you, did you?"

The Angosian widened his stance, his arms at his sides, trying to keep away from the deadly melee weapon. Though she only faked being a native from that world, his ex-wife wielded the Capellan weapon with expert skill.

He tried to reduce everything to the opponent standing in front of him, but it was hard blocking out the cries of his colleagues as the pirates began to reassert themselves. He flinched at each sound of disruptor fire and each cry of agony or worse. One of the shrieks sounded like it came from Lt. Brocc. And he didn't even want to dwell on how badly the captain might be faring.

Sensing his distraction, Andraste lunged at him, her blade nicking his upper arm. He pulled back just in time before it could do any other damage. "When are you going to stop retreating?" She taunted. "When did you become so soft?"

"Drop the kligat and I'll show you how soft I am," he promised. Andraste laughed. She had completely moved him away from the locker, almost to the other side of the upper bridge.

"Not lacking for confidence are you," she licked her lips, eyes roving his body. "I hope you haven't weakened in other areas."

"Put down that weapon and I can show you that too," he offered.

"I like it when you talk dirty," she said, advancing on him.

"Eww, gross," Helen said over Andraste's shoulder. The Angosian woman's shoulders bunched and Tai could see her wrestling with whether she should turn around or not. He decided to help her.

"Time to give up Andraste, she's got a phaser on you," Tai said, looking around the woman to see Norrbom propped against the wall by the now open locker. She held her weapon square at Andraste's back. "Good work Commander."

"Yeah thanks, could've done without all the pillow talk though," the woman said. "But at least it kept her distracted."

"I suppose so," Donar said. He held out his hand. "Hand over the kligat." Andraste cursed, her body tensing. For what, Tai didn't know, but he was certain it wasn't going to be good. He tried once more, "This raid is over. I promise I will do all I can to mitigate your incarceration sentencing, if you give up right now."

"You think I'm going to a place like Lunar V again?" She thundered, and Tai winced, realizing his mistake.

"Andraste," he was able to call before the woman released her weapon. It sliced through his shoulder on its way to implanting into a wall. The pain had barely registered, before the woman had turned on Helen. Norrbom fired, hitting her dead in the chest. But Andraste continued charging.

Grabbing his torn shoulder, blood geysering through his fingers, Tai shouted, "Commander, highest stun setting!"

"Damn," Helen said, backing away from the rampaging Angosian. She was still fumbling with adjusting the stun setting when Andraste crashed into her, flattening her against the wall. Norrbom's head bounced against the wall with a stomach churning smack. Helen gave a short, stunted cry before she fell to the deck. Tai rushed to her, checking her condition, unfortunately slathering her with his blood. The human tried to speak, but her eyes rolled back in her head and she passed out. The Angosian quickly wiped his blood stained hand on his tunic, and then picked up the woman's phaser. He checked its stun setting.

Andraste hadn't stopped. She had run toward the turbolift, hoping to escape the bridge. But courtesy of the plunderers' attack, the lift wasn't working. The woman was prying the doors open when he caught up to her.

"Andraste," he called, not wanting to shoot his ex-wife in the back. He wanted to give her honorable due.

"Blast," she called, yanking an old style hand-held communicator from her belt. "This is Nadeen! Emergency beam out now, damn you!" There was a crackle of static, and then Tai's spirits lifted.

*"This is Burning Claw, and we surrender,"* Lt. Ramlo's voice issued through the tiny transceiver.

Andraste bellowed in rage, whipping around to strike. Tai didn't waste a second. He shot his ex-wife in the chest, at maximum stun. The woman hit the parted doors, still on her feet. Tai aimed again, "Surrender now," he warned. Andraste glanced backward, through the sliver of the turbolift doors. "Don't do it," he snapped. Andraste yanked the doors apart and threw herself backwards. Tai got off another shot, clipping her shoulder.

"Andraste, no!" He rushed to the turbolift. He looked down into the depths and saw nothing. He knew it was a long way down. For the first time today he was grateful that full power had yet to be restored.

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Main Bridge**

Commander Donar stood on the precipice, one boot already over the edge. Gripping the lift's entrances with both hands, his eyes tried to puncture the darkness below him, searching for any signs of his wife. His ears were perked, primed to hear her prayers, screams, curses, or the sickening thud of skin and bone impacting the shaft's duranium bottom.

His fingers dug into the threshold's metal as he imagined the terror and fear that must be coursing through Andraste's mind as she fell down the turboshaft. It was interspersed with a rush of memories of their life together.

He heard faint noises on the periphery of his conscious mind, but his attention was still focused on his wife, his heart ached for her. Donar wanted to throw himself into the abyss, in an insane attempt to catch up with her, to save her...finally. Something he had failed to do all those years ago. He gathered himself, his fingers rending the metal within his grasp as he sought to gain purchase, to be better able to leap.

*"Captain Donar!"* The shout pierced the haze, stopping his preparation. He whipped around, annoyed that someone was interfering with his efforts to save his wife, but also stricken with the fear that such an appellation could only be uttered if Captain Redfeather had expired.

"What is it?" He fumed. Behind him, a battered Lt. French knelt beside an insensate Commander Norrbom. The younger man blanched at Tai's ferocity. The helmsman swallowed loudly, before replying.



"Sir," French said, "Captain, we need you on the bridge." Tai's eyes flicked to the demolished command chair. "Her pulse is very weak, but Captain Redfeather is still with us," the man answered his unspoken question with relief. Tai wished to breathe in a relieved sigh as well, but his large chest was constricted. "Until Captain Redfeather has made a full recovery, you are the acting captain now sir."

"Norrbom?" Donar asked, ignoring what the flight control officer had just said.

"She'll survive, I guess," French said, with noticeable doubt, "The commander certainly is in better shape than Captain Redfeather."

"I see," Tai said, glancing once more into the darkness behind him, before he forged ahead. "Let's get main power back online so we can transport our wounded down to sickbay. But first, I want communications, weapons, and shields back."

"Aye sir," French said, snapping to his feet. "Right away sir," he rushed to corral whomever among the bridge crew that could still stand or was conscious to help.

Tai marched to the communications console. He rerouted enough emergency power to send a staccato communications burst through the main deflector. He hoped that Mr. Ramlo was up on his Morse code.

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## ***The Burning Claw*** **Laboratory**

From his perch, the new command deck of the *Burning Claw*, Lt. Ramlo smiled as he watched the sequence of long and short paused bursts across the *Erickson's* main deflector. "I understand," he said into the communications receiver. Though both *Erickson's* inter-and-intraship communications systems were inactive, the ship's audio receivers could still pick up hails.

"*And I will assist once I've taken care of the immediate threat,*" the Arkenite said, using *Burning Claw's* sensors to locate the living members of the raiding parties. He was surprised that he didn't see a Capellan bio-sign among the living. He certainly wouldn't miss the ruthless Nadeen, Ramlo surmised, though he wished that he had been able to witness her end.

