

# Dark Territory The Needs of the One

By DarkKush

## PROLOGUE

### Distant Memory

**IRW Chula**  
**(Federation-Romulan Border)**  
**Year: 2310**

#### **(Dining Hall)**

Ante-Centurion Ousanas Dar felt out of place. His blood ran cold instead of hot, and his heart shriveled instead of swelling. Try as he might, he couldn't bring himself to share in the joy of his comrades-in-arms. He couldn't countenance what they had all done-what he had done.

What is wrong with me? He thought, but kept the seditious musing to himself. A large hand clapped his back, literally ripping through the cobwebs of his thoughts.

Dar automatically reached for the disruptor pistol clipped to his belt.

"Rest easy Ante-Centurion," a rough voice proclaimed. Dar recognized it immediately. He turned around slowly. Standing right behind him was his immediate superior, Centurion Lorek. The husky, graying officer clutched a half-empty bottle of electric blue ale in one paw. The bruising smile plastered across his face was caused by more than inebriation.

Dar stood immediately at attention, but the swaying Centurion rapped hard against Dar's golden helmet, the sound ringing painfully in his ears. Dar flinched, bringing on a hacking laugh from Lorek.

"Why are not partaking in our celebration?" Lorek asked, an edge underneath the slurred words. The veteran officer had always been vocal in his displeasure of having Dar serve on the *Chula*. Lorek had scrapped a worthy military career from a backwater origin in the Outmarches while Dar had come from the privileged environs of the Imperial Capitol.

Within two year's time, Dar's birthright would push him far beyond Lorek, despite his lifetime of service and hard work. That wasn't anything particularly unique in Romulan society. Dar had been born into an elite family. His aunt Caithlin had served once as an ambassador to the Federation

and was now a Senator. His father had given his life fighting the Klingons at Klach D'Kel Brakt. Dar's mother was a noted author.

His perch had already been carved out for him long before he was born. But it was a destiny he didn't want, and somehow Dar knew that Lorek could sense his doubt, and the older man despised him for it. And Dar really couldn't blame him. It didn't make sense that Dar wouldn't want the gilded life he had been given. If he kept a steady course, and didn't arouse the suspicions, or worse, of the Tal Shiar, his life course would more than likely lead to the Senate. Senate seats were often handed down by heredity, and his aunt had no children of her own. He was the oldest of his generation of cousins and he knew that Aunt Caithlin favored him.

All he had to do was remain silent and follow orders, but Dar wasn't sure he could do that any longer, not after what he had taken part in today. His mind flashing back to the smoking craters and burning buildings, he flinched again at the memories of screams. His stomach turned as the alien stench of red blood returned to his nostrils.

"Why aren't you enjoying yourself?" Lorek asked again, clumsily turning around, sweeping the bottle in front of him to take a measure of the revelry. Dar made to speak, but the words died in his parched mouth.

Despite his misgivings, Dar couldn't help but feel a tinge of yearning as his fellow officers sang songs, clapped each other's backs, and toasted innumerable times to their victory. There was something almost Klingon about their revelry, and for once such a description didn't sound insulting to him.

The Commander ran a disciplined ship, and to see such unrestrained passion was almost dizzying. Dar was almost tempted to shelve his doubts and give in to the embers starting to flicker in his blood, but the image of the dead woman, clutching her crying child stayed him.

The child was in the hold of their ship now, along with the other prisoners. Conventional wisdom stated that Romulans didn't take prisoners. From Dar's experience, mostly that was true, except when the prisoners could be of some value to the Empire.

The experiments the humans were conducting at Norkan had been deemed very valuable to the Empire. The intelligence dossier on the colony had stated that it was formed by humans who wanted to continue the genetic enhancements outlawed on Earth since their Eugenics Wars almost three centuries ago. The Norkan outposts existed in a buffer zone between Federation and Romulan space, not subject to either jurisdiction.

The Tal Shiar believed, and the Admiralty concurred that the defiance of the Norkan colonists was merely a ruse to hide a bio-weapon; one that could be quickly unleashed against the Empire.

Dar hadn't been so certain of that, even after reading the dossier. As a child he had accompanied his aunt to the Federation numerous times, and he had learned a great deal about Federation societies and cultures during his travels. Bio-warfare was not a tactic the Federation was known for using. It didn't mesh with their exalted sense of themselves. However, his superiors failed to see that point. Federation arrogance would preclude them from using a weapon, no matter how successfully it might work, if it sullied their self-image, just as Romulan paranoia couldn't accept that Starfleet wouldn't act as dishonorably as many in the Admiralty and Tal Shiar would to secure victory at any cost.

Dar had voiced his concerns, first with his Commander and then with his Aunt. But the admirals and Tal Shiar had convinced the Praetor that the Federation was using Norkan as a staging area for an attack, and he had decided to strike first.

Despite the genetic augmentations of many of the colonists, they were no match for disruptors and Romulan tenacity, especially when they were taken by surprise.

As Dar had suspected, no bio-weapons had been discovered. But the augmented humans in the hold would help advance the Empire's research into developing its own bio-weapon, and Sarpan, the Tal Shiar officer onboard, was already weaving a tale of how the Norkan Campaign would send a message to Starfleet to halt any aggression, already enjoined or merely being planned against the Empire.

Lorek poked Dar with the thick index finger his free hand. "Speak Ante-Centurion!" He bellowed.

"Leave young Dar alone," a quiet voice sliced through the raucous air. Lorek's eyes cleared immediately and the portly man attempted to stand at attention. Dar's sigh of relief was mixed in with fear.

Commander Alidar Jarok stood behind both him and Lorek now. The man's cheeks were flushed green with either exhilaration or drink, but he hadn't allowed himself to be conquered by the ale like Lorek. Dar hadn't expected him to. "Centurion Lorek, you are excused," Jarok said sharply.

Lorek thumped his chest in salute, "Yes Commander."

Jarok smiled. "Go back and tell the soldiers more war stories. They never seem to tire of your meeting with Kirk."

Lorek grinned. "Ah yes, Kirk deceived me to gain entrance into engineering. He was disguised as a Romulan Centurion, the tricky veruul. It is fortunate that I wasn't executed for being duped. But my Commander's lapse was far greater I suppose...as was the humiliation..."

Jarok nodded. "As I've heard many times," he said quietly. "Now, go regale the others...That is an order."

"At once Commander," Lorek saluted again before ambling off. Once Lorek had disappeared into the throng, Jarok studied Dar's face long and hard. The young soldier knew it would be dangerous to blink or turn away from the scrutiny.

"You do not approve of what we have done here this day?" Jarok asked.

Dar shook his head slowly. "What would give you that impression Commander?"

Jarok laughed softly. "Because I know you, and I know your mother. We served together years ago. You are a lot like her, and you don't belong here, though you allow others to tell you otherwise."

Dar felt like he had been physically punched. How could the commander read him so well? "Why...why would you say that?"

"The reason I selected you to be part of my staff was your journalistic talent. Your powers of observation of both external events and what goes on inside the hearts of men is very impressive. It doesn't serve me to surround myself with yes men or hatchet men entirely."

"Thank you," Dar said slowly, hoping that the Commander was giving him a compliment. Jarok dismissively flicked his hand.

"If you want to thank me, tell me what you really feel. I assure you that Sarpan is not within ear shot." Jarok leaned forward, wrapping an arm around Dar's shoulder. Whispering into the man's ear, "The last I saw him he was creeping into Subcommander Ael's quarters." The man chuckled, and Dar stiffened, shocked that the Commander would share such information with him.

Perhaps the partying had gotten to Jarok after all. Dar cleared his throat. "Well, sir, I just didn't think Starfleet would place a bio-weapon so close to the Romulan border before we went to Norkan. And they didn't."

"Yes," Jarok pulled back from Dar. "You are right. But it's the big picture that you are missing."

"I...don't quite understand sir."

"The information about bio-weapon research was specious to begin with," Jarok admitted. "The old guard is still haunted by the ghosts of our countless humiliations at the hands of Earth and the Federation. The recent alliance of the Klingons and Federation is a threat to our expansion and survival. Norkan is a symbol that the Romulan Star Empire is still a force to be reckoned with. All that was needed was a plausible enough excuse."

Dar stepped back, stunned. "So...you knew? You knew that there were no bio-weapons at the Norkan outposts?"

Jarok's expression was graven. "So much like your mother. She eventually grew tired of the gamesmanship of politics and war and retreated to her tales of historical fiction. Perhaps you should do the same." Dar wasn't

sure if it was a suggestion or a warning. "I can assure you that things will only get worse the further you travel down this path."

Something sad flashed behind the man's dark eyes and Dar's heart started beating again. Jarok was trying to help him, warn him. But warn him about what?

"Commander I don't understand," Dar began. Jarok began to speak again when but his words were drowned out.

"All hail Commander Jarok, hero of the Norkan Campaigns!" Lorek was now standing shakily on a table, a sloshing goblet in his hands.

"All hail Jarok!" the room roared. "Hero of the Norkan Campaigns!" The soldiers swarmed around Jarok, pushing Dar against the wall. He waited until he was certain know would see him leave before he departed. He had a lot to think about.

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## **Near Present**

### **Iconia**

#### **Joint Federation-Romulan Archaeological Excavation (Romulan Neutral Zone)**

**Year: 2368**

Lt. So'Dan Leva dreaded lunchtime the most. Both of the small contingents of Romulan and Federation archeologists shared a repast in the cramped mess hall. The lack of replicators on the dig forced everyone to journey to the commissary and the strict segregation between the two camps had dissolved more quickly than Leva had thought possible.

The Romulans had mixed in fairly well with their Federation counterparts. The din of conversation and laughter for each meal would only lessen when either Leva or Ousanas Dar, the V'Shar security attaché for the Vulcan Science Academy sought a seat among the throng.

Dar was a decades-long defector from the Star Empire and Leva was a half-breed, his father was human, and his mother was an Earth-based Romulan diplomat critical of the naked military dictatorship masquerading as an authoritarian republic.

Leva quickly glanced around and saw that Dar wasn't in the mess. So he would be the party-pooper he realized. The lieutenant had avoided the commissary for days, holing himself in the quarters he shared with the two other Starfleet security guards assigned to this excavation. He had brushed off their entreaties to join them to eat, relying on his internal reserves to sustain him as he submitted weekly reports and surfed the security TacNet for hours.

Eventually his body had betrayed him, his stomach rumbling like shifting tectonic plates.

As soon as he had entered the mess hall, Leva moved quickly to the serving line and palmed a few pieces of fruit. Leva planned to eat in his room, feigning the need to finish his reporting. Unfortunately, he hesitated at the beverage stand long enough to catch the attention of Dr. Zo’Kama Do’matar, the amiable Arkonian medic on loan from Vulcan Medical Command.

“So’Dan...Lt. Leva,” she called, “Over here!” The reptilian waved to get his attention. Leva tensed, his flight or fight syndrome warring within him. The coldness between him and the Romulans hadn’t been openly declared, but if ignored Dr. Zo’Kama’s entreaty it would be, and he would look like the perpetrator. Sighing, and slumping his shoulders, Leva turned around and ambled over to the Arkonian. She patted an empty spot beside her on the long bench.

“Finally decided to stop being a hermit huh?” Lt. Carrick, sitting on Leva’s other side, asked around a mouthful of a roast beef sandwich. Kirce Carrick piloted the shuttle the Starfleet shuttle that jetted the archeologists around the planet and also made supply runs back into Federation space. Leva had caught the young woman staring at him from time to time, with a look in her eyes that had made him feel uncomfortable. He had sought to avoid her as well, afraid of where prolonged exposure to the woman and her gaze might lead. He realized it was probably Carrick behind Zo’Kama’s gesture.

He nodded stiffly at Carrick and then across the table. Sitting opposite Carrick was Sublieutenant Torin, Carrick’s counterpart. The distaste on the man’s face was barely concealed. Beside him sat the archeologist Raccina. Leva hadn’t spoken to the young woman, though he had thoroughly researched her file, seeking the Tal Shiar or Tal Arcani agents sprinkled among the Romulan contingent. Starfleet Intelligence and the Vulcan V’Shar had done the same, with Dar and the Deltan Jadda, the titular head of the Federation security force on Iconia.

Raccina smiled at him, and Leva’s throat constricted. Similar to him, her brow ridge was slight, not as prominent as many of the other Romulans in the group. The woman also had a fair complexion, reddish hair and a fine sprinkling of freckles across her cheeks. She appeared to be a half-breed as well, though Leva wasn’t sure if she shared his human heritage or some other. “Lt. Leva it’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” she said, “I thought you were urban legend.” She laughed, the sound musical to him.

Leva’s face flushed green. He was embarrassed by his reaction, but there was nothing to do about it. “A hermit Mr. Leva might be,” Carrick replied. “But he’s definitely flesh and blood.” She nudged him with an elbow.

Leva swallowed hard, at a lost for words. So he quickly filled his mouth with a bite of fruit.

"It seems to me that Mister Leva perhaps doesn't share the amity of his fellow Federation colleagues toward us, his own people," Torin said, glaring at him. Leva chewed slowly on his apple, locking eyes with the Romulan pilot.

"I'm sure that's not the case," Zo'Kama said.

"And if it was, that's his business," Carrick interjected, an edge to his voice. Now she felt the need to defend him, the gesture making Leva even more unsettled. He had taken the slings and arrows from full-bloodied Romulans for most of his youth on the Romulan colony Henaka. He had learned how to deal with bullies a long time ago and he didn't like the idea that Carrick even thought she needed to speak up on his behalf, either because she felt he couldn't, or wouldn't do so himself, or if she was entertaining any notions that a relationship might be possible between them.

"Stop acting like a veruul Torin," Raccina chided. "If Mr. Leva is uncomfortable around fellow Romulans, I'm sure there is a reason. We are not the most accommodating people after all."

"I never said I had a prob-," Leva began, but Torin cut him off. The pilot's glare was now directed towards Raccina.

"Of course you would say that," the Romulan said. "What is that human saying about fellow birds sticking together? I'm sure you're mother taught it to you."

"My mother is as loyal a citizen as yours," Raccina shot back. "Don't question her loyalty again."

Torin sneered, turning his attention back to Leva. "Of course she is. She had the sense to leave the Federation behind, to seek the discipline and order of the Star Empire...unlike Ambassador Sonora."

Leva jumped up, the Kalerian apple crushed in his fist. Zo'Kama placed a strong, scaly hand on his shoulder, forcing him back down. But Leva wouldn't budge. Carrick was on her feet seconds after him. The whole room grew silent.

"Take that back," Carrick warned Torin. The burly Romulan stood up slowly, a gleam of anticipation in his eyes.

"No," he said evenly. "I am tired of this charade, of making nice with our enemies, especially traitors like you or Dar."

"That's enough Sublieutenant," Professor Gnaeus, the head of the Romulan team, intoned from across the room. The wizened Romulan was slowly making his way toward the table. Leva trembled with the desire to knock the smug expression off the pilot's face. He had made a promise to himself years ago that he would never be bullied again.

"I don't take orders from you," Torin retorted. "I'm the ranking officer on this mission."

"Ranking idiot is more like it," Ousanas Dar said as he swept into the mess hall. Almost in unison everyone turned toward the tall, striking Romulan. "Everyone was enjoying themselves, unwinding after a hard day until you had to ruin it. How about you sit down, finish your meal, and we can all let this incident be forgotten."

"Just like you forgot your oath of loyalty to our Empire?" Torin challenged. He stepped over the bench, heading towards Dar. He only made it a couple of steps before Raccina leaped up, her hand shooting towards Torin's neck. The man collapsed seconds later. Smiling, she nodded at Dar.

"I can't believe that neck-pinch really works," she said.

"Seeing is believing," Dar replied. "There is much our people have forgotten when we left Vulcan. Hopefully joint ventures such as these will ease the way toward reconciliation."

"I think most of us are in agreement with that," Professor Gnaeus said, sitting back down slowly. Raccina glanced at Torin's prone form.

"What do we do with him?"

"Let him sleep it off," Dar said, stepping around the unconscious man and taking his place beside Torin. He began picking at the untouched portions on Torin's plate. After Raccina sat back down, Leva finally allowed Zo'Kama to guide him back to sitting, even though he wanted more than ever to leave.

After the familiar din resumed, Raccina said, "So Mr. Leva, you are from Henaka?"

The mention of former home instantly brought back memories of the hazing he endured because of his mixed heritage and the brutal Klingon assault on the colony that had killed his grandparents. The few good memories about Henaka had been drowned out by the terrible ones that still gave him nightmares on occasion.

"My apologies," he said tightly, "But I have to go." Leva got up quickly, before anyone could protest and left the mess hall for the sanctuary of his quarters.

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## **Security Quarters (Minutes Later)**

"You can't run forever," Ousanas Dar said, his voice as irritating and grating as the sands engulfing dead Iconia.

"You're a fine one to talk," Lt. Leva replied, not even looking up from his terminal. "I have a report to file."

"You can do that anytime. It's not like you're going anywhere anytime soon."



"Thanks to you," Leva grumbled.

"You're welcome," Dar said. "Believe me, I know how hard this must be for you. Most of the Romulans here only consider you a half-breed, I'm a traitor...a far worse crime."

Leva sighed loudly before turning around. "And yet you insisted on accompanying the expedition to Iconia knowing that we would be working with a Romulan archaeological team. Furthermore, you recommended to both Starfleet Command and the Vulcan High Command that I join you."

"Did I?" One of Dar's eyebrows lifted. Though a typical reaction for a Vulcan, the quizzical expression looked disconcerting on a Romulan face. "How can you be sure of that?"

"Believe it or not, when you work in security you often run across all types of information. Plus, these civilians from Daystrom aren't too big on confidentiality."

Dar nodded. "Then again, Federation citizens have never valued the need for secrecy and discretion that is bred into our kind from birth."

Leva frowned. "I don't have anything in common with you," he sniffed, "or them."

"I beg to differ," Dar countered. "I also think that that attractive archeologist you brushed off in the mess hall thinks as I do. Isn't she from Henaka Colony, your birthworld?"

"No, she had relatives there," Leva began, before stopping himself. His face scrunched up in disgust. "I would appreciate it if you refrained from eavesdropping on me in the future."

"Can't help it," Dar said, tapping the tapered point of one of his ears. Leva sighed again. "I see you've done your research on Doctor Raccina eh? She is quite the beauty." When Leva didn't answer, Dar pressed on.

"Doesn't it feel good to be home," Dar added.

"The Neutral Zone isn't exactly Romulus," Leva said dryly. "Or Henaka."

"But its close enough," Dar replied. "And you didn't answer my question. Doesn't it feel good?"

"I don't feel anything," Leva said. "This is just another assignment."

"I hope you're better at detecting lies than giving them," Dar said.

Leva clamped down his anger. "I don't have time for this. I have work to do."

"You remember how we met Mr. Leva?" Dar said, ignoring the lieutenant's not so subtle dismissal. The older Romulan stoically waited the younger man out.

"Yes," Leva said after a few minutes. "The Borg Taskforce. SI bought me in for my knowledge about the Romulan frontier, where the Borg first struck."

Dar nodded. "So?" Leva challenged. "What has that got to do with anything?"

"You didn't like me at first," Dar began.

"I don't like you much right now," Leva interjected, causing Dar to wince.

"Touche Mr. Leva," the older Romulan said, "but whether you liked me then or now, you were professional enough to work with me. That's something I don't see you doing here."

Leva pointed at his terminal. "That's what I've been doing. As a matter of fact I was working before you showed up."

"No," Dar shook his head. "You were hiding."

"I was doing no such thing!"

"Yes you were, and you've been doing it since we got here. Don't you think you owe it to the Romulans and to yourself, not be seen as running from them. Not all Romulans are terrible people. If you take the time to remove yourself from your self-imposed prison you might learn quite a bit during this trip. I'm sure that's one of the reasons your station commander agreed to your placement here."

Leva smirked. "Guess again," he said. "My commander doesn't care for me, perhaps because of my Romulan blood."

"All the more reason to seek out friendships among these scientists here," Dar implored. "You can't live as half a person. You need to be whole, and embraced both of your cultures, the good and the bad."

"That's easy for you to say," Leva remarked. "You made a choice to leave Romulus. I never had a chance. I was an outsider the day I was born."

"I didn't make a choice," Dar said, his face darkening, "The choice was made for me by those in power. I had to choose right no matter how much of a personal sacrifice it cost me, and it has been very personal." The cloud lifted from his face. "Though Vulcan women are quite beautiful, they lack Romulan passion, even in the throes of their mating rituals. Ironically enough Klingon women are fairly similar to our own, though I can't get past the heavy foreheads or their bad teeth."

Leva couldn't help but chuckle. He hadn't been prepared for the curveball. "So you can laugh," Dar said. "For a moment I thought Starfleet had a second android in the Fleet. I know it will be hard for you Mr. Leva, but try. You might not get an opportunity like this again to be so close to Romulan space."

"Oh, I doubt that," Leva said, "but I will consider what you said." Dar nodded, and gave a short bow.

"Fair enough." Dar conceded, before leaving Leva to his work and his thoughts.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Present

**USS Lacaille**

**Kazis Binary System**

**Stardate: 488320.1**

**Year: 2371**

### (Main Bridge)

"I'm not going to lose you too," Commander Elaine Rosier promised the ship splintering apart around her. Painful memories of the destruction of the last ship she served on, the *Ambassador*-class *Yamaguchi* courtesy of the Borg, sought to drill through her concentration, but Elaine wouldn't allow it.

"Stay focused and you stay alive," she whispered to herself, clutching the armrests of her chair as searing sparks from another exploding console licked her back, hair, and the sides of her face.

Rosier purposely avoided looking at the gutted center seat. She had rerouted what control remained of the *Lacaille's* systems to the terminal at her station. "Damage report!" She yelled.

"Commander," someone called out a few seconds later. Rosier turned in her seat, trying to connect a face with the ragged voice. But her eyes were tearing from the wall smoke and plasma coolant fumes. She wiped at her eyes.

"Go on," she said, before the smoke poured down her throat.

"We've...we've...got nothing." The voice was hysterical. "Everything's gone...shields, weapons...even life support."

"Even the *Kobayashi Maru* wasn't this rough", Rosier quipped after she regained her voice. Captain Tsang had often valued her off beat, black humor. He probably would've gotten a kick out of that one, she thought, staving off her own hysteria. Before she could reply to the mystery crewmen, another voice sang out.

"We've still got communications sir, and we're receiving a hail."