He activated the freighter's transporter, sweeping up the pirates, and leaving them trapped in the pattern buffer. The scientist's finger hovered over the re-materialization button. He could transmit them to the holding cells or just as easily drop them into the depths of space, or one of those nice subspace fractures littering the void around them.

Would anyone really blame him if he did? After all that these marauders had done to him, after they had killed his colleagues? Besides, the ship's transporter was antiquated and transporter accidents unfortunately continued to happen even with state-of-the-art equipment.

The idea was tempting, but Ramlo held back. Despite whatever brutality had been visited upon him, it didn't give him a license to respond in like manner. He was

a Starfleet officer above all and he believed in the rule of law. These brigands would face justice, he decided. Not sure if Shash would agree with him, but Ramlo was doubtlessly certain she would appreciate his sticking to his beliefs.

Ramlo sent the pirates to the holding cells. Once the cells had been used to hold frightened slaves, now the rooms would be used appropriately to jail the slavers. Besides he could've killed the crew aboard the ship by shutting off life support, but instead he had pumped neurozine through the ship to incapacitate the shipboard crew. Why start murdering now, he surmised, somewhat sardonically.

Once the beams and a new round of gassing had been completed, Ramlo set about trying to find a way to help *Erickson* restore power quickly. Muting all sounds, so he could concentrate, the Arkenite engrossed himself in the myriad problems *Erickson* had as a result of flying into the pirates' ambush. Unfortunately, the silenced sound prevented him from hearing the proximity alarm that blared throughout the rest of the ship.

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### ***USS Erickson*** **Main Turboshaft**

Andraste held her arms and legs at bent angles, as if she was skydiving, and in a way she was. Her eyes were rapidly adjusting to each new layer of darkness, searching for something, anything that could save her life. She didn't know how long the shaft was or how much of it she had traversed. It had taken her an interminable amount of time to overcome her fear and panic. Hopefully she still had enough space left to pull off the impossible, which usually was very possible for Angosian super-soldiers.

With her enhanced eyesight, she caught glimpses of the ladder rings running the length of the shaft. Both of her arms shot out to grab hold. She bit down a scream as both of her shoulders were nearly wrenched from their sockets at the violent arrest of her fall. Her body slammed into the other rings, producing a fresh round of pain throughout her body. Andraste grunted and held on for dear life.

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### ***Jov'k Tholis*** **Calcite-class battlecruiser**

The large, pyramidal ship cut through the nebulous fog. Commander Narskene, at the bridge's command center, sent a mental command. Hir Sensor and Weapons Officers scanned the two ships before them.

While waiting for their replies, Narskene regarded the scene on the triangular main viewer. The Federation starship was darkened, its silvery hull blackened where it hadn't been punctured. "The work of mines," s/he muttered, ordering the helm to bring the cruiser to full stop.

S/he didn't want *Jov'k Tholis* to suffer the same fate as the Starfleet vessel. Narskene then shifted her head to the other ship. It was a smaller, *Antares*-style freighter. Though it hung in space before the starship, it looked none the worse for wear. So, this vessel must have tricked the starship into the minefield, Narskene surmised. And that made the denizens on the smaller vessel the deadlier foe due to their cunning.

"Commander," the Sensor Officer chirped first. "Readings indicate that the *Intrepid*-class starship is operating on emergency power, while a massive polaric ion energy signature is emanating from the *Antares* freighter."

"Weapons?" S/He asked his weapons master. The heavy-limbed Weapons Officer replied.

"All weapons systems are offline for the *Intrepid*-class vessel. And weapons are depowered for the *Antares*-class freighter."

"Excellent," Narskene said. "Target all of our weapons on the freighter, along the area where the polaric ion readings are strongest. Once the shielding has been overwhelmed, I want the locus of the polaric ion emanations beamed to Cargo Hold One and held within an annular confinement beam."

The susurrus of mental replies was sufficient for the commander. "Now, on my mark, fire!"

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Main Bridge**

Commander Donar removed himself from the guts of the tactical console as he heard its innards start to hum with new life. He stood up, dusting off his knees. He squinted at the increased lighting on the bridge. He strode aft, ignoring the wreckage, of men and materiel, all around him. "Lt. Jilicia, report."

The Boslic was hunched over a makeshift ops console, converted from one of the auxiliary stations. A deep purple bruise matching her hair color ran down the length of one side of her face. Looking up into the shadow looming over her, she replied, "Captain, the power grid is at minimum capacity."

Tai grunted approval. "How long until we reach full power?" Before the woman could reply, a proximity warning blared through the bridge. "What was that?" The Angosian asked the perplexed science officer.

"Let's see if the viewer is working?" Lt. French offered.

"Put whatever caused that alert onscreen," Donar ordered. A collective gasp ran through the bridge personnel as a large, pyramid shaped vessel, the color of molten lava, flew over them. Though he had never faced one in combat, the Angosian knew that only one interstellar power had ships fashioned in a triangular configuration: Tholians. And something in his gut told him that their sudden arrival wasn't happenstance.

"Shields," Tai ordered as he watched the ship pass *Erickson* on a course for the pirate vessel...and Lt. Ramlo.

"The best we can do right now is %15 percent," the petty officer at the engineering terminal replied.

"Then do it, but make sure to concentrate shielding over the Engineering section," Donar said, determined not to remain stranded out in this gods forsaken patch of space any longer than necessary. And warp core breaches would be less than optimal as well. "What about weapons?"

"That's a little better," replied the ensign who had taken over the restored tactical station. "Phaser banks are at %20."

"Hail the Tholian vessel," Tai ordered.

"No reply sir," Jilicia answered. He repeated the request and got the same reply.

"Tholian vessel is powering weapons," the auxiliary tactical officer yipped.

"Hail the pirate vessel," Donar barked, his emotions getting the best of him. The marauder didn't seem to have taken notice of the Tholian warship. It hadn't taken any evasive maneuvers, increased shields, or charged weapons. *What's going on over there?* Tai wondered, his concern for Ramlo growing.

"Fire a warning blow off the Tholian ship's bow," the Angosian commanded. Before the order could be carried out, the Tholians unleashed a devastating salvo at the hapless pirate vessel. Tai paused, watching the beautiful destruction as the disruptors stitched across the pirate ship's hull, shattering its weak shielding as it punched through its hide.

After the first assault, the Tholian vessel curiously stopped. "Belay my previous order, and check the status of the pirate vessel."

Jilicia rapidly said, "The freighter has suffered extensive damage. Both weapons and propulsion are inoperative, and the shields are gone too. The structural integrity field is in danger of collapsing." The corsair was in bad shape, but the Tholians hadn't destroyed it...yet.

Donar grunted, reassessing the situation. "Try hailing the Tholians again," Donar said, reasoning that maybe the pirate ship had done some injustice in Tholian space. If that was so, he was certain that a mutually beneficial arrangement could be worked out without engaging in actions that could lead to interstellar war.

"Hail received, and is being answered," Jilicia didn't attempt to hide her happiness at the news.

The view screen flickered several seconds before the fiery countenance of a Tholian appeared. "*Captain, Starfleet vessel, in the interest of continued peace between our nations, I will ask you only once not to intervene.*" The Tholian commander ended the message as curtly as s/he had spoken.

"The Tholians have just activated a transporter beam," the Boslic science officer replied. "They have taken the polaric ion generator from the pirate vessel."

So that's what they came after, Tai realized, shifting his jaw, his face taking on an even more determined cast. "Move to intercept them with whatever juice this ship can muster. We can't let the Tholians take that device."

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## ***The Burning Claw*** **Laboratory**

Lt. Ramlo had felt the deep rumbling of thunder before the lighting struck. Pitched from his chair and slammed against a bulk head, the Arkenite's head split open like a grape. There was a brief moment of blackness before the science officer awakened to a thudding, heavy pain in his cranium and blinding blood seeping into his eyes.

He blinked maddeningly, unable to will his hands to wipe the warm crimson fluid from his eyes. Strangely, even though Ramlo knew he should be in agony, the only pain he felt was in his head. The rest of his body was numb.

Taking stock of his situation, his neck creaked as he looked around. His body was a twisted, jangled mess, his legs crushed beneath a bulkhead. He was certain there was severe internal damage, but he could feel none of it. The lab had also been wrecked. His console and the control it had afforded him were both now slag.

*What happened? He wondered. Had Erickson fired on them? But why? Had Nadeen somehow reasserted control? Impossible, he surmised. It must be someone else, his thoughts darkened, a third party?*

"Who could it be?" He muttered, his speech slickened by the blood that bubbled up in his mouth and dripped from his lips. "Why?" He asked, his eyes shifting to the likely reason. "No," he mumbled again.

A blinding orange light enveloped the polaric ion device, which miraculously had not been harmed during the barrage. In less than a second the device was gone, absconded, and in the hands of whomever had attacked the *Burning Claw*.

"*Erickson*," he remembered. The ship, his friends, they could all be in danger. He tried to move his arms, to force them to remove the metal that had pulverized his legs, but they wouldn't respond. "Computer," he said, waiting in vain for the modulated, emotionless reply. He grimaced, realizing he wasn't on the *Erickson*, and now would likely never be again.

Ramlo was still grappling with that dark thought when the final darkness rode in on a blaze of plasma.

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## ***Jov'k Tholis*** **Calcite-class battlecruiser**

"The Federation starship is moving to intercept, they are charging weapons," the Sensor Officer informed Narskene. The Tholian commander looked at the battered Starfleet ship, slowly moving to block their advance. But it was too late.

The ship they ostensibly were moving to protect was now debris. Narskene knew that the High Magistrates would want hir to be thorough in removing all traces of Tholian origin of the polaric ion device, and s/he could take no chances that data to that effect was residing within that decrepit freighter's computer banks.

"Should we target the Federation starship?" The Weapons Officer asked, not hiding hir eagerness. The Weapons Officer carried the memories of hir forebear who had participated in the expansionist programs in the mid-23<sup>rd</sup> century. S/he longed to take on the Federation directly, to test hir mettle as earlier generations once had.

"Scan the Starfleet vessel for any polaric ion energy signs," Narskene replied instead. Though s/he knew hir orders, the commander was reluctant to take a step that could be considered an act of war. And s/he wasn't as confident in hir ship's ability to destroy the Federation vessel completely enough to escape free and clear. Narskene was content to avoid a conflict and let the politicians of both nations argue over the reasons for *Jov'k Tholis's* mysterious appearance in the Caldera Expanse.

"There are no traces of polaric ion energy aboard the Starfleet ship," the Sensor Officer replied. S/he paused a beat, "The Federation vessel is hailing us again."

"Ignore them," Narskene said, "And set a course out of this expanse and back toward Assembly space, highest speed."

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## ***USS Erickson*** **Corridor**

It wasn't the first time that Andraste had thanked the monsters who had turned her into a nearly indestructible killing machine. With a strong yank, she pried open the lift's doors, nearly stumbling out into the corridor. Her accelerated healing had already started repairing many of her more serious injuries, but was still very sore all over. Clutching her sides, her ribs squealing in protest, she took a quick look around. The darkened hall was deserted. No doubt the officious Starfleet personnel were all more focus on restoring the ship than milling about, or either the cowards were locked in their rooms, waiting for Tai to reestablish order.

Despite it all, she was pleased to see him again. Though he had thrown in his lot with self-righteous do-gooders he still cut quite the dashing figure. Andraste squinted as she recalled the layout of the ship in her head. One thing about Deoch, or more so about Mavaar, one of them believed in being prepared and had schematics of a wide variety of ships they might have to combat or elude at some point. Thankfully one had been of the *Intrepid* class.

The Angosian looked around once more, getting her bearings. "Now, where is the nearest shuttle bay?"

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## ***USS Erickson*** **Main Bridge**

"Tholian vessel is backing away, engaging warp engines," Jilicia grimly replied. Commander Donar frowned as he watched the scene unfold on the viewer. The *Burning Claw* was embers, along with Lt. Ramlo. Tai had lost another crewmember in his charge: Fryer, Kittles, Shashlik, Ramlo, so many others, maybe including the captain...

"Sort of obvious," Lt. French said, no doubt trying to leaven the morose mood gripping the bridge over the death of yet another colleague. However, the bitter tang to his words belied even the light-hearted human's attempts. Ramlo's death had been the final straw...for all of them.

Donar closed his eyes and willed the rage churning within him to abate. Tai needed, the *crew* needed him at his best logical right now, not his berserker fury. The Angosian knew it was folly, but he made a silent promise that no other Starfleet deaths would occur in the Caldera Expanse today, not at the hands of the Tholians.

Tai had failed to prevent the Tholians from taking the polaric ion generator, but he would do all he could to stop them from leaving the expanse with it. "Move to intercept, full impulse," he barked.

"Ah sir, we are not at full impulse right now," the petty officer at the Engineering station reluctantly ventured.

"Then give us whatever you have!" The Angosian snapped. "And target all of our firepower at that ship. It's not leaving this expanse."

"Sir," gulped the ensign at the tactical station. "Our weapons banks are now at 35%, I don't think we can do much to impede them, while they could do significant damage to us, since our shielding and structural integrity are still on the mend."