"About time," Rosier whispered. More loudly, she commanded. "On screen if we still have that. If not, speakers." The commander was pleased when the main viewer crackled to life. I can't believe I'm happy about offering to surrender *Lacaille* to the bastards that murdered the captain and half the crew, but Elaine also knew that part of her duty was to ensure the survival of as many of the people she was now ultimately responsible for as possible.

The Romulan on the view screen was smirking. Rosier smiled when she noticed the bright green slash running across the man's ridged brow. At least we nicked the slime devil, she thought. Rosier stood up slowly.

"Commander Domna, as Commanding Officer of the Federation *Starship Lacaille* I formerly offer our surrender..."

"I don't want your surrender," the man said, the smirk evaporating. "This could've all been avoided if your Captain had handed over the criminal as I had originally requested."

*Son of a bitch*, Rosier thought. She breathed deeply, composing herself. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Still the games, the deception," Domna shook his head, an incredulous smile creeping across his face. "Are you willing to sacrifice the remaining lives left on your vessel just to protect one person? One misguided fool?" The Romulan's eyes moved behind Rosier, peering into the smoky destruction his ship had caused, looking for his quarry.

Rosier prayed that the man would stick to the shadows. Tsang had ordered the man to the bridge in anticipation of the arrival of their package. But what had been waiting for them instead at the rendezvous was a cloaked Romulan warbird. The sharp-edged, predatory ship dwarfed the *Excelsior*-class *Lacaille*, and with superior firepower and surprise, the *Lacaille* had quickly succumbed. *Too quickly*, Rosier boiled, angry with herself for not being able to see the trap before it was sprung on them. She figured that Domna had already slagged the Barolian freighter they were supposed to intercept.

"This wasn't quite the reunion I was hoping for." Rosier cringed as a tall Romulan staggered into the command well, a greenish blossom spread over his chest. He stumbled and Rosier rushed over to prevent the man from collapsing on the deck.

Domna laughed. "So, what have you to say for yourself now Commander?"

Rosier bared her teeth, but remained silent. She concentrated her energy on propping up the man leaning against her, who was far heavier than his lanky frame would suggest.

"And what have you to say for yourself?" wheezed the Romulan at her side. "How could you murder women, children? I only wanted to see my family again."

"You are a traitor," Domna declared, a cold fire animating his features, enlivening his words. "What you want doesn't matter. If you had not allowed yourself to be seduced by that mad Vulcan and the foolish M'ret you could be with your family now, on Romulus where you belong. But you chose to turn your back on your people, serving our Empire as you had done ably before. Now you and your corrupted bloodline must answer for your crimes."

The man grimaced, tears running down his cheeks. He pulled away from Rosier to stand on his own wobbly power. "So be it," he remarked. "But killing me won't dampen the ardor for reunification between Romulus and

Vulcan, and it won't extinguish the flame to make our government more honest and transparent for our citizens."

Domna regarded the Romulan and then Rosier for almost a minute. Elaine could sense something clicking behind the man's cold black eyes. *We might just get out of this alive after all*, she hoped.

Domna finally spoke. "Flavus, you are correct. Killing you, destroying this vessel won't put an end to the dissident movement." He paused, a sigh escaping his lips as he sagged in his seat. Puffing up suddenly, the man smiled victoriously, "But it will be a start."

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**Deep Space Five**  
**(Near Ivor Prime)**  
**Stardate: 488326.6**

**(Commanding Officer's Office)**

"I really think you're worrying too much about this," Admiral Samson Glover leaned close to the monitor on his desk. He winked at the attractive blonde woman on the screen. "This isn't a popularity contest you know. You've done great work on the *Malcolm Reed*, and you handled that nasty situation on Mizar as well as it could be handled--from what I've read from the classified reports, there weren't any easy solutions to that snake pit and your solution probably was the only one that would have saved lives and kept the peace there--you did damned good and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Besides..." He grinned, "It's time for an upgrade. I'll bet you dinner at Siskos' that you're going to get another ship--a Nebula class, at least."

Captain Elizabeth Shelby sighed. "You think so?" She asked, but Glover knew that while the woman was genuinely concerned about the repercussions of her actions at Mizar, she wasn't as doubtful as she appeared to be. Elizabeth knew she was capable and ready to take on command of a *Nebula* or even *Galaxy*-class vessel. And Samson knew it as well.

Samson felt that the young woman wished to tap dance around was the enmity she had incurred among some in the Admiralty with the power to block her reassignment, chief among them Admirals Paris and Shanthi. Samson had personally lobbied Shanthi in an attempt to get his old friend to change her mind, but he knew that Thuosana could be as obstinate as a Horta when she felt she was right about something, and Shanthi felt that Shelby was not the type of officer that she be receiving promotion, despite the woman's instrumental role in saving the Federation from the Borg, not to mention

Starfleet Command, and the Federation Council's support of her handling of the Mizar crisis.

Paris, Shanthi, and a gaggle of other admirals felt that Shelby's off duty lifestyle was an embarrassment to the Fleet, and her sometimes relaxed style invited insubordination and a lack of discipline. The service records of the *Malcolm Reed's* personnel countered Shanthi's argument, but something personal had happened between Thuosana and Shelby that turned the woman dead against the young captain.

Whenever he asked, Shanthi deflected the question with one of her own, "Why don't you ask your golden girl?"

To which he would always reply, "She's Hanson's fantasy, not mine."

But Samson had to admit that he was quite fond of Shelby. She reminded him a lot of his late wife Deitra, with the same fire and zest for life though Elizabeth seemed to have found a balance between duty and a personal life that Deitra never had, or more sadly, never really wanted. The woman had always been on the go, always running. Samson really couldn't blame her. He might've been the same if he had lived her life...

"Admiral, Admiral is everything all right?" Shelby asked, a concerned expression on her face.

Glover shook his head. "Just woolgathering. Old people tend to do that sometime."

Shelby smiled. "You're far from old."

"And you're too kind."

"No, you've been very kind to me. Thank you for the support, and for being an ear when I need one."

"Anytime," Samson paused, unable to stop himself, "So, in your travels have you found anyone special yet?"

"I've found quite a few persons of interest," Shelby chuckled. "But please don't tell me you've got somebody in mind. You already paired off Terrence so now it's my turn?"

Samson laughed. "If Jasmine wasn't so right for him, I might've ordered the *Malcolm Reed* to rendezvous with the *Cuffe* on Risa."

"Well, I still look forward to meeting your son even if he's already spoken for," Shelby said.

"It's not official yet, but I'm working on it."

"You're too much Admiral."

His door chime cut through the cheerful mood. "Well, back to work I suppose."

Shelby rolled her eyes. "Yes, for the both of us."

"Make sure to bring your new ship to DS5 so I can take a look at her."

"I think you're getting a little ahead of yourself sir," Shelby cautioned.

“Admiral’s prerogative.” The old man stated, frowning as the door chimed again. “See you soon Elizabeth.” The woman said her good bye and Samson deactivated his monitor. He stood up and slid on his red and black long duty uniform. “Enter” he commanded, propping his arms on his desk, his knuckles bracing against the smooth *baakonite* finish.

Commander Amaya Donners, his adjunct, plowed through the doors. Samson immediately stood up to full height, his chest constricting. Donners was a cool customer, an engineer by trade she was a problem solver that didn’t allow her emotions to get the best of her. He had never seen the young woman so distraught.

“What happened?” Samson asked, clearing his throat to keep it from closing up.

“The *Lacaille* sir,” Donners began, pausing to take a gulp of air, “It’s been destroyed.”

“Oh my,” Samson’s legs buckled slightly. A million questions raced through the man’s mind, but all he could muster was “How?”

“Romulans sir,” Donners said, her caramel hued face darkening.

“Damn,” Glover whispered. “How did they find us out? Were there any survivors?”

Donners shook her head. “Sir, communications from the *Lacaille*’s log buoy has just entered our space. We can’t be certain, but the fact that only a buoy made it back without any indications of lifepods...” the woman let the admiral make his own conclusion.

“Well, that’s not good enough.” Samson barked. He sank back into his seat, anger and grief robbing him of strength.

“I don’t understand sir,” Donners ventured.

“Yes you do. If you just accepted things the way they were I would’ve never taken you on as my aide.” He reactivated his console while continuing to talk to Donners. “I’m not just going to abandon any potential survivors without verifying the log buoy’s information with my own eyes.”

“I take it your going on a trip?” Donners said with a nervous smile.

“You got it.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

**Captain's Personal Log, Supplemental: I can't believe I actually missed working with the Cardassians. Though I can't fault HQ for taking *Cuffe* off of patrol duty in the Demilitarized Zone. The crew certainly enjoyed the relative reprieve, mapping the rim of the Norma Arm in the Beta Quadrant, but I'm glad to be back in more familiar territory.**

### **Umoth VIII (Federation-Cardassian DMZ)**

"Still glad to be back?" Lt. Commander Pedro Rojas yelped as he dipped behind a crate, a sizzling barrage puncturing the air where his head had been seconds earlier.

"Aren't you?" Captain Terrence Glover quipped. His back against an adjacent stack of crates, the captain increased the power setting on his phaser before taking a shot.

"I'm enjoying myself sir," Lt. Nyota Dryer replied. The young security officer was crouched beside the captain, a phaser rifle clutched in her hands.

"Two out of three ain't bad," Glover remarked.

"It is if we don't come out of this alive," Rojas rejoined.

"Enough with the repartee," a familiar voice rasped. "I thought this was supposed to be a gunfight."

"It doesn't have to be Captain Diaz, if you surrender." Glover said, poking his head slightly around the edge of the box. The woman and the rest of her Maquis cohorts were swallowed in the warehouse's thick shadows. His Security Chief had suggested that Glover's away team take night-vision goggles, but Terrence had nixed the idea. He didn't think corralling the Maquis rebels would take so long that his team needed to be weighted down with equipment he felt was unnecessary. He had wanted them to go in light and fast. Now Glover realized it was a mistake, and he hoped it would be the only one he would rake himself over the coals with by the end of the day.

"You know that's not going to happen Terrence," Diaz said from somewhere in the murk. "And I'm also walking out of here with these medical supplies."

"And you know I can't allow that Captain."

"I'm not your Captain anymore. I gave up on Starfleet a long time ago. Maybe you should do the same."

"Fighting for the Maquis is a hopeless cause. The best way to ensure peace along the border is to support the treaty with the Cardassians."

"I can't believe I heard that from you, I guess the fourth pip really does change a person."



"Are you two going to jawbone each other to death?" Another voice, followed by a blast that singed the edge of the crate by Terrence's head, interrupted his reunion with his former commanding officer.

"My thoughts exactly," Dryer whispered through gritted teeth. "Let's bag these Maquis and call it a day."

"She's more than Maquis," Glover admonished. "She's our former captain. And don't worry, she'll be in custody shortly." One of the network of informants Starfleet Intelligence had spread among the Maquis had tipped Starfleet Command off that a Maquis cell would be raiding a medical supply station on Umoth VII.

Glover knew that Diaz's cell operated mainly in the Umoth zone and he lobbied hard to be part of the team that would apprehend her. He didn't totally disagree with Maquis assertions that the Cardassians couldn't be trusted, or that Federation citizens living on worlds ceded to the Cardassian Union by treaty weren't in more precarious straits, but Glover couldn't abide the idea of taking up arms against the Federation.

Sabrina Diaz, his former captain, and the woman who had nominated him to replace her at the helm of the *Cuffe*, thought differently. Glover felt it was only right that he be the one to bring her in. *And after her, Calvin*, Glover thought grimly. Cal Hudson, one of his closest friends, had also joined the Maquis. Terrence considered it a personal mission to also apprehend his friend. He was afraid that the Cardassians or less sympathetic Starfleet authorities might get to him first.

Unfortunately, in the spirit of détente, Glover had been forced to include a Cardassian liaison on this mission. Glinn Vennor had disappeared during the firefight. Terrence was assuming the wiry Cardassian was attempting to outflank the Maquis. *Good luck with that*, the captain thought. Diaz wasn't born yesterday.

Except for Vennor, so far things were going according to plan. Glover had allowed Diaz and her team of five to enter the medical warehouse, and then 'surprised' them. But the real surprise should be creeping up behind them, in the form of Security Chief Meldin, a *Cuffe* security detachment, and a cordon of local authorities.

"All we want are a few medical supplies," Diaz said after a few moments of silence. "We've got sick and wounded people. Unfortunately we don't have access to replicators and other nifty Federation technology."

"By choice," Glover said. "But you can choose a different way."

"It's too late for that now," Diaz replied, and Terrence was certain he heard something wistful in the woman's voice. "Besides, I would rather go back to the Stone Age than live under Cardassian rule."

Before Glover could reply, he hurt a grunt and then the sounds of scuffling. "We got him!" Another voice called out. Terrence's eyes exploded with pain as the warehouse was flooded with light.

"We've got your Cardassian," Diaz said. "Surrender or we'll treat him like his kind treat the Bajorans." Glover maintained his position. He motioned for Dryer and Rojas to do the same.

"I don't believe you," he called out. Diaz sighed loudly. "Rof, a demonstration please." Glover winced as an ear-splitting scream reverberated off the warehouse's walls.

Terrence couldn't help but take a look to see what had just happened, and to who. A fleshly, wet nub smacked his cheek before hitting the floor. He picked up the warm, scaly gray mass. It was a thumb. Vennor's thumb.

"I can't believe you just did that," Glover remarked, his anger and gorge rising. Diaz had been an abrasive captain that sometimes played loosely with regulation and protocol, but she had never been a torturer...well, except for that one time with Laurent. He deserved it after the havoc he unleashed aboard the *Cuffe*, Glover thought. But did Vennor?

"You can step from behind the crates now Captain. I promise that you or this spoon head won't be hurt again...unless you try something first." Shielding his eyes against the glare, Glover made to move.

Dryer clutched his bicep. "I don't trust her sir."

"I don't either," Glover replied. Though Terrence had originally been assigned to the *Cuffe* to spy on Diaz, whom some in Command thought was part of the Brigade, a precursor to the Maquis, the woman had completely duped him. But still, he couldn't say he didn't trust her or anticipate her next move, until this very moment. And now he didn't feel as bad about bringing her to heel.

The captain stepped from behind the crate. Diaz was ringed by four of her cadre. A large, muscular Alshain held the still struggling Vennor. Glover spied the thick boot soles of the fifth man. "The rest of your team as well," Diaz waved the Klingon disruptor she held side to side, at the crates both Rojas and Dryer were hiding behind.

"Come on out," Glover said with a calculated burst of frustration. Any second now, Meldin should be leading the charge into the building. Pedro and Nyota flanked him, their weapons pointed downward.

"Is he alive?" Glover gestured with the emitter node of his phaser, immediately causing the Maquis to tense up. Diaz ordered them to lower their weapons.

"He'll live," she glanced back at the injured man. "Granted you allow us to take these medical supplies." Diaz's face was more lined than it had been a year ago, and there were streaks of gray in her once lustrous black hair. But

she was leaner, more wiry, and there was a fire in her eyes that Terrence had never seen before.

"I'm not in the driver's seat here," Glover said, a wolfish smile on his face. If I can just string her along a little while longer...

"You think you are," Diaz's smile was as hungry as his own. "But you're cavalry isn't coming. We have informants too."

"What?" Dryer got out the question before Glover did.

"Your Security Chief...Meldin isn't it? He and the rest of your away team are taking a nap right about now, somewhere outside the facility, courtesy of a *neurozine* canister placed in the air filtration system of constabulary. Some of the constables are sympathizers, but good luck figuring out whom."

"Well, I'll be damned," Rojas whistled. "You're good."

Diaz gave a curt nod. "Why thank you. Your weapons please." Three of the Maquis quickly disarmed the Feds.

The former captain of the *Cuffe* slid her disruptor back into its holster. She palmed Glover's phaser, twirling it around. "Haven't had held one of these for quite a while now."

"Consider it a gift," Terrence said through clenched teeth. He could feel an apoplectic rage building within him. Diaz had bested him again, and Glover wasn't a man who dealt well with being outfoxed repeatedly.

"Thank you," Diaz said cheerfully. "By the way, I like the new duty uniforms. The colored stripe across the shoulder, and all that black is quite slimming."

"Glad you approve," Glover said, his muscles beginning to tremble with anger.

"I see you're on the verge of berserker fury," Diaz frowned. "Like that time on the *Ekuvu*...Nyota, remember the stories you told me? About Terrence and that mob of cannibals?" Dryer merely glared at Diaz. "Well, I guess you don't have to talk to me now if you don't want to," the woman continued, nonplussed. "Anyway, I promised you that I wouldn't hurt you Terrence, but I lied."

"That's a shock," he retorted. Diaz aimed the phaser at him. The other Maquis did likewise. Vennor tried again to escape the steel grip of the Alshain, before the man cuffed him with a boulder-like fist, knocking the Cardassian to the ground.

The phaser whined as its emitter cone lit up. Glover stared at Diaz, prepared to meet his end with as much dignity as possible.

"This is really going to hurt your pride," Diaz remarked. Terrence rode the bright flash all the way to the bottom of the well.

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## USS Cuffe (Seven Hours Later...)

The Nuvian concubine did her best to knead the tension out of Glover, her combined twenty-four fingers massaging his back muscles with programmed skill, but Terrence couldn't be mollified. The captain sat up on his table.

Lt. Commander Rojas, lying on the adjacent table, shooed away the olive-skinned Deltan attending him. He sat up as well. The hairless woman pouted with displeasure. "Is everything all right Captain?" Glover knew that Pedro knew him well enough to know it wasn't. "If you don't care for this one I've got quite a few holo-programs."

Glover smirked, "I'm sure you do. But you know I'm not much for fantasy." Terrence had never cared for the regulated dangers and pleasures of the holodeck. Even with the safety protocols off, there was no comparison for the thrill of orbital diving, Titan's Turn, or Terrence's other pastimes. Though he had to admit that recently he had warmed to a Klingon calisthenics program that had been a parting gift from the crew of the Klingon ship *Dorna*, that Glover had served on before being assigned to the *Cuffe*.

Pedro rolled his eyes and exhaled loudly. "I know, I know. Thank goodness Captain Gorik usually always found us a good port of call."

Glover chuckled, the mention of their old captain, and their times aboard the *Kitty Hawk* resurfacing in his mind. "Yeah, the captain knew we deserved a break from him every once and a while."

"You're right about that," Rojas laughed. "You remember that time on Vega Colony?"

"Please, don't bring that up," Glover clutched his stomach, the laughter shaking his insides, "Commander Awokou had us cleaning plasma injectors with toothbrushes for two months."

"The first speck on your spotless record," Rojas thumped his bare chest, "and you have me to thank for it."

"Yes, I do," Glover said, his mood turning sour again. "And today's events certainly merit entrance into my Hall of Shame."

"Damn, I was trying to steer you away from self-pity," Rojas said. "But I led you right back into it."

"No you didn't," Glover replied. "Right now there's nothing you could do to take my mind off of today. I don't know how she did it, but she got me again. And I'm not pleased." When Terrence had awoken in the *Cuffe's* Sickbay an hour later, his first officer, Nandali Kojo had been waiting for him.

The lithe Kriosian had informed him, with disapproval evident in her bearing and voice that Diaz and the rest of the Maquis had escaped. No ships

had left orbit in the last several hours, and scans of the nearby area of the medical center had not revealed any clues regarding Diaz's whereabouts.

"Well, let me try another tack," Rojas pushed ahead. He pushed up from the table, and Glover did the same. Despite himself, he was curious about what was swirling around his friend's mind. "Computer end program." Almost instantly the massage parlor reverted back to the true black and yellow grid appearance of the holodeck. Rojas cinched the towel around his hips and walked over to the neatly folded uniforms by the arch leading into the room. He put his own, self-consciously patting his curved middle.

"I think you need to start hitting the gym." Glover chided playfully. "I don't want you getting stuck in a warp nacelle."

"Ha, good one," Pedro remarked. "I've just been busy, that's all."

"Really?" Glover zipped up the jacket of his uniform. He had to admit that Diaz was right about the new uniforms: the black did make you look svelte, even though he didn't need to worry about such things. "So, what's next? A Vulcan love slave program?"

"Not quite," Rojas said. He tapped a command into the communication panel beside the door. The panel's small screen flashed with the golden leaf symbol of the Federation followed by the face of a very tired young woman.

"Pedro?" She asked softly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Time for you to wake up cadet," the engineer said. "And that's Lt. Commander Pedro to you."

The woman stifled a yawn. "Really, is there something wrong?"

"No, just felt the need to talk to you." The woman frowned.

"I've got an exam tomorrow," she replied. "We'll talk later."

"Juanita," Rojas pleaded. "I've got somewhere here who would like to say hi." The woman's eyes shifted away from Pedro, looking from side to side.

"I'm really not in the mood for jokes right now. That exam is going to be brutal." Glover nudged Pedro away from the screen, and stepped fully into Juanita's view.

"Hello Juanita, it's been a long time." The young woman reared back, mortified. She quickly tensed up, patting down her unruly hair as she did so.

"Sir...I apologize for being so disheveled."

"Please," Glover smiled. "At ease. I've known your brother for a long time, and I know Pedro has a penchant for putting people on the spot. Half the engineering department wants to keel haul him." He glanced at the engineer, who merely shrugged.

"I can relate," Juanita muttered.

"So, you have an exam tomorrow? What class?"

Juanita groaned. "Temporal Mechanics." The captain winced.

"So I see you've experienced the joy."

"Yes, and it's not something I want to ever have to go through again. Is Professor Oshodi still teaching that?"

"Wow," Juanita gasped. "She was here when you were?"

Glover frowned. "I'm not that old Juanita."

"Sorry sir."

Terrence chuckled. "Apology accepted. Yes, Oshodi was there. If I recall she had a mad-on for the Temporal Cold War and pre-Federation United Earth. Has he taken the class to the Delphic Expanse for a field trip yet?"

"Yes, I can't imagine it being any more than the unremarkable stretch of space that it is now. Or that the Xindi had ever tried to destroy Earth. Our class had a great time on New Xindus."

"It better not have been too great a time," Rojas waded back into the conversation. "I don't want to have to send a report to Mama or Papa."

Juanita glared at Pedro. "Whatever," she smiled again. "Captain I can't thank you enough for sponsoring my application. I didn't think they were going to let me in after I failed the entrance exam the first time."