Tai glared at the young human brunette, biting back a blistering retort. He was not going to allow his emotions to get the best of him or make her the recipient of misdirected anger. He paused, his mind spinning through a host of scenarios.

"Tholian vessel engines are almost fully powered up," Jilicia said while Donar was still thinking.

"Ensign," he said after arriving at his best option. "Divert all power to the torpedo bay, including warp, propulsion, and even life support."

"Excuse me sir?" The young woman blinked.

"Do it," He barked. "Life support will only be interrupted temporarily," he said. "But I want us to be able to fire as many quantum torpedoes as possible at that Tholian ship."

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### ***Jov'k Tholis***

#### ***Calcite-class battlecruiser***

"Warp engines are primed," the Operations Officer informed the commander. Narskene looked at the viewer, watching the Starfleet vessel struggle to catch up to them.

“Starfleet ship is moving to intercept,” The Weapons Officer stated the obvious. “And is powering...diverting power to forward torpedo bays.” S/he said, glancing up from hir terminal. What s/he wanted was evident.

“Take us back to Tholia,” Narskene ordered.

“But shouldn’t we...disable the Federation vessel first?” The Weapons Officer suggested.

“Carry out my order,” Narskene barked, ignoring the bellicose weapons master. In reply to hir command, the cruiser turned from the glacially advancing Starfleet vessel.

“Activate warp drive,” Narskene said.

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### ***USS Erickson***

#### **Main Bridge**

The Tholian vessel began to stretch across the main viewer as the warp effect began to take hold. Tai knew they only had seconds, if that, to stop them. “Fire whatever operable quantum torpedoes available!”

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### ***USS Erickson***

#### **Corridor**

Almost at the Auxiliary Shuttlebay, Andraste felt the walls quiver. She recognized the vibrations. Tai had just fired torpedoes. So they had regained some control over the ship’s systems, the Angosian realized. She also guessed that the focus of her exes’ ire would be *Burning Claw*. The woman guessed that was the epitaph for her fellow buccaneers.

There was no one on that bucket she would shed tears for, which made the decision she had already formulated that much more vital to undertake. Reaching the entrance, she tried the manual interface. Still disabled, she used her fingers to pry the paneling open and then rewired the interface to open the doors.

Crossing the threshold, Andraste grinned at the fleet of gleaming silver-white shuttles now at her disposal. “Stop right there!” She heard a hard voice coming from the pool of shadows to her right. A strapping young Grazerite, holding a phaser in one meaty hand, strode forward. Andraste’s smile grew wider.

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### ***Jov’k Tholis***

#### ***Calcite-class battlecruiser***

As the engines hummed around them, the warp field embracing the vessel, Narskene barely registered the weapons master’s shrill warning. “Commander, Starfleet vessel has just fired two quantum torpedoes.”



The commander didn't worry too much about it because the torpedoes would merely puncture the space where *Jov'k Tholis* had just been. Even if they made contact, the cruiser's shields were strong enough to handle the initial volley, and it would give him enough justification to vaporize the Starfleet vessel. None of the Federation advocates would be able to argue that *Jov'k Tholis* had not acted in self-defense.

As space began to stretch before his eyesight, Narskene heard the Weapon Officer's second report. "First torpedo missed."

"What of the second?" Narskene asked, still not concerned. The stars were stretching to infinity now and the harmonics of the engines as the warp factored increased was like music to the commander. It was what s/he loved most about breaking the warp threshold.

Enjoying the excitement of being on the cusp, Narskene held in his bantling delight as the ship flung forward, piercing subspace. The moment was shorter than it usually was because of a terrible, uncommon rattling that shook the ship and threw it off course.

Using her multiple limbs, Narskene maintained her poise. "What was that?" S/he asked, already knowing the answer.

"One of the quantum torpedoes hit our portside nacelle," the Weapons Officer's tone was accusatory. For the time being, Narskene chose to ignore it.

"Any significant damage?"

"No," the weapons master seemed not to want to admit. "The shields held." The commander could hear the warp engines still humming. The Starfleet ship had even been ineffective at slowing them down. Their best shot hadn't been good enough.

"Well then," Narskene said, with renewed confidence. "Helm, best speed to Tholia."

"I don't think that will be possible," the pilot soberly replied. *The viewer, s/he added mentally. Look at the main viewer commander.*

There was a sickeningly Terran-like gasp from the Sensor Officer who had gazed at the main viewer without the mental prompting. Narskene's eyes widened.

A large, dark band hung before them, a massive subspace rupture like a grinning mouth, a hungry gullet. While the Starfleet ship had not damaged *Jov'k Tholis*, it had knocked the ship off course and nearly right down the maw of a monstrous tear in space.

"Reverse engines," Narskene nearly cried. "Reverse engines!"

"It's too late," the Weapons Officer said, and Narskene had to have imagined there was a morbid self-satisfaction in the subordinate's tone. As if his words were prophecy, dark tendrils lit by infernal plasma lashed out at the ship, smashing into it, battering it about as if the large cruiser were a mere plaything.

"Increase power to shields!" The commander barked as the ship continued getting tossed about, spidery cracks appearing throughout the bridge as *Jov'k Tholis*

itself seemed to stop listening to him. Klaxons blasted while the engines' harmony had turned to cacophony.

At least his crew, including the weapons master, worked feverishly to avert destruction. But the great mouth of the rupture was only getting closer, and the assault against the ship was draining its power. The cruiser was struggling like a trapped beast, and it was losing.

Narskene knew the battle was lost, but could at least be satisfied that the Assembly's secret would stay safe and that his crew had performed ably. That was all that a commander could ask for, and it was a fitting sum total for the brief mortal thread s/he had been given. Accepting his fate, Narskene stared into the breach and dared it take him.

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### ***USS Erickson*** **Main Bridge**

There was a much needed cheer that went up on the bridge as the second torpedo struck. Commander Donar held back his pleasure, keeping his eyes on the screen. After the brightness of the conflagration had dissipated, there was no sign of the Tholian spacecraft.

Tai knew that the shot, which hadn't even hit the Tholian battlecruiser head on, could have destroyed it. "Lt. Jilicia, what happened to the ship?"

"Scanners show that the ship was able to go to warp," the Boslic answered, with obvious disappointment.

"At least we slowed it down," Lt. French offered. "Maybe we can catch up to it."

Tai shook his head, "No, Mr. French. By the time we are in a position to effectively take on that warship, they will be halfway back to Assembly space. Our first priority is here, taking care of ship and crew," the Angosian remarked. His head dipping for a few moments as he calmed the bloodlust still beckoning, he said quietly, "Restore power to main systems." The bridge brightened as energy was redirected from the torpedo bays.

He shifted his shoulders, the burden of failure rested uncomfortably on them. Though he had been unsuccessful in stopping the Tholians, it didn't mean that another Starfleet ship couldn't. "Lt. Jilicia, prepare a warning buoy about our encounter with the Tholians. I don't want them waylaying any more ships. Also, if another Starfleet vessel happens upon them, they will have some inkling of what they might face."

"Aye sir," the young woman replied, quickly getting to work. Tai left the upper deck and strode into the command well. Captain Redfeather, her face a mass of cuts and bruises, had been propped up in corner of the room, near her Ready Room. Before the Angosian could reach her, a shaft of bright blue light appeared in his way. It resolved quickly into Dr. Narsan.

The Halanan clutched a medical tricorder in one hand, a hypo in the other, and a medical kit was slung across his shoulders. He coolly took in his surroundings, before turning in the captain's direction without prompting from Tai.

He ran the blocky scanner over the woman, mumbled something unintelligible, and then placed the hypo on her upper arm. Before Tai could inquire about her condition, the chief medic tapped his combadge and the transporter beam enveloped both him and his patient.

Seconds later, several nurses, with similar equipment appeared on the bridge, and whisked away the most seriously injured crew members.

For the first time in what seemed an eternity, Tai allowed himself a little bit of hope that Captain Redfeather would pull through and that things would eventually return to normal, as much as that was possible with the gaping hole left in the command structure and the ship's community by the deaths of so many well regarded colleagues.

Despite that, Donar was going to cradle the little ember of hope to keep the flame alive. He had Jilicia check in with Engineering and the other departments, getting a sense of how badly the pirates had hit them. After working out restoration timeframes for affected systems, Tai set about to deal with something that had been coiling in his mind, under a rock until the immediate danger had passed.

"Lt. Jilicia," he asked the taxed Boslic. She answered crisply, with no hint of frustration. "I want you to check for Angosian life signs." The nanoseconds before her answer were some of the most agonizing that Tai had experienced in his whole life, and after all the death he had seen and blood he had spilled, that meant a lot.

"I'm reading...two," the woman jerked up from her terminal, her eyes wide.

"Where is the second reading?" Tai asked, his expression hardening, as tension built in his muscles.

"Auxiliary Shuttle..." Jilicia hadn't even finished before Tai had clapped his combadge and ordered to be teleported there.

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## ***USS Erickson***

### **Auxiliary Shuttlebay**

In hindsight, Tai realized he probably should've brought a phaser along. The floating shuttle turned around slowly to face him, Andraste in the cockpit. Below it, uniform rippling in the breeze was a Grazerite non-com, his head twisted at an impossible angle.

The Angosian's insides froze and he gathered his strength. Andraste smiled, before speaking, via the shuttle's communication system. *"Open the doors Tai, or I'm going to blast them."*

"No," he shook his head.

*"You'll get sucked out into space."*

"I'm not letting you go, not after what you've done, the murders you committed." His heart ached as the woman shrugged.

"Come now," she chided. *"This is not your coddled Starfleet compatriots you are talking to, this is your wife, and even more importantly a fellow soldier. You know how transient life is, and how much it is an honor to die in service of something you believe in. The lives I've taken here today, they now have a meaning, a resonance that those with more humdrum existences do not,"* his wife declared.

"That's sick!" He snarled, his hands starting to twitch as the desire to lock them around his wife's throat began to mount.

"Stop deluding yourself," she said, *"You know it's true. Now, let me go, or I'm going to demolish a good chunk of your hull. Do you really think that this ship can withstand another breach?"*

"I'm not letting you go," he repeated, damnable moisture collecting at the corners of his eyes.

Andraste sighed audibly. *"This isn't about the crewmen at all,"* she shook her head. *"This is about you and me. You have to let me go, finally Tai. You can't save me."* She paused, her voice growing surprisingly, disgustingly tender, *"You never could. This is my life, these are my choices, and you shouldn't beat yourself up about them any longer. You have to let me go."*

"You're going to face justice," he promised.

*"Perhaps, but not today and you know it,"* she replied with equal resolve. *"You have a ship and crew to take care of, save our little dance for another day."*

He fought against each step, but the Angosian forced his legs over to the free standing operation console. The shuttlebay doors parted open slowly, the black vacuum beyond held back by a forcefield. While the field kept oxygen in, it did nothing for heat. A deep chill came over him as Andraste dipped the shuttle in a twisted gesture of respect or to say goodbye. She angled it around and then eased it through the shimmering forcefield and then out into space.

Tai slapped his combadge so hard it burned his chest. He wouldn't be surprised if it didn't leave a chevron imprint on his pectoral. "Bridge, lock tractor beam on that shuttle, now!"

He waited anxious seconds for a confirmation that his order had been carried out. "Bridge," he prompted after activating the compin again.

"Sorry sir," the brunette at the tactical terminal said, "But we were unable to lock onto the shuttle. The pilot engaged in some unorthodox maneuvers."

"Understood," he said, "Donar out." The Angosian knew it would be pointless to chew out the young officer. Andraste always had been a good pilot. It would take a very skillful hand to trap her with a tractor beam, and Tai wasn't even sure he could have done it.

Contemplating what had just happened, Donar stood in the shuttlebay, with the dead non-com, watching the doors shut, clanging with a finality he didn't feel. "I will see you again Andraste," he stated simply, quietly, "I promise."

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**Infirmery**  
**Starbase 101**  
**Two weeks later...**

“Captain,” Tai Donar said warmly, punctuating it with a short bow once he reached her bedside. “It’s good seeing you conscious, and sitting up.” There were only a few other occupied biobeds in the massive medical center. The captain was propped up on the half-elevated bed, one leg and arm hanging from straps attached to the structure overhanging the bed. Tai stood on the other side of the bed, opposite the structure.

Captain Redfeather smiled, and winced right after. Her face was covered with deep red and brown welts, and her right arm was still encased within a cast. “Captain Donar,” she chanced a smile again, got half way and then thought better of it. She nodded and him and winced again. “Thank you for getting my crew and Erickson back safe and sound.”

He frowned, nodding his head, “I wish I could say the same, but there were fatalities.” Nine crewmen had been mowed down by the marauders, not counting the poor young man whose neck had been snapped by his wife. “And I let one of the key perpetrators go.”

Redfeather’s eyes clouded over and her face took on a grim cast. “It could’ve been worse, much worse. But it wasn’t, and I have you to thank for it.”

“Captain, I-I came here,” Tai paused, his words tangling. “To see you, but also...” She strongly shook her head.

“Don’t you say it,” she warned, “Don’t you dare. You’re not going to quit on me.”

“But captain, I...f-failed,” he stammered.

“Who among us hasn’t,” she riposted, “and who among us hasn’t lived up to all of their promises. You’ve had men die under your command before, far more than I ever have, and you know that is one of the risks of the life we live.”