"Believe me, it was nothing. You being successful is the only thanks I need. And don't worry about that exam. Oshodi's bark is worse than her bite. But I do think we should let you get back to sleeping."

"I would appreciate that sir," Juanita replied.

"Don't worry about that test lil' *hija*," Rojas said. "You're a Rojas, and if I got through the Academy I know you will."

"Truer words have never been spoken," Glover chimed in.

"Amen Sir," the cadet paused. "Sirs." After the three said their farewells, Pedro switched off the screen.

"Made you feel better?" He turned toward Glover.

"Yeah, it did." Terrence actually did feel a little better after talking to Juanita. It was a nice reminder of one good thing he had been able to do after suffering another humiliation at the hands of Captain Diaz. The sting wasn't as bad as it had been before. "Thanks Pedro," he clapped the shorter man's back.

"Anything for Mon Capitan," Rojas sang. "You know Juanita idolizes you. She's already hectoring me about being assigned on *Cuffe* as soon as she graduates."

"I would be happy to have her," Glover remarked. "You know how much I like being idolized."

"Yeah, I do." The engineer smirked. He pressed a button on the panel and the arch opened. Both men stepped out into the hallway, "So, care for a night cap at the After Burner?"

"Sounds good," the captain said. "We've received orders to hold orbit over Umoth so I've got a little more time to kill."

"Great." The engineer said. "And Lt. T'Shanir has Engineering practically humming along. You really didn't need me on this boat."

"I can always send you back to the *Carolina*," Glover said.

"On second thought..."

Pedro never finished the statement. Glover's combadge chirped, and the captain tapped it quickly.

"Captain Glover." It was Commander Kojo.

"Is there a problem Commander?"

"Sir, you have a priority message from Admiral Glover." Pedro's eyes widened and Glover's brow furrowed.

"I'll be on the bridge shortly." Glover nodded at Pedro. "We'll have to get that night cap later." He strode down the hallway without waiting for a response.

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### **IRW Invidious (Commander's State Room)**

Commander Prius Domna poked at the sealed gash on his forehead. Each scar was a new toy for him, another story for him to share with his equals. He held the dermal regenerator in his other hand. "Care for a touch-up?" He asked the woman standing in front of his desk, her arms crossed.

"Commander, General Volok is a very dangerous enemy to make," she replied, her eyes flashing and a frustrated expression on her face. A flap of tanned skin flapped down from her cheek. Domna could see hints of green blood and tissue each time the woman spoke.

"I'm more concerned with repairing our damage. We don't want to be caught as unawares as that Starfleet vessel," Domna said. "We failed to destroy the *Lacaille's* log buoy. You can be certain that Starfleet will be sending another ship to investigate as soon as it is recovered."

"Sir, the concern I voice isn't irrelevant."

"It is if I choose it to be Subcommander. I still command this vessel, until Volok or some other desk rider says otherwise."

The subcommander stepped back. She nodded. "Of course you are. I was merely hoping to emphasize the consequences of disobeying Volok's orders again. It could be very bad...for all of us."

"It's really too late for that. We passed the point of no-return when you placed our Tal Shiar officer in the refuse disposal, per Volok's orders. He knows that I am one of the most capable commanders in the Imperial Fleet, and this is one of the best crews. Who else is he going to turn to? Sela? Toreth? Most of the other commanders are still too fearful of the Tal Shiar to defy them. Sela and Toreth have been burned by the Tal Shiar, but both also

have notable marks on their records. VoloK came to me, and he will have to give me the required maneuverability. It is as simple as that."

"Not to him," the subcommander retorted.

"He's not out here Talveth, in the void, like we are. For all I know he has forgotten what the pressures of command under fire are all about."

"I wouldn't be so dismissive of him sir. I've read his service record." Talveth countered.

"And so have I," Domna shot back. "It is very impressive...if this was the 2350s, the last time VoloK fought for the Empire."

"He was the mastermind of both the Khitomer and Narendra III attacks," Talveth said with relish. "He's a legend."

"In time, some children might say the same of us if they aren't all corrupted by this reunification nonsense."

"And if we had captured Flavius, with additional Starfleet prisoners, their trials could've shown the permissive elements among us that our way of life is superior."

"Perhaps," Domna admitted. "But Flavius was insignificant in the larger scheme and VoloK knows it. The trap has been set for his real target, and when they blunder into it I will be there to close it."

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Memory

**Nullus Mining Concern  
(Romulan Space)  
Year: 2327**

Lieutenant Samson Glover hit metal floor-plates, his breath gushing from his lungs. A sharp elbow jutted into his throat. "Who...are...you?" The voice rasped. Glover tried to see who or what had attacked him, but he could only make out a fuzzy shape, the lack of oxygen dimming his vision.

"Who?" The voice demanded again, before sighing heavily. A heavy weight fell on top of him, knotted hair brushing against his nostrils. He turned, and the body slid off him. A hand clamped on his shoulder, and Glover jumped.

"Lieutenant, it's me, T'Prell." Gasping for air, Glover looked up into the hooded eyes of his Vulcan compatriot. Even in stealth fatigues the woman looked stunning, but Glover had been very careful not to tell her that.

"Who? What?" He asked instead, pointing at the dark mass now resting beside him.

"Why don't you find out?" T'Prell suggested. Glover gingerly turned his attacker over, his breath leaving his lungs again: this time from shock.

Despite her smudged, bruised face, she was the most beautiful woman Sam had ever seen, present company excepted. "She's human," he said, surprised.

"So, it appears that Dar wasn't a liar after all." T'Prell had been skeptical of Dar's accounts that there had been survivors from the Norkan Massacre. Sam had recently met T'Prell while doing graduate work at the Vulcan Institute of Defensive Arts. Sam had harbored a passion for Romulan history since his father had told him about the Earth-Romulan War, and the integral role one of their ancestors, Lt. Sheldon Palmer of the *Mendi*, had played in it.

Samson had angled for a planet bound posting on Vulcan after leaving the Academy in part to continue pursuing his interest in Romulan culture. Understanding the nuances of Vulcan's more violent past, which formed the basis of proto-Romulan society, could best be done on Vulcan itself, instead from halfway across the quadrant.

T'Prell, intent on obtaining a position with the V'Shar, Vulcan's intelligence agency, also was seeking to make herself a more attractive

applicant and pursue her own interest in the Romulans by attending the Pre-Time of Awakening seminars at the Institute.

Glover had been surprised to learn that T'Prell wasn't like most of the Vulcans he had met or attended the Academy with. T'Prell had been part of a sect of Vulcans she had told him were called "V'tosh ka'tur", or "Vulcans without Logic."

Similar to the Romulans they had rejected the austere philosophy of Surak, but the V'tosh ka'tur Vulcans hadn't left their home planet like the Romulans, nor had they continued to practice the militarism that had led to Surak's radical approach to save the Vulcans from themselves.

"Did you do the neck-pinch thing?" He checked the unconscious woman's vital signs. T'Prell nodded. "Help me pick her up," Glover grabbed the woman's arms. He bent down, attempting to sling the woman over his shoulders. "Anytime you want to help would be nice," He grunted.

"She was coming from the direction of the base commander's quarters," T'Prell said, her voice rife with accusation.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Glover said, adjusting the woman's weight as he prepared to stand.

"Perhaps we should leave her," T'Prell said.

"What?" Samson asked, exasperated, but his voice didn't rise above a whisper.

"I'm sure you are familiar with the concept of comfort women," T'Prell glanced at the unconscious woman. It took Sam a few moments to grasp her meaning. He shook his head in disbelief.

"You can't be serious."

"And we shouldn't take a chance on this one," T'Prell said.

"Our mission was to rescue the survivors from Norkan. I've got a pretty good inkling that this is one of them. At the very least, it would be logical to revive her for whatever intel she might provide, and to tell us where the other survivors are."

"Very cute," T'Prell said, with a half-smile. "But she just might as easily alert the Romulans of our presence here. We don't know what type of arrangements she might've have made to survive."

"We don't know if she's made any 'arrangements' at all."

"Please place the woman back on the floor so that I can revive her." The Vulcan said tersely. Samson grunted as he put the woman back on the ground.

"Why did you make me tire myself out to begin with?" Glover huffed.

"I like watching the sweat drip down your brow. The hairless look is agreeable on you."

"Very funny. A Vulcan comedienne and V'Shar agent all rolled into one, who would've thought?"

T'Prell bent down on one knee, and placed two fingers over the woman's carotid artery as if she were checking for a pulse. Glover didn't know how she did it, but seconds later the human was stirring. T'Prell had unholstered her weapon.

"I don't think there's a need for that," Sam protested.

"We'll see." The woman's eyes fluttered open, and she started to spring up, but T'Prell placed the barrel of her phaser hard against the woman's collarbone. With her free hand, the Vulcan placed a finger against her own lips.

The human woman's face twisted in anger, her eyes darting from T'Prell to Samson. "Who are you?" She said, in defiance of T'Prell, but her voice was a whisper.

"We're here to rescue you," Glover said. T'Prell nodded.

"With a phaser at my throat," the woman countered.

"You did attack me after all," Sam said. The woman regarded him silently for a few seconds before nodding in agreement.

"At least remove this weapon from my face?"

"No." T'Prell said. "Are there any other humans here?"

"Shouldn't you already know that?" The woman snarled. "Why don't you ask one of your people?"

"I am not a Romulan. I'm a Vulcan," T'Prell said. The woman's eyes widened in disbelief.

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care," T'Prell shot back.

"Ladies, we're a little pressed for time here." Both women flashed icy glares at him. Glover held his ground. "Dar and Stark should be finishing up and expecting a signal from us any moment now."

"Are you going to help us or not?" T'Prell asked the woman, waving her gun again.

"I don't have much of a choice do I?" the woman asked.

"Not really." T'Prell answered. "Now, get up slowly. Keep your hands where I can see them at all times."

"You don't have to be so cold," Samson chided. He reached out a hand to assist the woman. After a few seconds, she reluctantly took it. "My name is Sam. What's yours?"

"Deitra," she said.

"That's a pretty name," Samson said. He repeated it, the sound of it feeling right coming from his lips.

"Now that introductions are done, let's get on with this." T'Prell brushed past the humans. She glanced back, "Sam, she's your responsibility." Sam shrugged his shoulders when the woman gave him an incredulous look.

T'Prell pulled a tricorder from the satchel slung over her shoulder. She held it up to a systems display along the wall. "Can you read Romulan script Deitra?" She asked, the name sounding frigid coming from the Vulcan. Samson didn't quite get why T'Prell was acting so chilly towards the woman. It wasn't like she was the one the woman attacked, and it was obvious by her bruised face and bedraggled appearance that she was one of the victims they were trying to help.

"I...I read a little," the woman said slowly. "What are you trying to do?" She walked up beside T'Prell.

"I want to gain control of the door lock system, so I can control who can go where," T'Prell said.

"I...I might be able to help you in that regard," Deitra admitted. "But what you want isn't mounted on that wall."

"Really," Samson ventured. "Where is it?"

Deitra pointed in the direction that she had just come. "Down that corridor. In his room." The woman shook with such disgust and fear that Samson's stomach knotted. T'Prell wasn't as susceptible.

"Let's go." She said, grabbing Deitra by the arm. "You lead the way."

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### **(Security Control Center)**

Ousanas Dar worked diligently to deactivate the mining colony's defensive grid. He wasn't a man that left much to chance and he was certain that something would go wrong that would make the extraction of the Norkan survivors less than perfect. The fake identification cards, tagging them as traders for the Orion Syndicate, had gotten them safely into Romulan space and into the mining complex but their good fortune was bound to run out.

Though he knew it was selfish and prideful to think only of himself, Dar was nonetheless determined to bring as many of the Norkan survivors back to the Federation as possible. He not only owed them that for his role in enslaving them, he owed it to his Aunt Caithlin and his entire bloodline. They had all been wiped out when he convinced his aunt to speak out about the atrocities committed during the Norkan Campaign.

Dar had barely escaped, and sometimes wished that he hadn't. Federation authorities hadn't been waiting with open arms for him. They had largely kept him at arm's length, skeptical of his stories about Norkan and life inside the Empire. However, they had constantly pumped him for information, despite never believing anything that he said.

Even his cousins, the Vulcans, had been reluctant at first to let him seek asylum. He had lived in a limbo for over a decade after leaving the Empire,

until a Starfleet Intelligence agent had appeared at the door of his domicile and offered him a chance at redemption.

Stark stood watch over the two Romulans—a Decurion and an Uhlan—they had caught coupling by surprise instead of watching their post. Dar chanced a glance in the couple's direction. Stark had relented to Dar's request and allowed the soldiers to put their uniforms back on. That small courtesy had done nothing to lessen the hate pouring from the young male Decurion. The female Uhlan had a stricken, mortified look on her face. Dar couldn't be certain if she was more afraid that she was about to be killed or because she had been discovered and overtaken in such a compromising position.

"You won't escape," the Decurion spat. "The Administrator will hunt you down. Whatever you steal from us, the Romulan government will pay four-times as much to mount your heads outside the Imperial Senate."

"You really think we'd get such star treatment?" Stark asked before he slammed the butt of his rifle against the Decurion's face, pulverizing the man's nose. The Uhlan began to whimper.

"That's enough," Dar commanded.

"You don't give me orders Rommie," Stark spat, rounding on the man. "I have operational authority here."

"You're not thieves," the Decurion said, spitting as blood ran down his face and into his mouth. "You're Starfleet."

"And you're dead," Stark swung around, aiming his weapon. Dar moved quickly, but not fast enough. The weapon fired, sizzling through flesh.

The Decurion cried out. The Uhlan laid at his knees, a green-tinged crater in her chest. The young man cradled her head, whispering, "Turi, don't die. Please, don't die..."

"Patrin," the woman gasped, blood pouring from her lips. Her eyelids fluttered, and then she sighed, her entire body trembling. The Decurion, Patrin, gently placed her back on the unforgiving floor. He glared at both men.

"Turi was my betrothed. We...were to be wed...as soon as we had left this hellish place."

Dar held Stark in a firm embrace. The man struggled futilely. "My brother died at Norkan," he said. "He didn't believe in all that Eugenics crap. But the work the Soong Foundation was doing there was the only hope to save my sister-in-law from a disease that the best doctors in the Federation had no clue how to cure."

"My name is Patrin VoloK," the Romulan said softly, a detached quality to his voice. "Remember the name because it will be the last one you hear before you die."

"We'll see about that," Stark snarled before he found himself smashing into a wall. In one fluid motion, Dar had flung the human to get him out of the way so that he could incapacitate VoloK with a neck-pinch.

Turning around to check on where Stark had landed, and hoping he hadn't hurt the man too badly, Dar was felled by the butt of the man's rifle.

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### **(Administrator's Private Chamber)**

I can't believe we're doing this, Glover thought, resisting the urge to tip-toe as the trio crept into the largest room at the end of the corridor. The room was dominated by a bed that held the most corpulent Romulan Samson had ever seen. Beside the bed was a console with a tarnished key sticking out of it.

The woman pointed and whispered. "That's what you are looking for. It's some type of override control." She paused as the sleeping Romulan turned over in his bed, expelling gas.

T'Prell wrinkled her nose. She moved forward quickly, grasping the key and turning it. It made a noticeable click, and the console lit up.

The Romulan rose groggily. "Deitra is that you? Come back for more eh?" He said, but the smile left his face when he turned around to see Samson standing by the woman. The Romulan's jowls shook when he spied T'Prell at the console.

"What is the meaning of this?" He roared, reaching underneath his pile of pillows. Before either Glover or T'Prell could act, Deitra had snatched the phaser from Samson's belt clip. She pulled the trigger, the red beam punching into the Romulan. He sank into the plush bed.

"I thought when you fired these things it was supposed to dissolve a person." She handed the weapon back to a still-shocked Glover.

"Not when they are on stun setting," he finally managed to say. T'Prell had returned to working on the console.

"How do I change the settings then?" Deitra held out her hand, wiggling her fingers to get the phaser back.

"I'm not going to tell you that," Glover said. "And I'm not going to give you my weapon."

"He deserves to die."

"You don't have the right to determine that."

"But he has held the power of life and death over me...and the others for as long as I can remember. He has done things to us, made us do things to others...all for his amusement."

Glover's stomach turned, but he held firm. "That doesn't give either of us the right to kill him."

"How about we debate ethics back on the freighter?" T'Prell smirked, turning around, the large key twirling around her finger. "We've got some survivors to bring home."

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## **(Processing Lab)**

Stark hated involving Samson and T'Prell in this. From what he had read about both, they would've had promising futures ahead of them. But Section 31 needed their expertise today. In fact there might not be a future without their sacrifice.

The man attached his tricorder to the lab's mainframe. While it was downloading, he moved to the dozen tables spread around the lab. He collected as many samples of boronite that he could, placing the rare ore into his satchel.

He couldn't help but think about the symbol of the Ouroboros, the snake devouring his own tail, as he made his rounds. Late last century, the Lantaru Sector had been demolished when Federation scientists had attempted to create one particle of an incredible energy source they called Omega. Boronite was a key ingredient in synthesizing Omega. Section 31 feared that the Romulans were about to start their attempts to create an Omega particle after reports of an expansion of mining and a Romulan military buildup had been intercepted from Starfleet Intelligence communiqués.

The few spies the Federation had inside the Empire had also confirmed Dar's assertion that Norkan hadn't been a total massacre, and that some of the human survivors were being used along with Reman slaves to mine the deadly boronite.

The tricorder beeped signaling it had finished. If Stark could get the information back to Federation space, Section 31 would have a good idea of how far along the Romulan Omega program was. He retrieved the tricorder, clipping it to his belt.

Instead of heading straight to the freighter, he paused. Stark didn't feel right about sacrificing two patriots. Dar was a Romulan, and Romulans couldn't be trusted. But the other two...

He tapped a code into his chronometer. ABORT MISSION, it read, RETURN TO FREIGHTER. Now, at least they had a choice.

Satisfied, Stark turned toward the door. A swirling mass hit him before he could react.

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## **(Main Corridor)**

"The holding cells are just an access junction away," Glover protested.

"The mission has been scrapped," T'Prell said. "You read the same message I did."

"I'm not going to leave these people!" Samson said with quiet steel.

"If you even attempt to leave us after not letting me gut that pig Ketana, I will alert the guards."

"Go ahead, they're all locked in their rooms." T'Prell challenged. "Now, you have a choice. You can wait here until Ketana or one of the others figures out a way to override the override, or you can come with us."

"I won't leave the others," Deitra said after a moment's hesitation. "I...I can't leave them."

"I won't abandon them either. We've already done that once, and I won't be apart of doing it again," Samson stood beside Deitra, her aura weakening him a little.

"We have orders," T'Prell tried not to raise her voice, her brow beetling with displeasure.

"This isn't a standard mission," Glover countered. "It's as off the books as it comes, and frankly, if I have to choose between what's right and my orders, then orders get jettisoned every time."

"Humans," T'Prell said, shaking her head in disbelief. "Sam, you're going to get us all killed."

"Well, at least we'll be dying for the right reasons." Deitra stood closer to him.

"I guess I've been outvoted." T'Prell shrugged. "Time to be liberators."

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### **(Processing Lab)**

"You didn't come here for the survivors, did you?" Dar said, pressing Stark into the wall. One hand encircled the man's neck, the desire to perform Tal-Shaya almost overwhelming.

Stark merely stared at him. "And that story you told the Decurion back there, about your family dying at Norkan? Was that a lie too?"

"If you're going to kill me then do it, if not then release me," Stark challenged. Dar slowly moved away from the man. Stark moved to collect the tricorder and rifle that had clattered to the floor during Dar's attack.

"Leave the weapon." Stark looked up into the barrel of a Romulan disruptor.

"Fine," he said. "But I suggest we leave now. I've already ordered the others to return to the ship."

"We're not going anywhere unless we take the Norkan survivors with us."

"We don't have time for that," Stark argued. "While you were incapacitated, I set the main dilithium converter to overload. We only have a few minutes at best."

"Then I suggest we move quickly then."

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## **(Worker Pens)**

The stench of despair was even heavier than the odor of dozens of unwashed bodies. The workers inched back from Samson and T'Prell as if they were poisonous. In a way they were, Glover realized. They were a new element, and change could be just as bad as potentially good in the lives of slaves. There were almost two dozen lost souls in the pen, their hollowed eyes staring through him.

"They're friends," Deitra said acting as an intermediary, "I think."

"They look like criminals to me," an old woman said suspiciously. "Here to take more of our children away for the Orions."

"No, no, that's not true," Glover said. "We're from the Federation. Starfleet."

"Starfleet," spat an even older man. "Why would they care about us?"

"How could you say that?" Samson asked, both mortified and stupefied that anyone could even ponder such a question.

"It's obvious they haven't cared enough about us to save us from these devils," the old man rejoined. "Why now?"

Samson really didn't have an answer for that. He was thankful that T'Prell stepped in for him.

"We need you to come with us," she beckoned for the workers to leave, "Now."

"If I may ask, where are you taking us mistress?" A younger woman, with ratty, matted blond hair asked cautiously.

T'Prell looked at Glover askance.

"This one isn't a Romulan," Deitra said. "She's a Vulcan." An audible gasp flowed through the crowd.

"This is some type of trick," the old woman said. "The Administrator is deceiving us. We've done something to upset him. But how, what? We've exceeded our quotas."

"It's nothing like that at all," Samson said. "But we do need for you to come. We have a ship waiting for you."

"The Remans too?" A younger man, toward the back of the crowd, said with revulsion. Glover looked at T'Prell. The Vulcan nodded vigorously against the idea forming in Samson's mind.

"Remans? No, unfortunately we only have space for you."

"What about the guards? You think they're just going to let us waltz out of here without so much as a complaint?" The old man wheezed.

"We've taken care of that," T'Prell offered.

"Well now, you've thought of everything," the man threw his hands skyward.

"I can't say that we've thought of everything, but we have explored contingencies and exigencies in sufficient depth," T'Prell said.

"Now that sounds like the Vulcans I used to know," the old man cackled. "You might just be telling the truth after all."

Samson smiled. "We are sir." He reached out his hand, and the old man cautiously moved forward. But he stopped just before reaching the lieutenant. Pointing around Glover, the man breathed, "She might be Vulcan, but I can guarantee that he isn't."

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### **(Security Control Center)**

Decurion Volok stirred slowly, the effects of the neck-pinch leaving him woozy. It was only the sight of Turi's corpse that injected enough venom into his heart to make him rise to his feet.