He lowered his head, unable to speak. Captain Redfeather continued, “Listen Captain, Commander, oh, Tai, listen, I wasn’t honest with you. I did have doubts about you, reservations about your military conditioning,” she paused, to gauge his reaction. Tai kept his head down, so she continued, “I was concerned that when the battle was on, you might get lost in the thick of it, you might give into whatever thing the Angosians programmed you to be, but I was wrong. When that moment came, or moments from what I heard, you stuck by your crew, you put them first, and I,” she halted, the words escaping her now.

Donar looked up and saw tears glistening in the woman’s eyes. With her mobile hand she reached out and grasped one of his, and squeezed it tight. “I just want to say thank you.”

He nodded, his chest constricting, and his own eyes growing uncomfortably moist. "Also," Redfeather added, with a trace of a smirk, "If you try to leave, I'll send Helen after you."

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### ***USS Erickson***

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

Despite his size, the captain's leather chair felt too big for him. Tai downplayed his insecurity and laughed along with the woman gracing the holoprojector. Lt. Juanita Rojas, dressed in an alluring low-cut azure blouse and tight golden pants, definitely civilian attire, grinned as she finished, "I knew my man would make captain someday, but not so soon." The slight blue tint bathing his paramour, courtesy of the projector, didn't diminish one iota of her beauty.

Beyond the room, the faint din of work crews could be heard. Tai could've taken up space on the mushroom-like starbase, but he preferred being closer to the ship.

"Don't get used to it," Tai quipped. "This is just temporary. Will you still love me after I'm busted back down to first officer?"

"I love you," the younger woman said, suddenly serious, "I'm so glad you made it out of that nightmare in one piece." Donar had been ordered to be circumspect in how much he could discuss about what happened in the Caldera Expanse, but he had told Juanita as much as he had been allowed. "Andraste huh?" She asked, her eyes lighting with devilment again, "So, do you still have a thing for her huh?"

He rolled his eyes, playing along, and feeling so good he had someone he could do that with. "All I said was that she still looked fit."

"Really now?" Juanita hit him with a jaundiced eye, "And also that she was agreeable, if I recall."

He huffed, "Well, yes, there is that." He shrugged. They shared another laugh that died off into nervous silence.

Juanita reached out and Tai met her ghostly hand. He so wished that she was there with him, that he could feel the warmth of her hand, wrap his arms around her, lay his head on her lap.

Time had taken a lot from him, as it had Andraste, but at least he had found someone, a reason, to find himself again, and even more, to remake himself anew.

"You be careful out there," she warned him. "I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to be lost," he replied. "And thankfully I only have one ex-wife."

"That better be the case," she said. He quickly nodded that it was. "I'm surprised that the captain hasn't contacted you," Juanita remarked, switching subjects. Despite his promotion to rear admiral, Rojas still referred to Terrence Glover as Captain. He was the only captain she spoke about often, or at length.

Tai shrugged. "He's a busy man," he replied. It wasn't like they were especially close and Donar hadn't expected a call. Then again, he wouldn't have been surprised

if Glover hadn't contacted him. Tai could see how having one of his officers reach the captain's rank, if only temporarily, and handling the incident in the Caldera Expanse, would have been a point of pride for the man.

"Don't you think he's different now, since...you know, the Admiral?" Juanita asked, referring to his father Samson. The former admiral had been captured and later executed by the Romulans almost a year ago. Terrence had failed in his attempt to rescue him and had been captured himself.

Unlike Tai, Glover and Juanita had a much tighter bond. That was due in part to her deceased brother, Commander Pedro Rojas, who had been one of Glover's closest friends. "He's so...standoffish now, cold." She shook her head, a sad expression marring her features.

"We all deal with grief in a different way," Tai offered weakly. He had noticed some personality changes with his former CO too, but hadn't read too deeply into it. "We have to give him his space, let him...find himself again," he added, thinking about both Juanita and what she had restored in his life.

"I know; it's just..." Juanita sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "I know he must feel terribly alone, with his father gone, the divorce," her voice grew bitter, "and what those Rommie bastards did to him." The anger took Tai aback.

It also shocked Juanita. She touched the well of her throat and sat back. "I'm sorry."

"No," he said, "It's good to get it out. You should never carry that stuff bottled up. What the Romulans did to the captain, how they slaughtered Admiral Glover...not to mention all the other bad things that have befallen the captain," he paused, reflecting over the loss of the *Aegis* and its seventy-five souls, "It could destroy a normal man. But Terrence Glover is not a normal man."

"You got that right," Juanita brightened.

"I have every confidence that he will be back, and stronger than ever," he concluded, believing every word. For an average human, Glover had proven extraordinarily resilient.

"I think you're right," she smiled. "And I think the captain could learn a few lessons from you in that regard."

He cocked an eyebrow, "Oh really now?"

"Absolutely," she nodded in agreement. "What you did in the Caldera Expanse is already sounding like a legend around the Fleet. It makes me extra pumped about getting out there and meeting the new life coming to our part of the galaxy."

Tai frowned slightly, thinking of the polaric ion generator and the havoc it had wreaked in the expanse. He shuddered to wonder if other members of that species were out there, heading their way with even more terrible weapons. "Don't be so anxious," he cautioned.

Juanita sniffed, "Well, I'm hoping that we get picked for the second wave. I did hear that there's a second wave to the Vanguard taskforce. Did you hear the same?"

"I heard that as well," Tai said, "Well, for the time being, I'm content with roaming the Alpha and Beta Quadrants."

"Come on man, where's your sense of adventure?" Juanita teased.

"I've had more than enough of that for a good long while," Tai's smile was close lipped. "Besides, it's going to take several months to repair *Erickson*, and I was wondering if we could arrange some time to spend together in the interval."

The woman brightened so much, she shone like a star. "Maybe I should tell my CO to keep this can parked for a little while longer. I hear that Risa is wonderful this time of year."

"Risa is wonderful every part of the year," Donar said, prompting another round of much needed laughter.

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## **Starbase 101 Conference Room**

"While I still might not like you," Lt. Commander Helen Norrbom half-joked, "I detest him." She flung her wrist dismissively at the door. Tension was still thick in the room, in the wake of Security Advisor Cormac Sullivan's exit.

The dour Sullivan had been accompanied by a taciturn Saurian from Special Affairs and an inquisitive young Xindi-Arboreal Starfleet Intelligence agent. Sullivan had dominated the discussion, which consisted of mostly dressing down both Donar and Commander Norrbom over their failure to secure the polaric ion generator.

"Of course the Tholians are going to be tight-lipped about their involvement," Sullivan had said, his white eyebrows reaching toward the stars, "Wait, do Tholians even have lips, or mouths?" He had pointedly demanded of one of his associates. The Saurian had merely blinked while the Xindi had consulted the personal display device she held.