He staggered over to the small station's terminal, prepared to activate the alarm, when he noticed an angry, flashing light, and he read the numbers of a silent countdown.

Volok quickly flipped the toggle to the alarm, and its wail chilled his marrow. He also reactivated the door locking system that had been compromised. Though he knew it was too late for many of the guards to escape. Volok turned back to Turi, and carefully removed the locket from her delicate neck. Then he headed for the nearest transporter.

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### **(Transporter Station)**

Only the banshee screech of the alarm had convinced the prisoners to come with them after Dar and Stark had arrived. Something had occurred between the two men, Glover reading the tension in their body language as well as the disruptor clutched in Dar's hand and the lack of a weapon in Stark's.

But the alarm had also precluded him from inquiring further about what had happened. The four, along with Deitra began herding the Norkan survivors through the main corridor.

They had made it half way before the doors around them opened, and Romulan guards poured out, swinging melee weapons and shooting disruptors. What had amazed Glover, while he was firing, ducking, and throwing the occasional punch, was how just the mere glimpse of freedom had animated the Norkan survivors. Some threw themselves onto disruptors to save others, while some did their best to exact revenge, tearing at the Romulans who had brought such grief and misery upon them. A few of the slaves had actually bested some of their captors, plucking phasers and knives to use as the group surged forward.

By the time they made it to the Transporter Station, half of the prisoners littered the hallway, dead or wounded. Samson was grateful that Deitra was not among them. The woman clutched both a knife and a disruptor. She helped provide cover while Dar opened the doors to the transporter room.

The plan had been to use the mining complex's large cargo transporters to beam the survivors to the hold of their freighter. Samson helped corral the survivors into the room, with Dar and T'Prell holding down the rear. Samson breathed easier once the heavy duranium doors slid shut. T'Prell demolished the doors controls with her phaser.

Stark made his way over to the transporter terminal. He had just broken from the group when his head exploded, bits of brain, blood, and tissue sprinkling the survivors.

"One down," a spectral voice issued somewhere from the nest of catwalks above the large transporter pad. "Three more to go."

"Volok," Dar said. "I'll take care of this."

"No, you won't," T'Prell said. "You and Samson get these people back to the ship."

"You don't understand," Dar replied. "Stark has rigged the main dilithium converter. This whole facility will explode in minutes."

"All the more reason to act with more haste then," T'Prell said before she ran off toward the nearest ladder leading to the catwalks. Another blast sliced into one of the workers, and everyone who had an energy weapon began firing blindly into the catwalks.

Dar took the opportunity to insert the proper coordinates and activate the transporter. Samson nudged the group to the pad. One more fell before the rest were swallowed by the beam.

"Lt. Glover you're next," Dar said.

"I'm not leaving you or T'Prell," Glover said.

"They need someone to pilot that freighter," Dar argued.

"I believe you're more qualified to fly than I am."

"Listen, young man I'm not going to argue with you about this," Dar snapped. "Every second we waste, Volok could be lining us up in his sights."

"He's right you know," Volok said again, before grunting. The man fell from his hiding place, smacking the far end of the transporter pad.

"The second time so far today," T'Prell leaped from her own hiding place, landing on the pad with a feline grace. "I suggest we depart now."

"Sounds like a plan," Samson grinned. "And I love it when a plan comes together." He consciously avoided looking at Stark's headless body as Dar moved to retrieve the tricorder and satchel from the dead man.

"Dar, what's so important about that tricorder and satchel?" T'Prell asked the question before Glover could.

“I don’t know,” Dar’s mouth drew into a tight line. “But I intend to find out.”  
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## CHAPTER FOUR

### Present

#### USS Cuffe (Main Shuttle Bay)

Captain Glover smiled as his father stepped out of the hatch of the *Danube*-class runabout *Zambezi*.

"Tired of the long coats?" He asked, as he took in his father. The black and red-striped duty uniform fit the man well. It was similar to Terrence's except for the five pips on the right of the gray turtleneck collar. The outfit wasn't the standard long red coat, with gold-embroidered black shoulder stripe, that had seemed fused to Samson's lanky body.

The admiral ambled off of the runabout's ramp, wrapping Glover in a firm embrace. "It's been too long son." He held Glover away from him to give him a keen once over. "You look well all things considered."

Terrence frowned. "You heard about Diaz I see. Still keeping tabs on me?" The captain loved and admired his father, though he often felt the man would use his admiralship to keep watch over Terrence, and he didn't like that. He had been an adult for a long time now, and a captain for a little over a year, yet his father often still saw him as the little hellion running through the habitat areas of Starbase 39-Sierra, where Glover had spent a large block of his childhood.

Samson ignored the latest questions. Instead he tugged the sleeve of his uniform. "To answer your first question: Yes. I do like these new uniforms; quite slimming actually." His smile faded when Terrence grimaced. "Is something wrong son?"

The captain shook his head. "No, nothing at all."

"Fine," the admiral replied. "To answer your other questions, the situation with the Maquis is serious business. I would be remiss in my duties as a flag officer if I didn't remain informed."

"Sure," Terrence sniffed. He clamped a hand on his father's shoulders. "I've got your quarters already prepared. Would you like to freshen up before we talk?"

"I'm old Terrence, but I don't need a nap," the old man said brusquely. "And what we have to talk about can't wait." He paused, "Well...except for this." The admiral turned back toward the open hatch. "Lieutenant, what's taking you so long in there?"

"Sorry sir," the voice sang through the hatch, "I just discovered a slight variance in the port actuator during landing. I wanted to make sure it was ship shape before we set back out."

"You can worry about that later," Samson said. "Terrence has a very good engineering team. I'm sure they can handle it."

"If you say so," the skepticism in the woman's voice was faint but enough to rankle the captain. He stepped forward, preparing to defend his crew, when his father placed a stilling hand on his chest.

"Come on out, there's someone I want you to meet...again." The admiral urged. Glover's eyes hooded as a familiar figure stepped gracefully down from the *Zambezi*. Tall, with rich, chocolate skin and arresting amber colored eyes, Lt. Jasmine Mendes frowned when she saw the captain.

This was the third time he had seen the woman since his father had introduced them shortly after Glover had gained command of the *Cuffe*. Their first meeting had been very brief, almost perfunctory. The second meeting hadn't gone well at all, courtesy of Lt. Dryer and a gang of Chalnoth. However, it was obvious that the admiral was determined to foist this woman onto him.

"Lt. Mendes...a pleasure," he said icily, extending a hand. She barely touched the tip of his fingers with her own.

"Likewise." She replied, before glancing at the admiral. Glover noticed that her expression changed almost instantly. There was genuine respect and affection in her gaze. "Could you two be a little less chilly," Glover remarked dryly. "Even a Breen would shudder at such a reception. Now, Terrence, lead us to the Observation Lounge. I need to speak with you and your senior staff...immediately."

"Sir, don't you think I should contact Engineering," Glover asked. "So they can help the Lieutenant with that actuator?" Jasmine pursed her full lips with displeasure.

"No," the admiral nodded. "That can be done en route."

"En route?" Glover asked warily. "Where are we going?"

"The Romulan Neutral Zone," Samson said matter-of-fact. "Actually, we're crossing into Romulan space."

"Thank you for being more precise," Glover quipped.

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### **USS Cuffe (Observation Lounge)**

"Sirs, I think this is a suicide mission," Lt. Seb N'Saba harrumphed, his blue ocular implants giving the lupine Alshain Science Officer even more of an otherworldly appearance. "We don't even know if anyone is still alive. Is it worth it to risk this ship to pursue ghosts?"

"Suicide is perhaps too strong a word," Commander Kojo replied. The woman's smooth sepia skin was accentuated by Trill-like dots that covered the sides of her face, disappearing underneath her mop of platinum blonde

hair. Lt. Commander Rojas had often asked Glover if he knew if the spots covered Kojo's whole body, but the engineer had never taken up Terrence's challenge to ask the First Officer. Kojo was a tough customer. The captain had met her during orientation for the Officer Exchange Program. Glover had been sent to a Klingon ship and Kojo had actually spent time on a Tholian vessel.

The woman had spent almost a year stuck in an enviro-suit aboard a nova hot Tholian starship, surrounded by suspicious and hostile crewmembers. Despite Kojo's excellent service, the Tholians had withdrawn from the program after Kojo returned to the Federation.

During his interview of Kojo for the XO position, he had asked her why she thought the Tholians had decided to leave the program. She had told him that the Tholians saw that maybe the Federation wasn't as weak as they thought, and it had disturbed them. Glover wasn't sure if that was the whole story, but none of his contacts at HQ had contradicted Kojo or the after-service report. Also, Glover could personally attest to the woman's steeliness.

"I don't think there is anything suicidal about this mission," the Kriosian continued. "Foolish perhaps, but not suicidal...my apologies Admiral."

"No need to apologize," Samson looked at Terrence. The captain nodded, but remained silent. The admiral continued. "What I appreciate is honesty."

"Great," Pedro said cheerfully. The pudgy engineer always saw the brightness in any situation. "All we're doing is a glorified fly-by of a few planets, and then we're back across the Neutral Zone safe and sound."

"It's not quite so facile," Lt. Meldin, the Security Chief replied crisply. The aquamarine colored Benzite leaned forward in his seat. "We would be violating the Treaty of Algeron for starters. Plus, we don't have any knowledge of Romulan patrol routes. We are bound to run into a scout ship, Bird-of-Prey, or worse, and that could result in our captures, deaths, or interstellar war."

"Actually, we do," Glover said. He tapped the PADD resting in front of him. A starmap appeared on the small screen in the alcove behind Terrence's seat. He turned around, gasping at the detailed map. Highlighted in green were bold loops around various planets and star systems. The map was dotted with the avian symbol of the Romulan Star Empire. "Each symbol is a patrol craft," the admiral said for clarification. "This was the standard patrol pattern as of two weeks ago."

"Where-how-did you acquire this?" He asked his father.

"From my contact behind the curtain," the admiral said mysteriously. "That's one of the people I'm trying to save."

"Who is this person?" Glover turned back around to look at his father. Samson smiled.

"She's an old friend." He tapped another button. The map disappeared. The image of a raven haired, stately Vulcan female appeared. "Her name is T'Prell, of Vulcan." With another click, the image changed slightly. Ridges now appeared over the woman's brow, sharpening her features, making them more distinctly Romulan. "For the last ten years she has been on deep cover assignment inside Romulan space for the V'Shar. She disguised herself as a Romulan and infiltrated the Romulan bureaucracy, where she could best supply the Federation with information."

"On Stardate 48734.5, DS9 supplied information, later corroborated by T'Prell, that a joint Tal Shiar and Obsidian Order fleet conducted a preemptive strike against the Dominion in the Omarion Nebula. It did not go well obviously. The combined fleet was wiped out." The admiral paused, when Pedro whistled.

"Wow," the engineer remarked. "How many casualties?"

"She wasn't able to supply us with that information," Samson said glumly. "However, the disaster reverberated almost immediately on Romulus. Elements among the military, Senate, and bureaucracy rushed in to claim the remains of the reeling Tal Shiar. With the secret police agency on the ropes, the dissident movement led by Ambassador Spock also swelled. In one of T'Prell's last communiqués, she speculated that more Romulan citizens were demanding reform, and that even mass protests had been attempted for the first time in centuries."

"Fascinating," N'Saba breathed. It was one of the few times Glover had ever seen the Alshain impressed. "I thought the Romulan state was a totalitarian regime."

"It was," Samson said. "Or it attempted to be. There had always been a place for limited debate and discussion in Romulan society, before the advent of the Tal Shiar. In their quest to preserve the Romulan way, they have made a lot of enemies."

"And these enemies are now gunning for them," Glover finally spoke.

The admiral nodded. "Yes, and Praetor Javel not being so beholden to the Tal Shiar, it's quite possible that the agency has seen its last days."

"That would be a good thing," Jasmine, sitting beside the admiral, said quietly.

"Don't count them out just yet," Samson remarked. "Desperate to reestablish themselves, the Tal Shiar have begun a series of witch hunts and purges. They need the people to fear them again. From what we gather, Javel continues to give them a free reign because his enemies are often the targets of the Tal Shiar's state terror. Among the most prominent targets are Senator Telaan and her family. Telaan's influence was so great in the Empire that even the defection of her husband Flavius and two other high-ranking Romulan officials on Stardate 46519.0 kept her family from the executioner."



"So, why did her fortunes turn?" Operations Officer Amanisha Bheto asked. The demure Andorian had sat quietly throughout the whole exchange, taking in the entire conversation. Though Glover was more comfortable with rough and tumble debate, over the months he had learned to respect Bheto's quieter, more introspective approach.

"I'm not certain," Samson said. "But once Telaan and her family were arrested, and publicly charged with treason, our defectors refused to cooperate until they were rescued. Starfleet Intelligence and the V'Shar put together a joint mission."

Samson tapped another button. The screen split, and the two halves were filled with different images. On the right was an older Romulan, with slivers of gray in his black hair. On the left was a younger man. His brow line was much more delicate.

"On the right is Ousanas Dar, a V'Shar agent," Samson said tightly. Glover's eyes flashed with recognition. He had heard the name before but never met the man. He glanced at his father, but the man's expression was closed. "On the left is Lt. Commander So'Dan Leva, Tactical Officer on the *USS Eagle*."

"There are Romulans in Starfleet?" Dr. Nemato, the Antosian Chief Medical Officer asked. The centipede-like medic was curled around his seat.

"Yeah," Pedro shrugged. "I guess you didn't get the memo, or checked FNS in the last decade or so. Leva's been in the Fleet for quite some time."

"You know him?" Glover asked.

"No," Rojas replied. "Just heard about him. His entrance into the Academy caused something of a stir." Terrence nodded, a niggling memory clawing its way to the forefront.

"Yes, I do remember a little something about that." The Captain remarked. "And since we haven't heard much else about him is that a good thing or bad?" He looked at his father.

"Leva's had a pretty good run so far. SI wouldn't have chosen him for the mission if he was questionable."

"And what was the mission exactly sir?" Kojo asked, her voice milder.

"T'Prell had contact with some more radical elements of the Romulan underground. They were to help extract Flavius's family and rendezvous with Dar and Leva. Dar and Leva would bring Flavius's family to the Federation. Not only was it a good thing to do, it would keep our information pipeline going and poke another finger in the Tal Shiar's eye."

"So, what went wrong?" Glover grimly asked.

"I'm not quite sure," Samson replied, a weathered expression wreathing his face. "Dar and Leva were supposed to be picked up by the *Starship Lacaille*. However, a cloaked Romulan warbird was waiting for the *Lacaille* instead."

"What happened?" Dr. Nemato asked with dread. Both the admiral and Jasmine's faces hardened. Glover knew the answer before his father replied.

"The *Lacaille* was destroyed. To our knowledge, with all hands aboard."

"Oh," was all Nemato could say. A pall hung over the proceedings for almost a minute as each crewmember grappled with the loss of a fellow starship and its crew, and of the possibility that they might be heading towards the same end.

After Glover felt enough time had passed to mourn, pray, or otherwise respect the passing of the *Lacaille*, he said tightly, "Admiral, Lt. Mendes, and crew, I think we owe it to the *Lacaille* to complete their mission. And come hell or high water, we will."

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## **Aranthka IX (Romulan Space)**

She thought the crash was terrible enough, but what happened after was worse. First the struggle to free herself from her harness while the scout ship plunged below the depths, and then the thrashing rush to the surface, her body pulled along by the raging current.

Sub-Centurion Murris was the first of the survivors to be attacked. The school moved quickly through the water, small dark shapes, their silver fins glinting in the light poking through the walls of trees flanking them.

They circled her, dragging her under, leaving only a dark green splotch in the water. The woman didn't even have the time to scream.

"Slashfins," Sub-Lieutenant Sovar said through clenched teeth. "The veruul knew exactly where to knock our ship out of the sky!" The young man looked wildly around him, pulling his dripping disruptor above the water line. An uhlan, Thoiv, was yanked under before Sovar could aim.

Lieutenant Doval cursed. Everything was happening too fast. Out of a crew of six, only three were left alive, and if they didn't get to the shore, they wouldn't last long. "Sovar!" she yelled over the roar of the currents and the mewling of Uhlan Joro. "We've got to get to the shore! Now!" She held out her hand, "Link hands with me and grab the Uhlan! We'll form a chain." She pulled her disruptor from its holster. Doval shook the water from it, and curled her finger around the trigger. She fired into the churning water around her. "Hopefully that will frighten these 'slashfins' enough to allow us to escape."

Sovar wrapped her free hand in his. "I doubt it. These things are vicious, and now they've tasted blood and meat, they're in frenzy."

"Then I suggest we make our way," Doval said.

"But-but how are we going to complete our mission. We've lost half our men, all of our supplies, our ship!" Joro warbled. "And...what about the natives?"

"One thing at a time," Doval said. "But I promise you...we're not done yet."

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## **Aranthka IX (Romulan Space)**

Ousanas Dar leaped to the spongy, frond covered ground. He handed the tetryon pulse launcher to Lt. Commander Leva.

"Did you destroy the scout ship?" The half-Romulan asked. Dar nodded.

"Yes, but it appears that some survived the crash. But it's doubtful they will survive the slashfins populating the river the scout crashed into."

"Doubtful isn't conclusive," Decurion Narvek snapped. The rangy young man sat on felled tree, his arm around his portly, gray haired mother. A pregnant woman sat on the other side, her arm over Narvek's. The gray haired woman leaned over, her head in her hands.

"That's why I sent T'Prell to confirm the kill," Dar said calmly. He knew that Narvek and his family had been through a terrible ordeal the last several years, first the defection of their father, the loss of their careers, public standing, and freedom. And perhaps worse of all, Narvek's younger siblings Hilina and Liash had died during the escape. He could sympathize with the man's pain and embarrassment at the thought of reuniting with his father Flavius with only his mother Telaan, his pregnant wife Shanra, and himself alive. He had failed to protect all of the members of his family, a cardinal taboo, a mark of dishonor that Dar had bore for decades. "T'Prell should be back in a few minutes."

"T'Prell?" Shanra laughed coldly, her dark eyes flashing with fire and suspicion. "We thought she was a Romulan...she told us her name was Aeilen. That she was a Quaestor in the Imperial Treasury. She deceived us for years. Are you so certain you can trust her?"

"She got you out alive, blowing her cover in the process," Dar remarked, not willing to entertain Shanra's shock and paranoia.

"I'm still not convinced that this isn't all some elaborate Tal Shiar plot," Shanra said again. She had voiced the same concerns several times before. "The reason the Tal Shiar couldn't execute us years ago was because of our family's reputation. Though they chipped away at it over the years, even this recent decision to carry out our executions wasn't sitting well with the public. Now that we have escaped, we've run, we're proving our guilt." Shanra looked

at her husband for support. But the young man pulled his arm tighter around his mother, and whispered into Telaar's ear.

"That's one way of looking at it," Dar admitted. "But we decided not to take any chances. I'm sure you are aware that things aren't as regulated on Romulus as they have been before. There are a lot of new players on the board, and we couldn't anticipate their moves. So, we decided to rescue you."

"Some rescue," Leva said glumly. Shanra's eyes turned to him, and she nodded in agreement. Dar frowned at Leva. He had hoped the younger man would keep his criticisms to himself. He didn't want to feed Shanra's pessimism. Senator Telaar was close enough to the edge already.

Ousanas knew that the mission was forcing Leva again to face many of his own demons about his divided heritage, human and Romulan. Leva's psych profile had revealed that the man had suffered a terrible childhood, the victim of taunts over his less pronounced brow ridge, which many of his peers saw as a sign of his inferiority. Leva's identity issues had magnified once he learned that his 'inferiority' was actually the result of his father being a human.

Dar had suffered his own bouts of insecurity, fearing he wasn't Romulan enough, but that was caused by his political beliefs, not biology. He had followed Leva's career closely, pleased that the young man had become the first Romulan to be accepted into Starfleet Academy. Dar had worked with Starfleet Intelligence occasionally, but his role in the Norkan Massacre had been a stain that he could never erase, a chasm he could never cross to gain the trust of many in Starfleet. Leva, despite his struggles, had been more readily accepted, by Starfleet, and he had accorded himself well. "We're still breathing Commander, that's all that matters." Dar concluded.

"And how will we get off this gods-forsaken planet without a ship or even so much as a communications device?" Shanra challenged.

"Let me worry about that," Dar remarked, with more confidence than he actually felt. Very little had made it through the crash of their Barolian freighter after the *Invidious* had attacked it, forcing Dar to land on the nearest habitable planet. He speculated that the *Invidious* was going to make their appointment with the *Lacaille* in their place, and had sent a landing party to either capture them or carry out the execution.

Dar prayed that the *Lacaille* survived. They were his best shot for him to complete his mission. Leva twisted around suddenly, the launcher whining as he activated it. Dar reached for his own phaser, and Narvek yanked out his disruptor, moving to cover his mother and wife as best he could. Telaar, her face slick with tears, looked up fearfully.

T'Prell tore through the brush, and Dar's heart clutched in his chest. "What's wrong?" He stepped forward.

The woman stopped, bending over to catch her breath. "Did some of the Romulans survive? Are they pursuing you?"

T'Prell looked up, brushing away errant locks of hair from her face. "Worse," she said, her voice ragged. "Much worse."

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## **Mentarii Prime (Romulan Space)**

General Patrin VoloK pushed the plate of jumbo mollusk to the side. However, he did finish his glass of Carullan. He savored the tangy flavor of the citrus drink for a few seconds, knowing with each tick of the chronometer the Tal Shiar agent standing before him was growing more impatient, which meant he was more prone to make a mistake.

"Castra Viredis," VoloK said slowly, "I was expecting Koval. Has Chairman Helanor found a new favorite?"

"That's Captain Viredis," the wiry man replied haughtily. "And I recommend that you ask the Chairman that question. I would never presume to know her mind."

"So, I can assume that the Tal Shiar have yet to develop the telepathic trait among our people. Another failed project, along with the cloning of Starfleet personnel, instigating the Klingon civil war, the aborted invasion of Vulcan, and dare I mention Omarion..."

A nerve twitched along Viredis's jaw line, but the damnable man maintained his composure. "I take it you are not a fan of the Tal Shiar?" Before the debacle at the Omarion Nebula, such an accusation meant torture and almost certain death. Now, such sentiments flowed freely in the halls of the Senate and over the planet wide information net.

Despite that, VoloK knew that the Tal Shiar still held enough power and had to be handled carefully. "The Tal Shiar and Military Intelligence work together to secure the Romulan state. To be find displeasure with the Tal Shiar would be the same as finding displeasure with my left hand." The general said smoothly.

In truth he detested the Tal Shiar. His organization, the Tal Arcani had always been overshadowed by them. Even when VoloK led in the planning of the Khitomer and Narendra III campaigns, the wily, duplicitous Tal Shiar always took the raptor's share of the credit.

And the Tal Arcani had suffered as a result. The Tal Shiar had used blackmail and bribery, as well as terror, to subvert the Senate, the Continuing Committee, and even the Imperial family. They had become almost a parallel military, with their own fleet of ships and an army of soldiers.

He thanked the gods that their arrogance had led them to ally with the Cardassian Obsidian Order. VoloK, and a small group of military veterans had feared that the fleet Helanor was amassing might've been turned against Romulus itself.

Helanor's gambit had resulted in the loss of most of her fleet, the collapse of the new Praetor Javel's confidence, and more importantly the loss of fear and respect among the general populace. For the first time in decades, a vacuum existed, and VoloK planned for the Tal Arcani to fill the void.

Capturing the defector Flavius, whom the Tal Shiar had allowed to escape in the first place, would be the kind of daring maneuver that could win the imagination of the people. As for the Senate, VoloK's plan to deliver to them Admiral Glover, the spy T'Prell, and Romulus's most famous traitor, Ousanas Dar, would bury the Tal Shiar forever.

Domna's exuberance had already prevented the capture of Narol, but his family could be retrieved, Dar might still be alive, and his sources inside the Federation had reported that Admiral Glover had recently left his berth at Deep Space Five. VoloK was certain he was on his way to find Dar and T'Prell. VoloK intended to make Glover's incursion into Romulan space as easy as possible; all the better to spring his trap and obtain his revenge.

He absently touched Turi's locket, which he had worn around his neck for over forty years. Since her death, he had married and had children, duties a person of his station and breeding were supposed to perform, but he had never loved anyone else as he had Turi. When she died, VoloK long ago realized that he had too.

"General VoloK," Viredis's nasally voice intruded upon his recollections of Turi. Now, VoloK couldn't help but display annoyance.

"Yes?" He said frostily.

"I don't like being ignored General," Viredis retorted.

"And I don't like your tone Captain," VoloK rose slowly out of his seat, his hand resting on the golden hilt of the blade attached to his belt.

Viredis swallowed loudly before continuing. "Chairwoman Helanor has sent me to retrieve any information you have on Commander Prius Domna. We wish to cross-check our information with yours."

"And why did this require a personal visit? Though I am charmed by your presence," he added sarcastically.

Viredis tightly smiled. "I'm sure." The man sniffed before continuing. "We have reason to believe that Domna has some role in the recent escape of Procurator Flavius's family. The *Invidious* has deviated from its standard patrol route and we have lost contact with our contact aboard ship."

"And that alone makes the man a traitor?" VoloK asked, laying on the incredulity.

"In these uncertain times we can't be certain who to trust," Viredis said, letting the statement hang as his eyes bore into Volok. The general smiled. He had been playing this game far longer than Viredis had been alive.

"I concur," he glared at Viredis. Looking down, he tapped several commands into his desk top terminal. "You shall have the information in less than one hour. I suggest you avail yourselves of our hospitality until then. Our holographic chambers are state-of-the art."

"I would prefer to remain here," Viredis replied. "The Chairwoman was very specific about wanting this information transmitted on her personal, secure line the second I receive it."

"Sure," Volok said. He wanted to appear as helpful as possible. He sat back down, slid his plate of mollusks in front of him, and then filled his glass with more juice. He waved the decanter at the Tal Shiar agent. "Care for a glass of Carullan?"

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### USS Cuffe (Holodeck)

The cyan Apex Sea lapped gently against the shoreline. "T'Prell sent me this holo-recreation," Samson Glover said wistfully.

"What exactly does this woman mean to you Dad?" Terrence asked carefully. Samson stared at him almost a full minute.

"She means a lot son," he said so softly that Terrence almost didn't catch it. But he didn't need to hear the words: the expression on the man's face was enough.

"Why...why didn't you tell me?" Terrence asked. He squeezed his father's shoulder.

"What was there to tell?" Samson answered. "T'Prell and I have been friends for decades. There were times...especially after Deitra, that we almost became more. I'm sorry son."

Terrence was taken aback. "Why are you apologizing to me?"

"I never intended to betray your mother's memory," Samson said, a pained look on his face.

"Mom's...gone," the captain replied, his voice catching. "You're still here and you've got to live. It's okay. I understand. And mother would want you to be happy."

Though tears were starting to form in his eyes, the admiral chuckled. "Son, you obviously didn't know your mother." He laughed, and Terrence joined in. Samson resumed looking at the melodic waves.

After a few minutes the admiral took his eyes away from the gorgeous Romulan sunset to look again at his son. "You know if it wasn't for T'Prell I might not have met your mother."

Glover took a step back. "She was on that mission...to the Nullus mine?"

"Yes, and Ousanas Dar was too." Both his parents had been vague about how they met. It was only after Deitra's starship, the *Tombaugh* was lost in space that his father slowly parcelled out bits of the classified mission that brought his parents together.

"You and Dar go back quite a ways then as well." Glover knew that his father blamed Dar's 'shoddy intelligence' for the Ghorusdan Disaster, a black mark on his mother's record that led her to sign up on the ill-fated *Tombaugh* in an attempt to resurrect her career.

Samson nodded slowly, grimacing. "That we do."

Terrence grunted.

"What is it son?"

"So this...is very personal for you isn't it?"



"Damn right it is."

"I was afraid of that."

"Why?"

"Sir, you have operational authority on this mission. Even if you weren't my father, I would never disrespect you or question your orders in public because you are a superior officer." Terrence said slowly.

"Go on," Samson prodded.

"But I agree with Lt. N'Saba...and Commander Kojo," Terrence admitted, ashamed to say so. "It's been over a week since you received the log buoy. The Romulans aren't known to leave prisoners or waste time. If they had recaptured Flavius's family, or the others I'm sure the Romulan government would be crowing about it now. I don't think it's wise to take our ship into the thick of the Romulan Empire on a wild goose chase."

"Are you scared?" Samson said, his eyes clouding. Terrence stepped back, his chest tightening with surprise, his skin heating with anger.

"No, of course not! How could you suggest such a thing?" He asked.

"I came to you because I trust you Terrence. I know you won't question my orders or try to countermand them. I know you will do what is necessary to accomplish the mission. That's how we raised you."

Terrence nodded. "I know, but I am a captain now, with hundreds of lives I'm responsible for. I won't needlessly risk them...even for you."

Samson patted his shoulder. "I hope you wouldn't. I would be ashamed of you if you were that kind of man."

Terrence breathed a little easier. "Also...father. I won't hesitate to assume command of this mission if I feel your personal ties to T'Prell and Dar are interfering with my primary concern...getting *Cuffe* and her crew into Romulan space and back in one piece."

"Is that a threat Captain?" Samson's grip tightened on his shoulder.

"No," Terrence retorted. "A promise."

"Save the promises," the Admiral replied. "I will also do what is necessary to bring out as many of our people as possible. You have tons more field experience than I do son, but I know the Romulans just about as well anyone in the Fleet. Working together, we can salvage this mission. My gut tells me that Dar and T'Prell are still alive."

"I hope you're right," Terrence said. "Dashing across the Neutral Zone won't be an easy task."

"Easier than you might think," Samson said, tapping his right temple. Before the captain could reply the arch to the holodeck opened. Both Glovers turned around.

"Umm...Admiral," Lt. Mendes said slowly, a PADD in one hand. "I have the report on the *Zambezi's* port actuator you requested."

"That's great Lieutenant," Samson said. Terrence twisted his lips in displeasure. "Please come in." The admiral gestured to the sparkling green sea before them. "It's lovely isn't it?"

"Quite," the woman replied. The admiral yawned.

"It is indeed, it's so breathtaking that it's tired me out," he said.

"But the report?" She handed it to him. "You requested that I bring it to you here."

"I did," the admiral said. "But Terrence-the Captain I mean-can brief me on it later, after you brief him of course."

"Dad..." Terrence began, but Samson yawned loudly again.

"I'm heading to my quarters. I want to hear about it...everything when I wake up." The Admiral hurried out of the holodeck, leaving Terrence and Jasmine alone with the hypnotic Apnex Sea.

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## **USS Cuffe (Afterburner Lounge)**

Lt. Nyota Dryer leaned back against the bar, allowing the effects of the Andorian Porte clutched in her hand to soothe her anger. Work had never been such an ordeal under her previous superiors, Lieutenants Simus and Zim, and one was a Vulcan and the other was a Zaldan respectively, two races not renowned for their people skills.

Her enthusiasm at being promoted to second officer in the Security Department had been extinguished because of Lt. Meldin. The Benzite was such a prig, a walking PADD of regulations that it made her job almost unbearable. And Terrence was no longer there to provide the support or ear that she needed.

Terrence had decided to end their relationship shortly before the Norma Arm assignment. Dryer had tried to be cool about it, restraining her emotions, and so far she had been so good with her deception she had almost convinced herself. Until a few days ago when Jasmine Mendes arrived...

Dryer hadn't liked the woman as soon as she met her almost a year or so ago when the *Cuffe* put in at DS5 for repairs after a trek into the Tong Beak Nebula. There was something frigid about her, robotic. She didn't look like she had ever had a moment of fun, or done anything inappropriate in her whole life, and Nyota didn't trust people like that. What had incensed her more was the strange attraction Terrence held for the woman. Dryer had thought she had drove a wedge between them the second time Cuffe docked at the station, picking a fight with a band of drunken Chalnoth.

But she noticed how uncomfortable and awkward the captain became whenever Jasmine was around. Terrence was a bold man, confident and fluid

in his movements and actions. Mendes was the only person that seemed to leave Glover speechless, groping to say the right thing, and actually caring about saying the right thing. Dryer was saturated with envy.

The Afterburner's doors parted and Admiral Glover strolled in. He ambled up to the bar, whistling an off-key tune. He sidled in beside Nyota, nodding a hello.

"A bottle of your finest wine," he told the barkeep. "And two wine glasses."

"A special occasion sir?" Dryer asked as she sat up in her seat. She could see that Terrence got his height from his father, but the captain was far more muscular.

"You might say that," He paused, searching for an identifier. Dryer was happily off-duty and wearing a snazzy, low-cut violet Tholian silk blouse and matching pants.

"Lieutenant," she said, smiling. "Lieutenant Dryer, but please call me Nyota."

"Nyota," Glover said. "That's a beautiful name. Were you named after Admiral Uhura?"

She nodded. "Yes. My parents really admired her. My grandmother, Charlene Masters served with the admiral on the *Enterprise* during Kirk's run."

"That's very interesting. I'm sure you heard a lot of wonderful stories growing up. You have quite an impressive lineage."

"The same could be said of your family sir: From the Romulan War to the present day, your family has built quite a legacy of service."

"Thank you Nyota. I'm very flattered that you know so much about my family, but I'm a bit curious about why that is so."

"Well...umm..." Dryer struggled for an answer. "I...uh...just like to be familiar with who I serve under."

Thankfully the admiral didn't press her further. The bartender returned a couple seconds later with the wine and glasses. Samson thanked the bartender, and held the bottle aloft. "Chateau La Barre, 2294," he read slowly. "Sounds like a very good year."

"So, am I being impertinent asking you what the celebration is about," Dryer said. "I like a good party."

Samson smiled. "I'm sure you do. But this isn't for me, it's for Terrence and Lt. Mendes."

Dryer did her best to keep the smile plastered to her face. "Oh."

"Yes," The Admiral continued, oblivious to her distress. "I brought a holoprogram of Romulus's Apnex Sea. They are in the Holodeck now. I thought I would surprise them."

"Please sir, allow me," Dryer put her own glass down and snatched up the empty wine glasses.

"No, I wouldn't want to ruin your evening with such a chore." Samson said.

"It's no bother," Dryer flashed her most alluring smile. "Jasmine and I are old friends and she's told me all about the captain. I haven't had a chance to talk to her much since she arrived. We've been very busy in Security lately, preparing for the mission."

"Is that right?" The Admiral asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes," Dryer hated lying to the kind old man, but she hated the thought of that Ice Queen spending time alone with Terrence even more. "I've been a real cheerleader for those two, and I would like to do my part to keep the fires burning."

"Okay," Samson nodded, the wattage of his smile increasing. "Here you go," he handed the bottle to her. Nyota clutched the wine glasses in her other hand.

"Thank you sir," Dryer said. "I can't wait to see Jasmine again."

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## CHAPTER SIX

### Recent Memory

#### Deep Space Five (Hitching Post Lounge) Six months ago...

Jasmine tried to blame the warmth suffusing her skin on the Sundowner she was drinking, but she really knew that the true culprit was Captain Terrence Glover.

He was gorgeous, tall and broad shoulder, with smooth coffee-colored skin, and a ruggedly handsome face. Despite Admiral Glover's constant lobbying, Jasmine had done some checking through the grapevine about the young captain, and had learned some things about his rakish behavior that had made her wary even before she met him several months ago.

When she had heard that Terrence, recently promoted to captain of the *Cuffe* was coming to DS5, Lt. Mendes had made certain her schedule was filled with a station-wide diagnostic, and it had limited their time together to a brief introduction by his chagrined father.

The second visit had taken her by surprise, and the engineer hadn't been able to manufacture an excuse not to accept Glover's invitation to a few drinks in the lounge. Jasmine had been thankful that her counterpart on the *Cuffe* Lt. Commander Rojas had become smitten by the station's Communications Officer Christina Raeger and Glover had acceded to a double date.

The presence of the other couple helped blunt the man's magnetism. "You bagged a sabre bear all by yourself?" Raeger gushed in admiration, her face flushed pink from her third Salurian rum.

"It's nothing really," Glover said, a small smile creeping across his face.

"Yeah right, don't act all modest," Rojas brayed. "The captain told me that the only weapons the Klingons gave him were two little blades."

"They're called *tajtiq*," the captain added. "With them I fashioned a bow and arrow."

"And you did this in the dead of winter on Kang's Summit, with no help, and not even a communicator to call for help if things got out of hand?" Raeger gushed again, her smile widening, and Jasmine's annoyance and jealousy growing. "You're something else Captain Glover."

Unlike most men that Lt. Mendes knew, Glover didn't disavow Raeger's declaration. "Yeah, the Captain is a piece of work. You remember that time on

the *Kitty Hawk* when we got into a fight with those Retellians after they insulted our ship's warp capabilities."

"That was more of your fight than mine," Glover said.

"But you had my back all the way," Rojas added.

"With all that fighting going on, when do you have time for exploring?" Jasmine asked, more pointedly than she intended.

Before Glover could respond, Raeger said. "Well, I think it's dashing. There's something very 23<sup>rd</sup> century about a two-fisted captain and his crew. We don't see much action, or such men, on this station too much." She reached over and squeezed Glover's forearm, and then sloppily kissed Commander Rojas on the cheek.

Her jealousy piqued, Jasmine was regretting suggesting the double date. Terrence turned to face Jasmine, a serious expression on his face. "We do quite a bit of exploring, among other things, but neither Pedro nor I see any reason in boring you two ladies with the mundane."

"Hear, Hear!" The tipsy Raeger raised her glass. Rojas followed suit.

"I understand that Captain, it's just....I expected to learn more about life aboard a starship," Mendes said.

"So, you've never been stationed on a starship?" The captain inquired.

"Not for long," Jasmine answered. "Just a little while before I wound up at doing duty at 40 Eridani, then the Beta Antares Ship Yards, Tranquility Base, and finally at DS5."

"You must have a thing for old ships," Glover remarked appreciatively.

"And stations," Rojas added, looking around the cramped environs of the *Orbiter*-class station. The *Orbiters* had been in use since the late 23<sup>rd</sup> century.

Mendes frowned. She loved the creaky old station. There were always things to fix, and she liked being, and feeling, needed. "From one engineer to another," she warned, with more bite than she intended, "leave my station alone."

Rojas recoiled, his eyes shifting back and forth trying to gauge Jasmine's true mood. Eventually the man grinned. "Fair enough. I punched that Retellian Firek for saying even less about the *Kitty Hawk*, and she had been around just about as long as this station."

"If I recall, it was Firek Doff that punched you," Glover corrected with a broad grin of his own.

"Well, if you really want to be technical about it," Rojas said with a shrug. Raeger laughed.

"I could listen to you guys all night," she said. Jasmine winced inside. The last thing Glover needed was his ego stroked again. "So," Raeger leaned on Rojas, her cheek pressed against his, but her gaze on Captain Glover. "How did the fight turn out?"

Terrence looked at his Chief Engineer. "Pedro, please do the honors." Rojas hadn't finished his first sentence before a commotion drew their attention to the lower level of the Hitching Post. The four had been ensconced in a booth on the balcony, courtesy of Slog, the Gorn proprietor and barkeep. He had also offered the foursome a free pitcher of Meridor, a ghastly Gorn beer that only Glover had been mad enough to try. The second mug of the thick, obsidian brew was sweating in front of him.

Both Glover and Jasmine looked down at the same time. Rojas and Raeger leaned over the table. "Damn," Glover muttered. "It's some of ours." A comely Demerian dabo girl was the only thing standing between a young lieutenant and a feral Chalthoth thrice her size. Three other crewmembers from the *Cuffe* were standing behind the lieutenant. The Chalthoth similarly had compatriots at his back, some had drawn wickedly curved blades.

"This looks like it might be fun," Rojas clapped his hands together. Glover glared at him. "Come on, you know it's been a long time since we've had a row."

"Or since we've had some excitement around here," Raeger added.

"Admiral Glover would not approve of a fight breaking out on his station," Jasmine said.

"I'm well aware of that Ms. Mendes," Glover said tightly. "Come on Pedro, let's go squash this."

Raeger slid out of her seat to swallow to follow the men, but Glover told her to remain where she was. "I don't want you ladies getting hurt if things go south."

"So, you're saying we can't handle ourselves in a fight," Jasmine huffed.

"Damn it woman, there's just no pleasing you is there?" Glover exclaimed. Mendes smirked. Terrence was cute when he got angry, his broad nostrils flaring, his full lips quivering.

"Fine," she exhaled, playing at being outraged. "The little women will do the gathering while the manly men go hunting."

Terrence rolled his eyes, but didn't respond to her jab. Instead he tapped Pedro on the shoulder. "Let's go Mr. Rojas."

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"Captain, not only did Dog Breath just insult you, but your entire blood line," Lt. Dryer said, her face a mask of anger. "Chalthoth culture demands a response."

Glover sighed. Keeping one eye on the Chalthoth glowering before him, Terrence said, "We're not on Chalna. How did you become such an expert on Chalthoth culture anyway?"

"I do more than just fire a phaser sir," Dryer remarked. "A lot more," she said more loudly for the benefit of the Chalnoth. The tusked, lupine alien laughed.

"If you had wanted to return to my bedchamber in the place of the dabo girl you should've told me so," he crowed. A dozen other Chalnoth guffawed behind him. Terrence tamped down his rising anger.

The captain had quickly extricated the Demerian from between Dryer and the Chalnoth named Garq. The frightened, half-dressed attendant clutched herself by the bar. The massive Slog leaned over the bar top, cradling an old style phaser rifle in his clawed hands.

A security team was already rushing in as several patrons were hastily making their exits. The majority remained at their seats, transfixed by the scene unfolding before them, many with expectant, almost predatory gazes.

Glover had waved for the station's Security Chief to stand down while he tried to defuse the heated argument.

"Nyota, do you mind telling me what just happened here?"

"He," she pointed, "Dog Breath tried to force that dabo girl back to his barge."

"Is that true?" Glover asked the Chalnoth.

"I don't answer to you human!" Garq spat. "The Chalnoth don't recognize Federation law!" He thumped his barrel-chest, and the other Chalnoth snarled in agreement.

"You will respect Federation law while you are on this station," Glover said with quiet resolve. "Now, is the lieutenant's claim true?"

Garq shrugged. "I merely wanted to cap off another successful night at the Dabo wheel."

"You had no right putting your paws on her!" Dryer said. Pedro, standing on the captain's other side, nodded in affirmation. Garq looked down at his hands, in confusion.

"These aren't paws," he stared at Dryer a few seconds, with the realization dawning slowly that he had just been insulted. "You will pay for that human!" He charged.

"Damn," Glover whispered as he ducked low, ramming his shoulder into the Chalnoth's midsection. The lupine alien went down hard. The other Chalnoth sprang into action, one leaping over Garq's back, pinning Glover beneath the gasping canid.

Glover flipped Garq off of him, but kept low to the ground. A melee had already broken out in the Hitching Post, replete with flying chairs and tables, shattering glass, and the sounds of running, screaming, and insane laughter.

Terrence moved quickly, capping as many Chalnoth at the knees as possible. He fell to the ground, courtesy of a double ax handle blow to his back. Recovering quickly enough to avoid the boot rushing to smash his face,



Glover reached up and thrust his fist hard into the unbalanced assailant's crotch. The Chalnoth yelped, and Terrence decided it was time to stand up and fight.

A large mass bumped against him, knocking him out of the path of a flying chair. A strong hand stopped Glover from tumbling into a shard-filled table. The captain whipped his head around. Pedro, blood trailing from his broken nose, was grinning ear to ear. "Just like old times eh?"

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## **Present**

### **USS Cuffe (Holodeck)**

"I can't believe you've still got a bee up your bonnet about that scrape seven months ago?" Terrence exclaimed.

"It's not that at all," Jasmine replied hotly. "If you want to prove your manhood you didn't have to wreck my station to do it!"

"I tried to stop that fight from breaking out." The captain protested.

"And what a bang up job you did," Jasmine retorted.

"There's just no winning with you is there?" Terrence threw up his hands in defeat. "First you say all I do is fight, and then when I try to play peacemaker you can't abide that either."

"You should've let Chief Mickelson do his job," Jasmine said, "Instead of trying to run the show yourself. A lot of people might be blinded by the glare from that fourth pip, but I assure you that I'm not one of them."

"Noted and logged," Terrence said tightly.

"You didn't have to constantly prove your virility to us weak womenfolk."

Glover sighed loudly. "Here we go again with that. I just didn't want you to get hurt. You're an engineer and Christina is a Communications technician by training. Those Chalnoth were rough customers."