"You just gave one of our longest-running adversaries a weapon of mass destruction," he had brayed, prompting Helen to get out of her seat to dispute the man. The only thing that had held her back was Donar's surreptitious, but iron clad grip on her forearm. He had warned her with a sharp expression to remain quiet. She had been forced to sit there while the saturnine Sullivan ripped them apart.

After he was finished, he informed them that both that Starfleet would be keeping a close eye on the Tholians to see if they violated the weapons ban. Since there were no signs that the Tholian warship had even made it out of the Caldera Expanse, it being littered with subspace tears and all manner of nasty anomalies, Helen wasn't holding her breath.

Sullivan had then raked them both with a querulous gaze and told them that he also would be keeping a closer eye on *Erickson*. Helen hadn't been unable to stifle a groan, which the older man had misinterpreted as fear. He had gifted them with a small smile before sweeping out of the room.

"That wasn't so bad," Tai shrugged.



"Are you joking?" Norrbom said. "He might be a blowhard, but he is the Federation Security Advisor."

"Have you ever been stared down by Fleet Admiral Shanthi?" Donar asked, nonplussed.

"Hmmm, no," Helen answered. The Angosian shrugged again.

"As I said, Sullivan wasn't so bad." He quipped.

"You know, I'm really starting not to like you again," Norrbom remarked, "Sir."

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***USS Erickson***  
**Birdland Lounge**  
**January 2378**

The entire room erupted into cheers, and for the first time tonight, it wasn't because of Lt. Commander Kalnath's jazz quartet. Standing in the lounge's entrance, stood Captain Redfeather, flanked by Counselor Dendron and Commander Norrbom. The bruises had thankfully faded, and the captain looked resplendent in a flowing stately black gown. Norrbom wore a brassier electric blue dress that showed off her long, toned legs. Dendron was still in his uniform. The captain waved, her smile beaming.

Everyone stood for the trio, clapping even when they arrived at the table at the front that had been reserved for them. A table had been left empty for the captain ever since her injuries, Redfeather being a frequent visitor to the lounge.

Donar thought it was great to see Captain Redfeather finally being able to partake again in the life of the ship. Tai was also glad that he could hand the reins back to her. The repairs were almost completed on *Erickson* and a new assignment would be coming soon. The ship needed its real captain back.

He looked down after feeling a soft squeeze on his bicep. Juanita placed her head against his arm. She sniffled and he could tell she had been crying. "Is everything okay?" He asked. She looked up at him, wiping her tears away.

"Yes," she nodded, "It's just wonderful that your captain made it and is doing well. I guess I just got caught up in the emotion of it all." He shook his head in understanding and pulled her tight.

"I guess I should leave you two lovebirds alone," Commander A'nurd said. He had been sharing the table with Tai and Juanita. While the crew had extended downtime, Tai had finally decided to join A'nurd on one of his excursions to one of the starbases's taverns. It had turned into a frequent thing, as both men had perused almost all of the station's myriad lounges. Tai did it more for camaraderie than the food and drink.

"You don't have to go A'nurd," Juanita had said. She had become taken to the Munzalan more quickly than Donar had.

"That is very gracious of you," the engineer bowed deeply, his tail curling behind him. "But I must spread my joy around," he said, his tail angling in a direction

across the crowded room. Tai followed it to a table occupied by Lieutenants French, Jilicia, and Brocc, along with other members of Hazard Team. Catching the Angosian's gaze, French lifted his glass, which prompted the others to do so too. Donar did likewise.

"Just make sure you don't leave this ship before you tell me goodbye," A'nurd told Juanita, before he grabbed her free hand. Unfortunately, Juanita's vacation was nearing its end and Donar would soon have to part ways with her again.

"That's a definite," she said, smiling. The couple watched A'nurd flit through the crowd. Tai started to sit back down, but stopped when Juanita squeezed his arm again.

"What's wrong?" He asked.

"Nothing, nothing's wrong," she said, sighing with relief. "For the first time, in a long time, everything just feels right." She leaned back against him, melting into him.

"I couldn't agree more," he said, "I couldn't agree more."

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## **Aodh Homeworld**

### **One year ago...**

The Steersman brought his flitter to a stop. "Urith!" He cried over the surging throng, "Urith!" He shouted his mate's name once more. His eyes flickered over the ripple of bodies, most dressed in the finery befitting the political strata. He focused his attention on the large circular hatches gobbling as many of the desperate passengers they could. The guards hovering about the entrances, on flitters similar to his, had largely given up on trying to police the mob.

There was a similar sense of dread wreathing many of their features. The Cold Ones were here, their large cube ships carving into the homeworld, devouring people and technology. Once the Cold Ones had gorged themselves below, they would set their unholy sights on the ring space station above, holding the four remaining generation ships: *The Gift of Fire*, *The Pillar of Fire*, *The Ring of Fire*, and *The Rain of Fire*.

He had been assigned to the Gift, given one of the holiest honors ever bestowed on one of his strata, in fact, of any strata. Shepherding not only the Prelate and most of his clerics, but also the Sacred Fire, the jewel left behind by the Fire Beings so long ago, the cornerstone of their civilization, would be his duty.

But he cared for none of that now. All he wanted was to see Urith once more, before they cast their fate to the frigid stars.

"Fintan!" His heart leapt at the nearly hoarse cry. A flitter zipped up to him, stopping just inches from his own.

"Urith!" He cried out, unable to contain his joy. He took one hand off the controls, readjusting as the vehicle tried to get away from him.

"Some steersman you are," she joked. Urith wore a similar yellow jumpsuit. His beloved was assigned to the engineering crew of *The Pillar*.

Fintan grinned. "And why aren't you *aboard The Gift*?"

"I had to see you...just once more," he said, now feeling a bit sheepish, and not sure why. The woman smiled, tears glistening her eyes, before she put on a mock tough expression.

"You're too old to be so sentimental," she admonished. "We'll see each other again, once we have left this world to the Cold Ones," she shuddered, their very mention chilling her, as it did Fintan. Despite all of their technology, all of their terrible weapons, the Cold Ones had found some way to bypass them. It had taken decades, but eventually they had overcome the Aodh.

"*The Gift* isn't going anywhere without me," he smirked, trying to lighten his gathering sadness. "I am the chief steersman after all." Urith rolled her eyes.

"Get one little promotion and it goes straight to your head," she said, reaching out to him and touching his cheek. "I can't wait to hear all of your stories among the cloistered," she said, "Stay safe."

Fintan kissed her hand, not really wanting to let go. "You do the same."

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### ***Jov'k Tholis***

#### ***Calcite-class battlecruiser***

The anomaly threw out the battlecruiser like it was refuse. Commander Narskene, still grabbing hold to his console, sent a mental command for a status report. The ship spun wildly, gases and fluids spraying across the bridge. The bridge was dark as space, with each newly sparking terminal providing a brief glimmer of light.