"Commander Rojas is your Chief Engineer," Jasmine shot back, smiling with relish that her point had been made.

"Yes, but Pedro also spent a tour with the Marines before joining the Exploratory Division," Glover remarked with equal relish. "Can either you or Raeger say the same?"

"I thought she was Christina to you now?"

" 'Christina'?" Glover asked, perplexed. "What do you mean by that?" He looked askance a few seconds before a light bulb turned on inside his head.

"You wouldn't happen to be jealous of Christina would you? Noticed she was a little too interested in my stories last time huh?"

Jasmine crossed her arms. "Of course not," she sniffed. "I'm sure you probably had a wonderful time after the fight, Officer Raeger binding your wounds."

Glover's smile vanished. "A few bruises and cuts, that's all I got. It would take more than a dozen Chalthoth to bring me down."

Jasmine rolled her eyes. "Yes, I've heard it all before. Fighting shoulder to shoulder with Klingon warriors, skipping across the River of Blood like it was a mere pond."

"Why are you mocking me?"

"Isn't it about time someone did? Knocking you off your pedestal might show you the views of people in the real world."

"Is that so?"

"The universe doesn't revolve around you Captain."

"Really? Seemed that way to me," he smirked.

Now Jasmine threw up her hands. "Of all the egotistical, insufferable beings I've ever met..."

"Don't forget handsome," Terrence interjected. "You do find me attractive don't you? Are you really flustered because of that?"

"I'm even going to dignify that asinine come-on with a response," Jasmine pressed the padd against his chest. "You can read this on your own." She turned away from him and stomped toward the holodeck's arch.

Glover tossed the padd into the artificial sand. "Jasmine?" He called out, using his command voice. The woman stopped instantly. She cocked her head around. Glover, momentarily at a loss for words, transfixed by the fire flashing in the woman's amber eyes, finally got out, "Well...actually you did respond to my observation. By avoiding answering the question."

She hissed before activating the door release. A pensive Lt. Dryer was standing in the door way, a bottle of wine in one hand and two glasses in the other. She gingerly held them up. "These are for you," she squeaked, a pinched look on her face. "A gift from the Admiral."

"I don't want to spend another minute alone with this man, much less share a drink with him. The apple definitely fell far from the tree," Jasmine said before storming out of the holodeck and down the corridor.

Dryer still held the bottle and glasses aloft. The young woman was clearly at a loss for words. "How about it sir?" She finally said, a smile of relief brightening her face.

"Some other time Nyota," Glover said brushing by the woman. "But you can keep the holoprogram running if you wish. It would be nice if at least someone else got some enjoyment out of it besides my father." He stalked out

of the arch and down the hallway in the opposite direction of the retreating Lt. Mendes.

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## **USS Cuffe (Captain's Quarters)**

Lt. Commander Pell Ojana stifled a yawn.

"Sorry about waking you up," Glover said, an embarrassed grimace on his face. "Rough day?"

"The usual," the auburn-haired Bajoran shrugged. "Obviously you've had a more hectic day than I have. I haven't heard from you in weeks." She slowly rubbed the sleepiness from her eyes.

"Sorry about that too," The captain added. "Things have been busy around here."

"I heard about Captain Diaz," Pell said sympathetically. "Don't take it personal." Pell had also served under Diaz on the *Cuffe*, but she had been promoted the First Officer's billet on the *Chevalier* shortly before Terrence's arrival.

"You know it's too late for that," Glover said grimly. "The captain and I will cross swords again, and the next time will be different. But I really didn't contact you to talk about that."

"Really?" Pell leaned forward into her monitor's sensor, fully awake. Her ridged nose crinkled, and her eyes lit up with curiosity. "So, what's on your mind?"

The captain parted his lips, but found he couldn't speak. Struggling to convert his thoughts to words, the captain tried another route. "I take it that you and Lt. Sandhurst are still an item?"

Pell's glow quickly dampened. "Not...quite."

"Finally came to your senses and realized you were too good for him?" Glover tried to say jovially, even though he knew that was how he felt deep down. Sandhurst was another *Cuffe* alum. He had served as acting Chief Engineer under Diaz when Terrence had been XO. He had never quite warmed to the man; never felt he had much of a backbone.

Though Sandhurst had acquitted himself fairly well in his final mission aboard the *Cuffe*, revealing a steeliness that showed the man had potential to be more.

"Were you really so concerned about my relationship with Donald that you called me in the dead of night watch?" Pell's deep green eyes widened with disbelief.

"Well...you are my friend," Glover said weakly.

“Sure that it isn’t something else?” Pell pursed her lips. “Donald told me all about the other Ojana from the Mirror Universe. He told me everything.”

Damn that man, Glover clenched his fist together. On Sandhurst’s last mission aboard the ship, the *Cuffe* had encountered a duplicate Pell from another quantum reality, a literal inverse version of the Ojana Terrence had known since he was a teenager.

And the woman, so like his friend, had stirred feelings inside Terrence that led him to partake in objectionable behavior, an embarrassing make out session that had been interrupted by Sandhurst. The engineer would also become involved with the Mirror Pell during her time aboard the ship.

Glover hadn’t known how to broach his behavior with the alternate Pell to his old friend, and he was hoping that Sandhurst would let the matter lie. But the man and his damnable need for full disclosure had made things more complicated than they needed to be.

Not wanting to relive the embarrassing episode, Glover pressed forward. “Actually Pell...I contacted you to discuss a woman...not you,” he added quickly.

Ojana regarded him silently for a few moments. Terrence began to fidget, not certain what the Bajoran was thinking. Would she press him for his accounting of his near tryst with her doppelganger? Would she force him to reveal his latent attraction for her? Would Pell discover, as Glover eventually had, that part of his animus for Sandhurst was born from jealousy over the special place the engineer held in Pell’s heart, a place higher than even their decades-long friendship?

Glover held his breath, feeling as if he was standing on a precipice, and on the verge of losing one of his closest friends. Pell’s brow beetled in concentration. She’s struggling with this too, the captain realized. Over a minute later, Pell’s expression lightened, and she smiled. “Who is she...this time?”

Terrence was glad that Pell had decided not to open a door he wasn’t sure they could close again. He sighed. “Her name is Jasmine. And right now I really, really need a woman’s advice...”

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## **USS Cuffe**

### **(Deck Nine, Corridor Ten)**

Lt. Dryer tore down the corridor, oblivious to the startled onlookers she rushed past, and even those she bumped into. She pressed on, not even looking back. She wanted to keep running until she found somewhere she could hide for a decade or two, or perhaps until the furnace roared within her had been extinguished.

She burned with anger, embarrassment, and shame. Nyota couldn't believe that she had actually lied to Captain Glover's father, and then contemplated having a catfight with Lt. Mendes over the captain like he was a Tilarean rodent.

She had really outdone herself, and she wasn't sure how she could explain it to the captain or even to herself once the world slowed down enough for Nyota to come back to her senses.

A strong hand grasped her arm, stopping her momentum. The wine glasses in her hand fell on the floor. With a small growl, Dryer's security training took over. She jabbed her forearm up against the assailant's throat, driving the larger person against the wall.

"What are you doing Lieutenant?" A female voice shrieked.

"Let him go!" Cried another. Nyota shook her head, to clear the red veil that had suddenly encased her mind.

She stepped back immediately. "I'm so sorry!" Dryer apologized. Lt. Shane Hardcastle, *Cuffe's* chief Flight Control Officer, was massaging his throat, gasping for air. She moved towards him to see if he was alright, but he waved her away. He inhaled several big gulps of air before the reddishness began to leave his face.

"That was some greeting," he said, his voice raspy, one hand still rubbing his throat. "Been doing the Klingon calisthenics thing with the XO again?" He joked.

In his short time on the *Cuffe*, Dryer had become fast friends with Hardcastle. Though he was a flight jockey, they both shared a love of rigorous workouts and safeties-off holoprograms. After one exhilarating night of Parrises Squares they had shared more...but that had been a couple months ago.

Nyota noticed that the man wasn't in uniform. He was wearing a tight fitting one piece that did justice to his toned, wiry form. A sweatband held his damp black hair out of his face, and he carried a racket. The security officer remembered that Shane had asked her to join him in a game of racquetball tonight, but Dryer had declined. She hadn't been able to stop worrying about Jasmine, and she knew she couldn't give Hardcastle the competition he craved. And he would've sensed that, asked her what was wrong, and Dryer might've told him. She didn't want everyone to know she was an idiot.

Dryer didn't know what to say to him, "No...I..."

"Are you alright sir?" One of the young women who had screamed before wrapped an arm around his shoulder. She was also dressed in work out clothes. Petty Officer Jean Hajar, Nyota recalled. The noncom was also one of the newer members of the *Cuffe's* crew. Captain Glover spoke very highly of the young woman. Nyota knew about Hajar's tarnished past at Starfleet Academy, but she had worked with the captain to encourage any grumblers among the crew to give Hajar a second chance moreso for the captain's

benefit than Hajar's. Dryer was pricked with a thorn of envy at the closeness she sensed between Hardcastle and Hajar. She quickly chided herself. You can't have all the men onboard, she reasoned. But Hajar seemed to occupy a special place for both of the men Nyota found interesting onboard, and the lieutenant had to be honest about not liking that. Hardcastle gently brushed Hajar's arm off.

"I'm fine Jean," he said. "Really." The diminutive brunette stepped back a respectful distance.

"Lieutenant, I believe these are yours," the other woman, Ensign Sophia Detmer, also donning a leotard-like outfit similar to Hardcastle's, handed the lieutenant the wine glasses. They were unbroken.

"Th-thank you," Dryer didn't know what else to say.

"Hey, I see you've got some wine, two glasses," Hardcastle said, his almond-shaped eyes sparking with curiosity, "Headed to a hot date?" Hardcastle, you have no idea, Nyota thought.

"Look Shane, I'm sorry, I really am, but I've got to go," Nyota almost found herself pleading. Before he could reply, she whipped around and crashed right into Commander Kojo. "Oww!" She said, her head throbbing from connecting the First Officer's. Kojo stood still, completely unfazed.

"Lieutenant, you seem distressed," Kojo's voice was matter-of-fact, but her eyes burned with an almost scary intensity. There wasn't much, or many people that unnerved Dryer these days, but Kojo was damn near at the top of that very short list.

"No, I'm fine...really," Dryer tried to walk around the Kriosian.

"I didn't dismiss you," Kojo barked, planting Nyota to the floor. "I want to see you in my office."

"Really Commander..." Dryer protested.

"Now!" Kojo stalked off, in the direction of her office. Before following her, Dryer glanced at Hardcastle, hoping he would intercede on her behalf. The pilot shrugged helplessly. At least he had enough common sense when to keep the safeties on, she realized.

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## **USS Cuffe (Hydroponics Lab)**

Lt. Seb N'Saba growled softly with displeasure. He couldn't believe that the soft swishing of the door alerted him to the human female standing at the threshold instead of her smell. He rubbed his artificial eyes. Was his sense of smell leaving him as well, he pondered, or had he been so engrossed in remembering his homeworld that it had caused him to be so lax?

"I didn't mean to intrude," the woman, N'Saba recalled her scent almost instantly, Lt. Mendes from DS5, said. "I can come back some other time."

N'Saba turned around slowly, surprising himself with his response. "No, please...I could use the company." He was even more displeased with himself when he saw the woman, her appearance turned into a strident array of reds and oranges by his implants. She was definitely unsettled about something, N'Saba could now even smell it in her scent. The tension was so thick on her skin that it should've sounded like a gong in N'Saba's head.

"Well...all right," the engineer walked slowly into the room.

"I can assure you that I've already had dinner tonight," N'Saba flashed a fang-toothed grin. "I don't bite." Now that's more like it, he thought with pride. The reds in the image spiked briefly.

An embarrassed, pained expression crossed the woman's face. "No, please I didn't mean to offend you."

"It's quite all right Lieutenant," the Alshain paused for effect, "Mendes." She nodded, and smiled. Human teeth were so blunt, and it made their smiles unappealing.

N'Saba sighed. Of course, with his disability he was no longer considered worthy of a mate. In addition, he was no longer considered a valued member of the Sept N'Saba clan, his deformity obscuring even the prestige of serving in Starfleet.

Despite the great strides his people had taken to erase the image that they were nothing more than feral savages, natural born predators that could truly be nothing more, the hunt still held a powerful cultural and psychological pull on the Alshain mind and worldview.

His ocular implants gave him the ability to see the electromagnetic spectrum, far beyond any 'normal' Alshain, but they also marked him as different, and that too often meant less than in the staid, stratified echelons of the Alshain nobility.

"So, you're a fellow nature lover?" Mendes asked tentatively.

"Something like that," N'Saba remarked. "This is the closest place aboard ship that reminds me of Alshain Proper. The holodeck can never replace the feeling and smell of real greenery."

Mendes nodded. "I agree. I grew up on Pacifica, and the holoprogrammers have never gotten the roar of the oceans right for it either. When is the last time you were on your homeworld?" She added. "I haven't seen Pacifica in quite some time."

"Home?" N'Saba asked with feigned interest. He wanted to divert the flow of conversation away from Alshain Proper. The lupanoid had no interest in sharing his distress with others. He had so far been able to dance around the ship's Counselor Ellan's intrusive questioning, and his well-earned reputation for being prickly kept other crewmembers, even the captain, a safe

distance away. "I've never been to Pacifica," he deflected, though there was a genuine twinge of regret. It was the hunger to conquer the unknown that had led him to Starfleet. At first his Sept had not wanted him to leave, but the elders had become supportive when he proved himself a capable officer. Ironically, now when he actually wanted to return home, he was denied. It was the way of the gods he supposed. N'Saba had asked their permission to travel among the stars. He hadn't realized it would be a continual journey.

The engineer looked as wistful as N'Saba felt. "It is a wonderful place, very warm, temperate, and relaxing. I can't believe I was in such a rush to join Starfleet sometimes and leave that paradise behind. I guess what they say about the grass being greener on the other side is true huh?"

N'Saba nodded, though he had no idea what idiotic human expression the woman was referring to. After spending years in Starfleet, N'Saba had learned not to question humans about their musings, but merely to let them voice them and move on to ramble about something else. "So..." N'Saba struggled for something to say. He hated small talk, "How are you enjoying your stay aboard the *Cuffe*?"

"It's...alright," the woman ventured carefully, with another red spike that belied the coolness of her words.

"But I take it you are ready to return to DS5?" N'Saba asked.

"How did you know?" Mendes asked, surprised. N'Saba tapped his temple.

"I'm psychic. All Alshain are. It's a state secret."

Mendes chuckled. "I think you are toying with me. I don't recall ever reading or hearing that."

"We don't like to share it. For once, we've actually decided not to crow about ourselves, why not let the Vulcans, Ullians, or Betazoids be the big telepaths in the quadrant."

"Is that so?" Mendes laughed again. N'Saba focused the resolution of his implants, giving him a fairer approximation of Mendes's appearance. He had to admit to himself that the woman was quite beautiful for a human, and her laughter was infectious.

He had been forced to restrict his amorous encounters to the holodeck, afraid that coupling with any species without at least the constitution or pain threshold of a Klingon would result in N'Saba being arraigned for murder. The Science Officer was almost tempted to flout fate with this human, but he held back. He could smell the scent of the captain on her. Mendes was already marked, and N'Saba knew the woman knew that, but she resisted for some reason. Humans and their foolish reactions and behaviors continued to stupefy him.

"Yes," N'Saba said. "We are psychic," he repeated. "And that leads me to ask you why aren't you with Captain Glover instead of here with me in



Hydroponics?" The woman's image turned into a glob of red and orange, a blazing sun.

"I don't know if you are telepathic or not," Mendes said, an edge to her voice. "But that is none of your business...and how did you know that I had recently been around your captain?"

"Alshain aren't really psychic," N'Saba admitted. He tapped his snout. "But are senses are finely honed. Coupled with the advanced sight of my implants, my intelligence and intuitive abilities make me as perceptive as any natural born telepath."

Mendes nodded. "I see, but it's still none of your business."

"As you wish," N'Saba shrugged. "It's strange that you would like to spend your night here in a lonely lab when you could be spending time with the Captain. It's what he would prefer you know."

"How would you know that?" Mendes asked incredulously. "The man can't stand me."

"The senses don't lie. The captain does as good a job with distraction and diversion as you do. After all these years in the Federation, human mating rituals still amuse me. The Alshain are much more direct in their mating process."

"Are you saying that Captain Glover is attracted to me?" The woman was stunned. "I don't believe it."

"Just like you are trying to convince yourself that you are not attracted to him," N'Saba said.

"But...but he's so conceited, and headstrong," Mendes stammered.

"And that's probably what you like about him," N'Saba countered. "He's strong, certain. Females of every species I've ever encountered find the confident males of their species the most appealing. Humans are no different, despite your beliefs otherwise."

"He resorts to fighting instead of civilized debate," Mendes continued to protest.

"He's human," N'Saba reasoned.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Everything," N'Saba sagely remarked.

"I don't understand what you mean," Mendes said. "And I don't even know why I'm engaging in this conversation with you. I don't even know you."

"Which is probably best," N'Saba replied. "It is often easier to accept the truth from a stranger than someone close to you."

"There's no truth here to accept," Mendes retorted. N'Saba shrugged.

"Suit yourself Lt. Mendes. But there will come a time when you can't flee your feelings, especially when you are meant to face them."

"I don't understand," she began.

"I don't either," N'Saba cut her off. "I merely know this to be true because it's happened to me, and it will again. That's the way of the gods."

"While I do believe there is a deeper meaning, a larger purpose to life I'm not so sure there is some grand plan or creator behind the scenes directing our actions or guiding our lives," Mendes admitted. "Our lives are riddles for us to solve."

"Perhaps because you feel that way because your trials haven't tested you harshly enough," N'Saba paused, blinking his ocular implants for emphasis. "But we often arrive at moments in our lives when we have nothing else but our deities to turn to. Hopefully your time of trial won't cost you what it has me. And you will learn to heed their advice when they speak to your heart." Before the human could reply, N'Saba added, "Please enjoy the plants," before ambling out of the garden.

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## **USS Cuffe (Executive Officer's Office)**

Lt. Dryer felt like she was standing in the principal's office again, except she damn well knew that Mr. McAllister couldn't rip your arm from your socket as easily as Commander Kojo could.

The commander plopped into her seat and nodded abruptly for Nyota to follow suit. The security officer sat down in the lone seat facing Kojo's desk.

"Care for anything to drink?" Kojo asked. "Raktajino?" After Dryer nodded, a light twinkled in Kojo's eyes. "Of course...I forgot the wine." She tapped her desk, and Nyota reluctantly placed the wine and glasses on the nearly empty desktop. A small hologram of a Klingon male with a raised bat'leth was Kojo's only concession to sentimentality. Dryer didn't know all of the details, but she did know that the commander had once been married to a Klingon warrior killed decades before, which seemed impossible because of the commander's youthful appearance. However, Nyota also knew that Kriosians were a long-lived species.

Kojo swiped the bottle, gave it a once over, her lip curling in distaste. "Too tame for me," she muttered before placing it back in front of Dryer. "Do you know why you're here Lieutenant?"

"Is that some kind of trick question sir?" Kojo frowned, her attractive, though hardened face darkening.

"I don't play tricks," she replied. "Answer the question."

"I really don't know sir," Dryer ventured. "Would you care to enlighten me?"

"I don't mince words either. If you want to be Captain Glover's mate, then you must declare your intentions."

Blood drained from Dryer's face. For a few seconds she could only work her lips, unable to speak. "That's not true...how could..."

Kojo smiled. "You can learn a lot working out with a person. Especially a person seeking to become closer to Captain Glover through an association with me."

"That-that wasn't what the calisthenics training was about at all," Nyota lied.

"Maybe not now, but in the beginning it was. Only males are so obtuse that they can't see what's right in front of him. Though Captain Glover seemed oblivious to your presence I noticed you hanging around quite a bit whenever the captain and I practiced with bat'leths or Mok'bara. You were smart enough to know I would never accept you joining in unless you had proven yourself to me." The commander paused, waiting for a response. Nyota kept her mouth shut. "So, I speak the truth?"

Dryer felt like a jerk, but she nodded. "Humans amaze me. Why do you resort to such subterfuge? Life is too short. When Kojo first saw me, he declared his desire to mate with me." The commander glanced down at the hologram, giving Dryer enough time to erase the unsettled look off her face. "But he had to earn my respect first. Do you truly think the captain will respect a woman that acts in such a subterranean manner? The captain respects forthrightness."

"Commander..." Dryer choose her words carefully. "I really appreciate you taking time out of your schedule..."

"But this is none of my business right?" Kojo's smile was predacious.

Yes, Nyota thought, but what she said was, "No, I value your opinion."

"If that is so, then you will do as I recommend. It will make your life a lot easier."

"I'll...uh...take that under advisement." Dryer said, sidling out of the chair.

"See that you do," Kojo replied. "Dismissed."

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**USS Cuffe**  
**(Captain's Quarters)**  
**Three hours later...**

Captain Terrence Glover sat at his desk, rereading the first paragraph of the latest warp core realignment report for the third time. He couldn't get Jasmine off his mind. He had tried to drown her out by working the midnight oil.

Since talking with Pell, the captain had reread the security and tactical reports twice, had checked with the conn officer several times regarding the status of Gamma Shift, each time getting the same bored reply.

Eventually, Terrence gave up. He put the padd back on his deck, went to the replicator in his cabin's tiny kitchenette area, and ordered a mug of Meridor. He stood by his view port and gazed at the stars streaking by.

The captain hated not being productive, but even more so Terrence couldn't fathom his attraction to the glacial Lt. Mendes. Her physical beauty was an obvious attraction, and his father had glowed enough about her engineering talent that Glover appreciated her competence.

But the woman treated him so coldly and unfairly accused him of being a damn near ruffian that he just couldn't figure out why she had taken over his thoughts. Perhaps it some kind of mind control device she's cooked up to torture me, he thought in half-jest. Maybe she's gotten hold to one of those Ferengi thoughtmakers, he wondered. Perhaps I should have Meldin search her room.

"That would really make her go supernova," Glover laughed, briefly imagining Jasmine stalking down the corridor in search of him, with more bloodlust in her eyes than a band of Klingon marauders.

On his way back to the replicator for his third Meridor, Glover's door chimed softly. The captain froze, hoping and dreading that Mendes was on the other side of the door. "Enter," he said with a slight tremble in his voice.

"May I come in?" Lt. Dryer asked, still in possession of the bottle of wine and glasses.

"I think the Apnex Sea would've been a more scenic place to imbibe," Glover remarked.

"It's no fun drinking alone," Dryer said. Glover held up his empty mug.

"Understood." The captain gestured for the woman to enter while he ordered another lager.

"What's that?" Dryer asked, setting down the bottle and glasses on the small coffee table by the Aaamazzarite sofa. She lay back against the couch, sinking into the amber-colored bio-fibers.

"Meridor," Glover said. "A little taste I acquired the last time we were on DS5."

"She's on your mind, isn't she?" Dryer said flatly, the corner of her eyes crinkling.

"Who?" The captain said coyly.

"Permission to speak freely sir?" Dryer asked. She began to stand up, but Glover waved for her to remain sitting.

"Granted," he said tersely.

"I don't know what you see in her," Nyota said. I don't either, Glover thought.

But he said, "I don't see how my relationship with Lt. Mendes is any concern of yours."

"In all honesty, how could you say that? After what you and I have experienced," The security officer's voice was laced with hurt. Glover winced.

"I didn't mean it like that Nyota," he said softly. "But you know that our relationship is over."

"Why?" She asked, her voice rising in pitch. "I thought things were going good for us...until the Ice Queen."

His throat drying, Glover downed the rest of the thick Meridor, forcing back a gag response. He waited a few seconds to make certain his stomach wouldn't retaliate for the strong brew he had just sent its way. Satisfied that he wouldn't vomit, the captain finally said. "This has nothing to do with Jasmine. I told you several months ago that it was unseemly for me to be carrying on with a member of the crew, an officer under my command. I'm the captain and I've got to keep a certain level of distance from the crew."

"Well, that didn't stop you from bedding Captain Scott or Dr. Chace," Dryer said hotly. Glover's temperature rose at the dig. Though Glover hadn't cared about propriety at the time, he realized he had crossed a line with both Captain Scott, his CO on the *Renegade*, and Dr. Nya Chace, the former CMO on the *Cuffe*. And Terrence had paid a personal price for both dalliances. Scott, the first love of his life, had nearly been killed when an alien parasite took control of her body. The violation had caused irreparable damage to their relationship. But Terrence's affair with the married Dr. Chace had been even more devastating. The woman had terminated the fetus they had created, Terrence's child, before leaving the ship and reuniting with her husband on Trill. The loss of his unborn child was a tragedy that Glover didn't think he would ever truly overcome.

"That's a low blow," he said quietly, his voice hardening, "Totally uncalled for."

"I'm sorry," Dryer said seconds later, realizing that mentioning Dr. Chace also brought back memories of how they parted. "I didn't mean..."

Glover shook his head sadly. "It's over between us Nyota, plain and simple. I thought you were dating Lt. Hardcastle?"

"Dating's too strong a word for it. We just hang out together sometimes," Dryer declared. Glover rolled his eyes.

"Sounds like dating to me Nyota," he jokingly remarked.

"It's nothing...serious," Dryer declared.

"It could be," Glover said, his tone and bearing at the moment reminding him of his father. "Shane's a good man. You two would make a nice couple."

"'Nice couple'", Dryer teased. "You sound like my father."

"I'm old enough to be your father," Glover replied.

"You're not that old sir, only a decade or so ahead of me," Dryer smiled.

"So, you're actually keeping count?" the captain asked, mockingly aghast.

"Only so I could make sure I had a birthday gift ready for you," Dryer remarked.

"Really?" Glover said, intrigued. "You were really going to give me a present?"

"Yes," Dryer sighed. "But I guess I'll just have to find out when Lt. Hardcastle's birthday is."

"Perhaps you should," Terrence nodded approvingly. "I'm sure he will be pleased."

Nyota stood up slowly. "How can you be sure he'll like it?" A devilish smile crept across her face, "Without trying it out first." The woman slipped out of her Tholian blouse, the sheer, violet garment floating to the floor below her. Glover gaped at the woman's bare, well-defined torso. "You think he'll like this?" She asked innocently, batting her eyelashes.

Glover nodded, unable to speak.

"I'm not sure," Dryer pouted, and she began sliding out of her pants. In seconds she stood before Glover completely naked, the bulkhead lights casting her dark skin in a warm, sensuous glow. "Now that you've seen the total package, you think Shane will approve?"

"Damn him," Glover said, placing the empty mug loudly on the coffee table before he wrapped Dryer in a strong embrace. The young woman didn't resist.

If this didn't take his thoughts off of Jasmine Mendes, nothing would. Terrence realized as he kissed Nyota and began running his hands along her glorious form, kneading and massaging her at various spots, thrilled by her accompanying moans.

Why he had attempted to turn down Nyota, a good woman who cared for him, who damn near worshipped him for the Vulcan-like Jasmine was beyond him. Then again, maybe that was the whole point, an errant thought surfaced in the back of his consciousness, but Glover didn't care to ponder it at the moment. He had better things to occupy his mind.

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## **USS Cuffe**

### **(Captain's Quarters)**

#### **0700 Hours**

"I need an antioxidant," Glover placed a hand against his throbbing head. The captain sat up in the bed, readjusting the tangled sheets as he propped his back against the headboard.

"What you need is an injection of common sense," Adm. Glover glared down at him. Lt. Dryer, wrapped in a towel, stood agape in the doorway to the refresher. "Just what's going on here?" The admiral demanded.

"Dad," Glover said slowly, his mouth arid. "Wha-what are you doing here? At this time of morning?"

"I came by to see if you wanted to have breakfast, and discuss our route through the Neutral Zone," Samson said. "When you didn't answer, I used my personal code to enter. I expected to perhaps catch you coming out of the shower, not Lt. Dryer," he stared at her. "I don't understand. I thought you were Jasmine's friend?" The older man's expression was a mixture of confusion and hurt.

Dryer looked away from him and then stared down at the carpet in front of her. Captain Glover laughed. "Friends? That's a good one Dad. Nyota likes Lt. Mendes about as much as I do."

"I-I think I should go," Dryer said quietly.

"Yes, I think you should," Samson said sternly.

"Hold on," Captain Glover snapped. "Dad, you might have operational authority during this mission, but you don't have the right to tell anyone to enter or leave my quarters!" Glover slid across the bed, wrapping a sheet around him as he left the bed and walked over to the now trembling Dryer.

"It's okay," he said, grasping the woman's shoulders. "You can stay if you want."

"No," Nyota shook her head, "I really should go. I've go on duty in about twenty minutes."

"Okay," Terrence said quietly. He released her, and the woman made a wide berth around the fuming Admiral as she retrieved her clothing. She quickly hurried back to the lavatory.

"What's going on here?" Samson asked again.

"Dad, I don't have to explain myself to you," Glover said. "I'm an adult, and so is Nyota. What we do on our off time is our business."

"But what about Jasmine?"

"What about her? Really Dad, I don't see what's so special about the woman. She acts like she can't even stand to be in the same sector with me."

"That's not necessarily a strange thing. Both Cardassian and Klingon courting rituals are often confrontational," Samson offered.

"Thanks for the xeno-sociology lesson," Terrence quipped. "But I don't see how it applies."

"I'm just trying to tell you that Jasmine's bark is worse than her bite."

"You're a mind reader now?"

"No, just a student of people," Samson remarked.

"And all this time I just thought you were merely a Romulan scholar."

"Don't be flippant with me son," the admiral chided.

"My apologies sir," Glover said. The refresher door swished open and Lt. Dryer hurried from the room, not making eye contact with either man. After she was gone, Glover said. "Your behavior towards Lt. Dryer was really uncalled for."

"She lied to me last night," Samson remarked. "She said that she was Jasmine's friend, and she even tricked me into having her deliver this wine," he paused to point at the empty, overturned bottle still on the coffee table. "I bet she sabotaged your evening in the holodeck."

"She did deliver the wine, and walked right in on Jasmine and I arguing. Nyota came by a few hours later to check up on me, and one thing led to another. We had previously been involved."

"I see," Samson nodded. "Do you love her?"

"Hold on Dad," Glover stepped back. "Don't be in such a rush to marry me off okay."

"You can't keep gallivanting about," Samson said. "Marriage will do wonders for you disposition."

"Yeah, right," Terrence said. "I think I'm pretty well disposed right now."

"Exposed is more like it," Samson said. Glover followed his father's eyes to his hand cinching the sheet around his waist.

"I'll be back in a nanosecond," Glover said, dipping into the refresher. He came out in a dark gray bathrobe. "Are you through reading me the riot act, or do you want to put me over your knee or ground me now?"

"Ha," Samson snorted. "I'm sorry if I stepped out of bounds, but that Lt. Dryer's deception incensed me."

"She's really a good person," Terrence said. "I'm sure she had a reason to do what she did."

"Yes, to keep you and Jasmine apart. Just like this little rendezvous last night," the admiral chuckled a thumb at the bed. "But I know I'm right about you and Jasmine, you two and Dryer know that as well. You can fight it all you want, but it won't do you any good."

Terrence rolled his eyes. "Okay Dad, whatever." He lightly touched his father's elbow and guided him into the kitchenette. After the admiral sat down, Glover went to the alcove where the replicator was located. "What'll have? I'm in the mood for ful medames and laxoox."

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Tal Shiar Headquarters (Romulus)

"I strongly urge you to reconsider," Captain Viredis's nasally voice irritated her, but it was a small price to pay for the valuable information the promising young officer had secured. "The *Dromorn* could be in the Aranthka system well before Domna arrives. We could retrieve the prisoners and have their Right of Statements ready for the communication nets before Volok realized he had been duped."

Chairwoman Spuria Helanor smiled sweetly, pleased with the man's exuberance. She couldn't help but find his enthusiasm infectious. Their business often required a cold, detached demeanor, but Helanor hoped that Viredis never became as dry as her deputy Koval. The man had definitely lost the exhilarating thrill of protecting the Empire. It was all about power and position for him. Helanor sought those things not by choice, but because of necessity.

"No, I have need for you and the *Dromorn* elsewhere, Commander Sarpan will handle this. I think it will be a welcome retribution." Sarpan had been her mentor when she had first joined the Tal Shiar. Despite the man's glittering record, the one stain on his career had been his failure to detect Ousanas Dar's nascent treachery while the two both served together on the *Chula*. Helanor thought it would be fitting for Sarpan to capture Dar, erasing his most lasting mistake. Of course she knew that General Volok's trap largely sprang from his desire for revenge, but for Helanor it wasn't about vengeance at all. It was partly about balance-Dar had besmirched Sarpan's reputation and now Dar would be the cause of removing that taint. Also, it was about the survival of the Tal Shiar. If Volok's plan succeeded, Praetor Javel would likely move to dismantle the intelligence agency. Such a move would concentrate too much power in the hands of the military. The rule of the Senate would effectively be over. "The *Mellori* has already been dispatched." Despite the recent failures the agency had endured, the Tal Shiar was still a necessary check on the overarching power of both the Senate and the Imperial Fleet.

Viredis's thin lips drew into a tight line at the news. He bowed his head curtly. The man also had the foresight to know when he had lost the argument. "I await your instructions," he said. Helanor transmitted her orders via her secure link to the *Dromorn*.

"Jolan tru," she said crisply, deactivating the link. Helanor took a moment to compose herself before opening a new link. Praetor Quintus Javel's long, patrician face appeared on the screen. Helanor dipped her head in a gesture of respect. "Praetor," she greeted the man.

"Yes," he said sharply, with the right air of imperiousness this time. He's been practicing, Helanor realized, her left eyebrow rising up. She said so, causing Javel to laugh. "Actually I have. I'm not quite as good as the Empress though, nor my predecessor," the man admitted.

"You are far better than that old set'leth," Helanor remarked with a smile of her own. The Tal Shiar spymaster had known Javel for decades. In the near incestuous world of the Romulan elite, that wasn't so strange or coincidental. Shortly after her graduation from the Intelligence Academy, Helanor had been chosen as the Proconsul's intelligence aide for the Continuing Committee. Javel was one of the legal intercessors in the Proconsul's office at that time. He had never been much for ceremony even then. In fact it was those rustic qualities that had made him an appealing choice for Praetor. He wasn't one of the gray, sterile creatures that had inhabited the perch of power for far too long.

He was a reformer at heart, but not a foolish extremist like the reunificationists. Javel wanted to modernize the Romulan system, to make it competitive with the Federation, the Klingons, Cardassians, and now the Dominion. Most of the Romulan populace and elite had so far gone along with his modernization plans, except for Javel's call for greater rights for the Remans.

Javel held a great fascination for the wraith-like slaves that toiled in the dilithium mines of Remus and across the empire. He believed they could be turned into an effective military force, a more willing ally that could create a buffer between the empire and her enemies. Such thoughts evoked memories of the Earth-Romulan War, which many still believed had been lost by placing too much trust in the Reman soldiers on the front lines. The Reman revolt at Cheron had turned the war conclusively against the Star Empire, and the Remans had rightly born the cost of their ancestors' transgression ever since.

Helanor felt that the Imperial Fleet's rampant militarism was more of a threat to the empire's long-term health than the assimilation of the Remans into Romulan society. But due to the debacle at Omarion, Helanor wasn't able to utilize her usual leverage to sway the Senate and the Romulan people to support Javel's initiative.

"You have news I suppose?" Javel asked.

"Yes. Our best estimates place that Dar and Flavius's kin crash landed somewhere in the Aranthka system, after their botched escape."

Javel's eyebrows beetled. "There's only one planet capable of sustaining life in that system if I recall: Aranthka IX." He grimaced. "They're probably dead already. Why should you and VoloK shed Romulan blood over the bones of traitors?"

"Ousanas Dar has proven himself very resourceful over the years. I speculate that he has entered Romulan space several times since his defection, and each time crossing back into Federation space unscathed. I want to see his corpse and have it verified by genetic scan before I'm willing to accept the fact of his death."

"The Aranthkans don't leave much behind, if my foremother's tales are to be believed," Javel replied.

"If that is the case, then my agents will dissect them to get the confirmation I desire. They are well trained," Helanor said with pride.

"I'm well aware of how well trained the Tal Shiar are," Javel said. "And if you are successful in capturing a Starfleet Admiral, it will go a long way to restoring the Tal Shiar's reputation, and in sustaining my support."

"That is my objective Praetor," Helanor said. " 'A satisfied Praetor is a satisfied Empire', isn't that how the saying goes?"

Javel laughed. "No, it's 'A satisfied people is a satisfied Empire.' *Seldar's Collected Works* I believe. But you know that already don't you?"

Helanor smiled. "Of course I do."

The Praetor sighed. "I do so enjoy these games with you Spuria." He paused, a dark expression shadowing his face. "I would hate for them to end. Make sure they don't." He closed the link before Helanor could respond.

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## **Mentarii Prime (Romulan Space)**

"You have served the Imperial Fleet well Subcommander Hesperian," Volok smiled wanly at the young soldier on his small viewer. "I didn't realize that the Praetor was so firmly in league with Chairwoman Helanor. I thought he supported my plan?" He absently scratched his chin.

"The Praetor is an erratic sort," Hesperian replied with an arrogant sneer. "First, this business about Reman suffrage, then his embarrassing attempt to integrate Remans into the Praetorian Guard."

"If I do recall, the Reman in question saved the Praetor's life from assassins," the general replied.

Hesperian grunted. "A wasted gesture it appears, because both that Reman and the Praetor have forgotten the natural order of things. The Remans were perfectly happy in their substation until this talk of emancipation began stirring them up. Perhaps it would've been poetic justice if Reman assassins had cut down the Praetor."

"Watch your tongue," Volok hissed. "The Praetor is still our leader!" *No matter how duplicitous and misguided he might be*, the general thought privately. The sneer quickly left the young man's face.

"Of course Sir," Hesperian squeaked, a contrite expression on his face. "It is my speculation that the Praetor will still support the military's absorption of the Tal Shiar, granted we can retrieve the prisoners, and capture the Starfleet Admiral, before the Tal Shiar."

Volok nodded. "A prudent observation," he remarked. "I will do all that I can to make certain that scenario becomes reality. It's time for my contingency plan."

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## **Aranthka IX (Romulan Space)**

T'Prell had barely got the warning out before her pursuers burst through the thick foliage, a blinding, swirling crimson mass of chitin, mandibles, and pincers, slashing and skewering from the almost all directions.

The Vulcan took aim at one of the insectoid-like creatures that had dropped from the trees onto a screaming Senator Telaan. But Lieutenant Commander Leva quickly tackled the assailant before it could assault the senator. Leva and the beast were tumbling madly on the jungle floor, struggling for position. T'Prell tried to take aim at the creature, but a searing pain flared in her shoulder. She dropped her phaser in shock, her eyes riveted to the fountain of green blood sprouting out of her shoulder. A chitin pincer was rooted in her shoulder. She tried to pull it out while simultaneously swirling on her attacker. All she saw was baleful, yellow compound eyes, before her world went black.

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So'Dan Leva smiled with grim satisfaction as his fist splintered the helmet-like mask covering the face of Senator Telaan's would be attacker. He ignored the pain that juddered from his fist up his arm from the force of his punch. The attack had come so furiously that Leva had first thought their assailants were some type of insectoids. But during his tussle on the thick, canopied jungle floor, he realized very quickly that he was fighting a humanoid, outfitted in some time of armor that resembled an insect.

The half-Romulan pulled at the mask, wanting to see exactly who or what they were up against. He gasped when he finally wrenched off the helmet, but before he could process the revelation, hot agony raked across the back of his neck, and then he felt nothing.

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Narvek pushed his mother behind him, where Shanra already quaked. The creatures encircled him, claws and mandibles clacking. Now that the din of the initial attack had abated somewhat, the young Decurion could see that

these were humanoids dressed in insect-like garb. For what reason or purpose he didn't know, nor care. His entire universe, past and future, existed right behind him, and he would do everything within his power to prevent them from being harmed.

He waved his honor blade at the encroaching horde. He knew it wasn't sufficient, and so did they. Yet, they hesitated. Narvek wasn't sure why. A soft whine drew his attention, distracting him.

Telaan screamed, and Narvek whipped around, momentarily forgetting the insect-men. Shanra held a disruptor: At him.

"What?" He asked thickly, confused. "I don't understand."

"I don't either," Shanra said quietly, tears running down her cheeks. "But this wasn't part of the deal. I'm sorry...and I love you." She fired.

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## **USS Cuffe**

### **(Romulan Neutral Zone)**

**Stardate: 488338.6**

"Take us in," Captain Glover said tightly to Lt. Hardcastle at the helm. He sat up in his command chair as the *Cuffe* crossed the invisible barrier separating Federation and Romulan space. A second later, the bridge dimmed a garish red and a klaxon sounded. "Cut that alarm," Glover ordered Lt. Meldin.

As soon as the klaxon was turned off and the bridge's lighting returned to normal, the captain swiveled in his seat to look at his father. The man was standing beside him in the command well. "You sure you've got the right codes to cover our entry into Romulan space?" He said soft enough for only the admiral to hear. "And to the supposed crash site?"

Adm. Glover nodded. "I've got some good sources inside the Empire. If I thought they had been compromised I wouldn't be attempting this incursion...or risking our lives."

"That's good enough for me," Glover said. He opened a channel on his chair's armrest.

"Engineering, Rojas," Commander Rojas said cheerfully.

"Pedro, ramp us up to Warp Nine."

"You got it." Glover closed the link.

"Mr. Hardcastle?" When the fresh-faced young man looked back at him, Glover felt a pinch of shame for his blithe dismissal of the man's likely feelings for Nyota. But he betrayed none of his embarrassment in his voice or bearing. "What is our ETA to the Aranthka system?"

Hardcastle glanced back at his console before speaking. "Sir, we should arrive in the Aranthka system in fifteen hours."

"Good work," Glover said unnecessarily. Hardcastle grinned, blushing slightly.

"Well...thank you sir...but it was more the computer than me." Behind Glover at the Science terminal, Lt. N'Saba loudly snorted. The captain ignored him.

"Commander Kojo," he said, swiveling in her direction. The Kriosian perched on her seat on the upper deck, a tense and expectant expression on her face.

"Yes sir?"

"I want you to begin another round of battle drills. I want the crew sharp," Glover said. The woman smiled. A warrior born, practice was foreplay for her. Glover noticed out of the corner of his eye a few grimaces and frowns from some of the bridge crew.

The captain had pushed them hard in the past week, determined that they be well prepared for anything the Romulans might throw at them. He had promised them, and himself, that the *Cuffe* would not suffer the same fate as the *Lacaille*.

"I'll begin immediately sir," she said with relish.

"Good," the captain said, rising out of his seat. "I'll be in my ready room. You have the conn."

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## **IRC K'Met (Romulan Neutral Zone)**

"The *Starship Cuffe* has crossed the barrier," Subcommander Avita informed her superior. "Shall I engage?"

"Don't be too eager," her superior admonished. "Your orders are to follow the starship only. Maintain your cloak and do not engage the Federation vessel unless you receive a commandment from me, and me only."

Avita nodded her assent, "Understood."

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **IRW Mellori (Aranthka System)**

Commander Tremellus Sarpan sat on the edge of his seat. The command chair was situated in the aft portion of the bridge, where he could keep an eye on everything that occurred there. At the moment, his eyes were riveted to the main viewer. He knew it was unseemly to be seen so on edge by his very observant crew, but Sarpan no longer cared.

The *Mellori* had entered the Aranthka system less than an hour ago, and would soon arrive at their destination. He hoped it wouldn't be too late. He turned slightly in his chair to glance at the sensor technician sitting in an alcove to his left.

"Lieutenant Numa, have you received any other coded messages since the last one?" He asked, though he knew the answer.

"No sir," the husky young officer replied quickly. Sarpan hadn't expected a different answer. If there had been, Numa would be a pile of ash for disobeying his previous order to immediately report any communiqués from their contact on Aranthka IX.

The last garbled message had unsettled him. Things had seemed to take a turn for the worst. After his chief Xenobiology Officer had informed him about the inhabitants on Aranthka IX, Sarpan's trepidation had only festered for the last several hours. He had to reach Dar; he had to capture him before the Aranthkans were finished with him. The old Tal Shiar agent hoped to at least recover Dar with most of his body parts intact. Bringing home a corpse wouldn't be as handsomely rewarded as a live traitor that could stand trial and be executed publicly. He would be damned if he let Aranthkan savages spoil his chance at redemption. He flipped a toggle on his armrest. "More power to engines," he grated. "Our quarry is just over the horizon."