The commander didn't know where they were, what part of space, or even what time they had been thrown into, owing to the temporal properties of the polaric ion energy that had spawned the subspace rupture. Though she had his suspicions, but the thought chilled her as much as the encroaching coldness of the void seeping through the hull multiple breaches: a predestination paradox...

*We're going to crash*, the replacement Sensor Officer said. *Rudimentary sensors have detected a planet below us. We are barreling towards it now.*

*Is there any way we can...cushion the blow?* Narskene asked all the remaining bridge crew. *Does the flight control station still have rudimentary functionality?*

*There is some, yes*, the hapless pilot sent the nervous reply.

*Try to scan for a body of water and then send us into that*, Narskene riposted, annoyed that no one had thought of that before.

*Have detected a body of water*, the Sensor Officer informed him. The bridge lit up as the ship hit the atmosphere, and a fiery chariot formed around the *Jov'k Tholis*, yanking it down toward the planet below. The battlecruiser trembled violently and

Narskene flinched at the terrible shrieking of metal and crystal as parts of its weathered hull were torn away.

*Angle the ship towards it,* Narskene told the pilot.

*It is difficult,* s/he replied, right before hir console exploded in hir face.

Narskene calmly redirected flight control to hir station. The pilot had been right, s/he realized. The shaking ship and the planet's gravity were fighting against hir, and they were winning. From what s/he been able to grasp from rudimentary readings, the ship was still not headed for the ocean, but for land nearby it. Breaking free of the atmosphere's blazing embrace, what was left of the battlecruiser continued plummeting. Through the cracked viewer, he saw flashes of blue, the toxic nitrous-oxygen atmosphere seeping into the cracks.

Narskene trilled, coughing at the noxious brew. S/he had hoped they would crash on a methane planet; at least they would be able to breathe if they somehow survived the crash. But now their fates were truly sealed. Unless they could reach the encounter suits in their armory, s/he thought. That was hir last thought.

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## **Aodh Homeworld**

### **One thousand years ago...**

The young, short haired woman eased her way down into the deep crater, each step, and the occasional slide drawing a collective gasp from those assembled. She paused each time, more so to regain her balance than for dramatic effect.

It had been thirty passages since the great Fire in the Sky, which had brought something from the skies down to them, and cleaving a hole in good, arable land in the process. It was all as sign the clerics had said, that the sacrifice of the fertile land was small compared to the gifts the gods had placed inside their chariot.

Even though she wore the purple ritual robes and markings of the priesthood, she was no true believer. But a person of her breeding had obligations and she would fulfill them. What she lacked in faith though, she made up for in other gifts, including the silent tongue. She could speak to others without thinking and also project her thoughts to them, but only when she touched them. Just her family knew, and her father had forbidden her from sharing the truth with others.

While she considered the silent tongue a gift, others among her kind thought it was a curse. So she had hidden her true talent, like she had buried her faithlessness. Reaching the bottom of the hole, she paused, taking in the lump, which appeared to be a misshapen lump of crystal and iron.

She remembered the stories she had first heard, of the hardy souls that tried to go touch the great Sunstone. Some had been burned to a crisp, others horrifically scarred for their remaining years. Still more had died of poisons spewing from within the darkened environs.

"This will be a test of faith," her rector-superior had told her, "Your test." Perhaps he had wanted to be rid of her and merely devised a clever means to do so.

Perhaps he had seen her lack of faith and was giving her a way to bow out of the priesthood. But this she could not do, because of family obligation.

So she had made the trek here to this crater, to gaze upon the already fabled Sunstone and then to attempt to divine its mysteries. She walked slowly towards it, again less for drama, and more out of fear. Insane thoughts ran through her mind of abandoning her quest, throwing away her robes, and moving far from her family and their damnable demands of tradition and duty.

She stilled those disquieting thoughts, lest they become too tempting. She inched glacially toward the Sunstone, the gathering above her watching her every step, their breaths hitching at every pause.

Now at the entrance, or rather hole within the stone, she paused once more, to gaze up at all of the anxious and hopeful faces, as if taking in her last glimpse of life. She fingered the sun medallion hanging from her neck. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and stepping inside.

She walked slowly, letting her breaths out in small bursts, testing each inhalation as if she knew what poison smelled like. As she walked deeper into the Sunstone, she realized it was much more than a rock. She didn't quite know how to describe it. The best she could come up with was like a ship, like the barge that had ferried her here.

Now that her curiosity had taken hold, she continued going deeper inside. She was careful though to take slow, measured steps. Sharp objects jutted from the walls and were spread across the floor.

She lost track of time as she walked throughout the barge. It didn't take her long to find the bodies. She had jumped at first, the crystalline creatures reminding her of the crawlers that pestered her and sometimes despoiled her food. The first sight of the larger crawlers had almost made her flee, but she had stanchied that impulse and approached one. Poking it with the heel of her boot, she had realized that the creature was dead.

If it was a creature at all, because even through her boot toe hill she could tell it was not made of skin. The exterior felt hard and as crystal like as its appearance.

She wondered what manner of beings they were. Nothing in her texts had said such creatures existed. Looking forward to stupefying the sanctimonious rectors back at the rectory, she ventured even further, searching for other things she could use to upend their cloistered views.

Turning a corner, she eyed a soft, mesmerizing orange glow. In one room, off to the side she saw a large crystalline screen, with diagonal patterns. It gleaming, pulsing if not with life, some kind of power. And if she didn't know better, it almost felt as if was calling her.

Stepping over one dead creature to reach it, she paused only a second before placing her hand against its smooth crystalline exterior. She shrieked, her body twitching in spasms as a torrent of images and emotions poured into her. She was touching a lattice, a way that these being communicated with each other, shared and

stored their thoughts, and there were so many thoughts, a chorus of them, and so many images that came from a well of memories, for hundreds of years.

Her mind nearly shut down as it struggled to contain them all, much less make it all understandable to her.

Even after she wrenched her hand free, the woman, still in the clutches of the device, fell to the ground. Her mind reeled as she absorbed what she could, learning of beings and times that didn't yet exist, from worlds far beyond her own. She didn't know how long she stayed on the ground, only that when she was released, her stomach felt like it was eating itself and the smell of her own body clung around her.

She was dirty, she was stiff, tired and famished, but none of that mattered. Because she had communed with beings of fire, and now she believed. Not only that, they had told her of a great object of enormous power, even greater than the lattice, that would make her people great, so magnificent that they too would one day stride among the stars like the Fire Beings. That great power, like a sacred fire, was nestled within this barge.

She stood up, shaking off the tiredness and stiffness, allowing the knowledge of the Fire Beings to fill her and to guide her to the sacred fire and to her destiny.

**THE END**