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### **IRW Invidious (Aranthka System)**

"Commander," the Decurion paused, confusion rife on her face, "Long-range sensors have just detected another warbird has entered the system, on an approach vector."

Prius Domna shot out of his seat, his face flushed green with anger. The commander stalked over to the helm, almost pushing the woman from her seat so that he could look at the information himself. The raptor with two

worlds in its talons, a symbol for all Romulan military vessels, was moving rapidly across the small terminal's screen.

"Put the image on the main viewer," he commanded. The Decurion said slowly, "The ship isn't in range yet sir."

"We will arrive at Aranthka IX before them?" He asked, shifting his jaw impatiently as the woman checked her instruments.

"Yes sir," she said after a few seconds. "We will arrive thirty minutes before them."

"Damn," Domna cursed as he stomped back to his command chair. Standing in front of it, he stabbed a button on his armrest. "Engineering."

"Commander Domna," the Chief Engineer Dhaka replied.

"Is your primary assistant present?" Domna asked.

"Yes Commander, Lieutenant Lukath is present."

"Excellent, Lieutenant Lukath can you hear me?"

"Yes Commander." The adjunct said crisply.

"Perfect...I want you to take Chief Engineer Dhaka's sidearm and then execute him with it."

"Sir?" Lukath squeaked.

"Question my orders again and I will ascertain if your prime assistant is present." Domna warned.

"Of course," Lukath gulped.

"What have I done?" Dhaka asked with surprising calm. "I have been loyal. I have followed orders."

"I've never said you didn't," Domna riposted. "But your repair schedule delayed us from arriving at Aranthka IX for several additional hours, and that is unacceptable. Lt. Lukath, I'm waiting."

Domna smiled when he heard the sound of a disruptor, and then a heavy thud. Lukath spoke again a few seconds later. "It is done sir. Chief Engineer Dhaka has been executed."

The commander nodded with satisfaction. Dhaka had passed beyond the veil, quietly and without struggle, which fortified Domna's belief that he had made the right decision. He didn't trust someone who wasn't willing to fight to the end. "You've performed your first task as Chief Engineer with promptness and distinction. Make sure that is a standard you maintain." After toggling off the switch, Domna gazed around the bridge, looking for any signs of disapproval for his summary execution of the former chief engineer.

He smirked when he saw that the bridge officers continued with their duties as if nothing had happened. One good thing about living under the million eyes of the Tal Shiar was that it had thickened the Romulan hide. Romulans were almost Vulcan-like in their ability to hide their emotions, cloak their thoughts, or desensitize themselves to the pain of others.



"I won't let anyone deny me my prize!" He declared loudly, to no one and everyone at the same time. "Subcommander Talveth, prepare a shuttle. I will personally lead a landing party to the surface."

"At once commander," Talveth, at her standing console, immediately set to work at her console.

"Once I leave the ship you are in command. I want you to cloak *Invidious* and try to ascertain the motives and loyalties of our unsuspected intruder." He pointed at the screen. "Use whatever force necessary to do so."

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## **USS Cuffe (Main Bridge)**

Lt. Nyota Dryer's attention was torn between the closed doors to the observation lounge, located aft, and the command well where Lt. Hardcastle manned the conn.

Nyota had been avoiding the Flight Control Officer for the entire shift. She could tell by his tense posture that her cold shouldering had upset him, but Dryer didn't know what to do, or how to tell him that she and the captain was an item again.

Only a handful of the present crew knew about their previous relationship, and they were all discrete. That had been helpful when Terrence had first decided to end their dalliances. She hadn't become the laughing stock of the ship, or totally felt like she had a red brand on her forehead.

But it had felt that way all the same. The captain's desire to dissolve their relationship had hurt her deeply, and in her pain and desperation, in her need to feel wanted, she had reached out to Lt. Hardcastle, and he had responded.

In all honesty, she hadn't led him on. She had never demanded a commitment from him, or even insinuated one like she had with the captain. When she needed not to be alone she called Shane, and he had been very nice to her, a thoughtful, caring friend. The problem was he wanted to be more than a friend to her.

But the pilot wasn't who Dryer wanted. On one level she thought herself crazy for not taking up Shane on his offer. In addition to being a kind person, the lieutenant was very handsome. A lithe, but muscular man, with dark spiky hair, equally inky almond shaped eyes, and a smooth pale yellowish complexion.

Nyota just couldn't shake her feelings for Captain Glover. Her gaze wandered from her station back to conference room. The captain was conducting a meeting with the department heads to check the ship's readiness again.

Though she understood Terrence's desire to make sure the crew would be ready for what awaited them, Nyota felt that he had been pushing everyone a bit too hard. What she thought the crew needed was less tension, not more. She hadn't been able to secure some alone time with the captain since last night to voice her concerns unfortunately.

Thinking about Terrence unknotted memories of their time together last night. Nyota didn't catch her smile before Shane did.

He was turned around in the captain's chair, a questioning look on his face. "Care to share the thoughts behind that smile?" He asked.

Dryer's expression immediately turned serious. She made a show of scouring the tactical console display. "Just happy we're still in one piece sir."

Hardcastle pursed his lips, his expression disbelieving, but before he could reply, Ensign Sophia Detmer at Ops said, "Sir, I'm picking up a subspace variance aft of the ship on ship's sensor." Dryer was relieved that Hardcastle, Detmer, and Hajar had seemed to have forgotten the incident a couple nights ago. The bridge operated with a chilled air of detached professionalism.

Hardcastle turned toward the young woman while Dryer attuned her tactical sensors to the Ops console. There was a small, winking ripple on the small inset screen.

"Can you identify it?" Hardcastle walked quickly over to the Ops terminal. He placed a hand firmly against Detmer's headrest.

"No sir," Detmer said, bending down to stare at the readings scrolling down the flat screen.

"Think it's a cloaked vessel Lt. Dryer?" Hardcastle glanced in Dryer's direction. Nyota stared again at the fuzzy image on her console. She shook her head, apprehension tightening her stomach.

"It could be," was the best she could muster.

"Romulan cloaks have been known to radiate a minute subspace variance at warp speed," Detmer said. "If a Romulan cloak is tracking us they would have to be at warp to keep up with Petty Officer Hajar," the woman said with a tension-breaking smile at her roommate.

"Nice one Egghead," The vivacious brunette sitting adjacent to Detmer, turned around enough so that Nyota could see her wink at Lt. Hardcastle, before laughing softly. Dryer was surprised that her face grew warm with an ember of jealousy. She had discouraged Hardcastle's entreaties, so she couldn't quite understand why she felt funny now, especially at such an important time, that another woman was flirting with him. Perhaps it was because Hajar's gesture was as inappropriate as her arm wrapped around Shane's shoulders in the hallway a couple days ago, she told herself, and damn near believed it.

Hardcastle wisely chose not to engage. Instead he tapped his compin. "Captain Glover, please come to bridge."

"Acknowledged," was the curt reply. Seconds later, Glover, bounded through the conference room door, followed by his father and the rest of the senior staff. Dryer reluctantly gave up her position at Tactical to her superior, Lt. Meldin, and the other auxiliary officers did the same.

Some of them went to other work stations on the bridge. Dryer tried to hang around a few seconds to see how Captain Glover would respond to Hardcastle's news. But the anal Meldin would have none of that.

"Lt. Dryer," the Benzite said crisply, "You need to resume your post in Security." She nodded, grinding her teeth.

Walking as slowly as possible to the turbolift, Dryer had one foot placed across the threshold before she heard the klaxon.

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### **IRC K'Met (Main Bridge)**

Tactical Officer Vatia whipped around from her terminal. "Subcommander, the *Cuffe* has dropped out of warp, raised its shields, and powered up its weapon's banks!"

"Full stop," Subcommander Avita leaned forward in her seat as soon as the ship came to a complete stop. "Has the cloak been penetrated?"

The Sensor Officer, a wizened Centurion named Fentane, replied succinctly, "It's possible."

"That's the best you can do?" Avita frowned.

"The cloak is operating within parameters," Fentane remarked, "but it is a common occurrence for the cloak to emit a subspace variance at warp, and we have been overtaxing our engines to keep up with the Federation vessel. Perhaps this assignment should've been tasked to a warbird," the old man added with a snort, "and not this old ranctor."

"Don't think I'm up to the task?" Avita asked sweetly, her eyes colder than space.

"You are more than capable," Fentane said, "and you deserve a better posting than this battle cruiser."

"There'll be promotions all around if we can defeat a Federation starship," Avita said confidently.

"But I thought our orders were not to engage?" Fentane asked. Before Avita answered, Vatia said:

"Federation vessel has turned around, and they have begun an intensive gravitic sweep of the immediate area."

"On screen," Avita said. The curved bow of the *Nebula*-class starship faced them, the module hanging over the main saucer staring at Avita like a great, accursed eye. "Have we been detected?"

“Not yet, but the scans will reach us in less than five minutes,” Vatia replied.

“We have a few seconds to attempt to back out of range,” Fentane suggested.

“Power up the forward weapon arrays,” Avita ignored the recommendation, a predatory smile inching across her face. “Let’s surprise them before they can do the same to us.”

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## CHAPTER NINE

### Aranthka IX

Ousanas Dar couldn't believe his eyes. A young unidentified Vulcanoid woman swam before his blurry vision, whispering words to him in an ancient tongue he hadn't heard spoken since leaving T'Karath after a misguided attempt to attain kolinahr.

He could barely decipher the woman's words, but felt her hands running gingerly across his bare torso. He winced as she patted his side. Dar craned his neck to see the side wound he had received during the melee was now matted with leaves, stuck together by some dark substance that burned slightly, but it was a pleasant, cleansing burn.

"Thank you," he mumbled through cracked lips, repeating the phrase in Old High Vulcan after the woman looked at him in confusion. She nodded and smiled.

"Who?" He started raise up, but she gently held him down by grasping his shoulders.

"Now is not your time, and you will need your rest," she said, her soft dark eyes radiating concern.

"Rest?" Dar asked, before a soul shivering scream robbed him of speech. He sat up quickly, his head immediately growing woozy. The woman eased him back down.

"No," he protested weakly, "What? Who?"

"Ssssh," she cooed. "It's not your time." Her touch was feather-light on his left temple. A soft mental push sent him back into the darkness.

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Shanra didn't know if she would ever stop crying. She wiped away fresh tears as she walked cautiously through the jungle, clutching the disruptor she had used against her own husband in a death grip.

She had been weak. Prison had broken her, the months of confinement, substandard food, the threat of imminent trial and execution. Even worse was the loss of her social standing, and the suspicion that would taint her parents for her 'crimes' against the state. They had gotten to her, and she had made a deal with them.

Assist Senator Telaan in escaping which would damn the popular woman in the public arena, but carry a subcutaneous beacon that could keep the Senator within tracking distance. They had promised her that both she and Narvek would be spared, their positions restored, and her husband would never learn of her role in condemning his mother.

Shanra had tried to assuage her guilt by convincing herself that she hadn't made the deal with the Tal Shiar for her own selfish needs, but because she had a new life to provide for. As a mother she had to do everything possible to ensure her child's health and survival and she couldn't do that in prison or dead. She was certain Telaan would understand if Shanra had been brave enough to confront the woman.

But she hadn't been afraid. Her husband had stood tall, prepared to give his life for her, and what had she done? She had shot him and ran off, leaving him to the twisted appetites of the monsters that had attacked them.

Shanra was disgusted with herself, but she saw no other reason than to press on. She had upheld her part of the bargain. She had activated the beacon, and if the Tal Shiar arrived too late to pick up their quarry, there was nothing she could do about that.

Stepping out of the foliage and onto a verdant ledge overlooking a steep valley, Shanra looked up into the sky. The beacon just beneath her left wrist trilled softly. Seconds later a small dot appeared in the pale blue sky. It quickly grew larger, eventually taking on the spread-winged avian shape of a Romulan shuttlecraft. The small craft landed on the outcropping. Seconds later, a sibilant hissing filled the air, and the side door to the craft opened.

The young woman stepped to the side, lowering her weapon, and clutching her stomach, her baby kicking furiously inside her stomach. Perhaps he's trying to tell me something, Shanra thought, before her attention became riveted to the tall, handsome Romulan striding through the open hatch. His attractiveness was marred only a long, wicked scar across his forehead.

He planted his feet onto the mushy ground as if he were declaring ownership of the planet.

"Commander Sarpan," Shanra bowed clumsily, the pain in her stomach increasing. The man's smile was reassuring.

"Where is Senator Telaan, or the others?" he asked, with concern. A small landing party slowly departed from the shuttle to join their commander.

Shanra pointed in the direction that she had left, her body trembling so much that she couldn't point straight. "The-they-re-," she stammered, "Bugs!" she wailed hysterically. The commander grunted and a burly soldier left his side. He quickly subdued the woman in a strong embrace.

"Mild sedative," he said to a wispy female on his other flank. The woman dug into the black satchel hanging from the padded shoulder of her argent uniform. She pulled out a silver cylindrical object, and approached Shanra slowly. "I want her lucid and calm shortly."

"What's that?" Shanra asked suspiciously, bucking against the soldier's solid grip.

"Just a sedative," the woman said, before placing it against her arm. "You're going to be..."

Shanra was unconscious before the woman finished her sentence.

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### **IRW Mellori (Aranthka System)**

"Withdraw from this system immediately or you will be destroyed," the appealing woman warned. Commander Sarpan tugged on his pointed, gray Vandyke as he stood before the main viewer.

"Unfortunately that is a request I cannot acquiesce to. I have my orders," he said, with a ping of regret at having to remove the winsome Subcommander Talveth from the mortal plane.

"And I have mine," she riposted.

"It appears we have a standoff," Sarpan said. Beyond the range of the viewer, he motioned for his Tactical Officer to bring weapons online. The ship rattled. His brow furrowed and he pursed his lips in displeasure. "It appears you've already made your decision," he said to the woman.

"Minor damage to the primary hull," Lt. Numa informed him. "No casualties."

"You've drawn first blood," the older Tal Shiar agent told his counterpart. "It's only right that I return the favor." He pointed at the tactical console, the deck beneath him shuddering as the forward disruptor batteries cut loose.

"Their shields are holding. Minimal damage," Numa said.

"We are evenly matched," Talveth replied. "I will not let you venture one inch further into this system."

Sarpan was boiling with impatience. He assumed that the *Invidious's* Commanding Officer, Domna, was already at Aranthka IX, and that Talveth's stand was nothing more than a stalling tactic to allow Domna to get to Dar and Teraan first. Every second he wasted sparring, verbally or otherwise with Talveth, was less time for him to obtain absolution.

Despite his burning emotions, the Tal Shiar operative decided to play it cool. He returned to his seat, and regarded Talveth for a few more seconds. "Subcommander, don't you know that this foolish gambit by General Volo to dismantle the Tal Shiar won't work? We are too integral to Romulan society."

"You mean that your tentacles are everywhere," Talveth retorted.

"Our actions have saved the empire countless times," Sarpan said.

"Tell that to the people lost at Tomed, Tarod IX, or in the Omarion Nebula," the young woman shot back. "Or to all the people falsely accused, imprisoned, tortured, and disappeared by the Tal Shiar for decades."

"This is about your father isn't it?" Sarpan asked, his face and voice drawing tight with empathy. He had researched the *Invidious's* crew's profiles

on the voyage to Aranthka IX looking for weak points. From the hesitant look now on Talveth's face, he realized he had found one. "Do you know that it was Chairmanwoman Helanor who personally declassified the files of many of the abuses of the Tal Shiar regime under her predecessor, and that she has been working diligently with the Senate to compensate many of the unfortunate victims of the previous Chairman's excesses?"

Talveth swallowed loudly before replying. "How can money replace the loss of a father, a husband?"

"It can't," Sarpan admitted. "But it's a start. Helanor wants to work with the military, and the purges and loyalty tests have decreased since her ascendance."

"If she truly sought amity with the Imperial Fleet, why did the Tal Shiar build their secret armada?" Talveth asked, her voice dripping with skepticism. "Or launch a preemptive strike at the Dominion without the authorization of the military or the Senate?"

"There was no time for endless debate," Sarpan countered. "We wanted to spare both the Senate and military the responsibility of making the decision. The Fleet was needed to defend our borders if the Dominion chose to strike back, or if the Klingons or Breen sought to exploit the situation. Plus if it went badly, the government would not be held responsible and the Imperial Fleet would still be intact."

Talveth nodded. "That is sensible," she conceded.

Sensing an opening, Sarpan pressed forward. "The Tal Shiar will not quietly wither away, even if the Praetor supports Volo's bid. This could lead to civil war, and that's the last thing we need right now. The Tal Shiar isn't perfect, we've made mistakes, but we've also kept Romulan society from splintering into a morass of greed, ambition, and chaos."

"So has the military," Talveth said.

"Yes, it has. But both the military and the Tal Shiar are needed to check one another, and to ensure that the Senate remains the conduit of the Romulan people," Sarpan said.

"I'll give you that," Talveth conceded again. Sarpan smiled.

"Subcommander, I know that our representative aboard the *Invidious* has likely had a fatal accident. I'm willing to leave the details of his unfortunate end alone if you let me pass. You can't believe that Commander Domna will share any of the spoils of victory with you. He is too vain for that." When Talveth didn't rush to defend her commander, Sarpan knew he had her.

"Go on," Talveth said quietly.

"Disable your warp engine, and allow us to pass. Volo would not suspect you, and you will have earned the favor of the Chairman," Sarpan offered.

"And what about Commander Domna?"



Sarpan shrugged. "Who knows?" He grinned.

Talveth nodded, a hungry smile on her face. "You Tal Shiar are no better than Ferengi. I would never dishonor my father's memory by colluding with you."

Sarpan's grin faltered. He was stunned that he had misread the woman so badly. "But-but I thought..."

"A stalling tactic sir," Talveth said, "While we used the information obtained from your operative, whom I gutted myself, to hack into your access codes."

"Impossible," Sarpan said, looking nervously at Lt. Numa. The stout officer returned his stare with a wild one of his own.

"Commander, the shields are deactivating," he said, a helpless, frustrated expression on his face.

"Get them back," Sarpan yelled. "Get them back!"

"Too late," Talveth said, with obscene satisfaction. "On my mark...fire."

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## **Aranthka IX**

"Grandfather," Lt. Commander So'Dan Leva whispered weakly, the tentacles of an old nightmare holding on to him as he struggled to wake. He came to slowly, dream-memories of flames, spouts of green blood, and leering, demonic, sooty Klingon faces following him into the waking world.

"Are you okay?" It was a female voice, concerned. Matronly. Not unlike his mother Sonora. So'Dan looked around the dimly lit cave to see Senator Telaan, with her son Narvek's head in her lap, on a bench of stone carved out of the rock wall.

"Where are we?" Leva's throat was thick, and his mouth and throat felt as raw and dry at the Vulcan Forge. He slowly got to his feet, his legs wobbling as he made his way over to the stone bench. Telaan scooted over, giving him space to sit down.

So'Dan quickly took stock of his surroundings. A single sconce held a burning torch, which cast flickering light and shadow across the cave. A large boulder blocked their only exit. They were trapped. "What happened?"

"They just brought you back," Telaan said, her voice weary. "You did better than either me or my son. It was quite some time before we came back to our senses." She paused to look down at her quietly mewling son. She stroked his hair. "I'm not sure that Narvek has fully recovered yet, but then again Shanra's inexplicable behavior might be more to blame."

"Recover from what?" Leva asked, confused and frustrated. He hated being confined or not having options.

"You don't remember what they did to you?" The Senator asked. "That thing they used to probe your mind?" The commander shook his head. He caught the hint of a smile on the woman's lips. "Consider yourself lucky then."

Leva wasn't sure he wanted to remember. "Where is Dar? Or T'Prell?" Telaar leaned forward so that the half-Romulan could see her face more clearly.

"Dar's injuries were greater than ours. They separated him quickly while they bandaged the rest of us. T'Prell...they separated her too, even though her injuries were minimal."

"Do you have any idea why?" So'Dan asked with increasing dread.

"They seemed to make a great commotion about that pendant she was wearing," Telaar remarked. "The Vulcan pin...the Kol-Ut-Shan," she added.

"The IDIC," So'Dan said, "Why would they be interested in that?"

"I've got a feeling we're going to find out," Telaar said, "and soon."

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## USS Cuffe

Captain Terrence Glover leaned back in his seat, ignoring the pain shooting through the deep gash in his right arm. "I bet you didn't expect this turn of events," he gloated.

Subcommander Avita, her face a crisscross of scratches, snarled. "We'll never surrender! I'll never yield!"

"This is your final warning," Glover said, glancing in Lt. Meldin's direction.

"Photon torpedoes primed and ready," the Benzite said quietly. Avita cut the communication link, leaving the listing, scorch-marked *Cormorant*-class destroyer filling the *Cuffe*'s main viewer.

The ship was an updated version of the venerable D7-class which had served with distinction in both the Romulan and Klingon militaries in the last century. However, its firepower was no match for a *Nebula*-class starship, and once Avita had lost the element of surprise the chances for victory became nil. But Glover respected the Subcommander for her attempt at the near impossible. His desire to spare Avita and her ship clashed with his greater desire to speed to the Aranthka System.

"Sir, awaiting your orders to fire," Meldin said.

Glover mulled over his options for a few seconds. Both his father and his Exec flanked him. Admiral Glover kindly and Commander Kojo wisely, allowed the captain to reach a decision in his own time. "Mr. Meldin, target the ship's nacelles. Disable it, but leave it intact."

"Are you certain we shouldn't destroy that ship sir?" Commander Kojo piped. "She could send out a distress buoy alerting other warships of our presence here."

"Good point," Glover said. "Mr. Meldin also target their communications array. I want it permanently out of commission. With that out of the way, by the time the engineering crew restores power to the engines, we should be safely back across the Federation border." Kojo frowned with displeasure.

"Good call son," Admiral Glover said. "There's never a need to shed blood unnecessarily."

"Do it," Glover said, covering his eyes seconds later as a blinding flash overwhelmed the main viewer's sensors and slammed into the ship. Klaxons roared and a few more consoles sparked. The acrid odors of coolant leaks and flames filled the bridge once more. Fortunately, Lt. Hardcastle was able to right the ship in a few seconds. Terrence immediately noticed his father struggling to get off the deck. He rushed to help the older man.

"Dad, are you okay?" Glover asked, worried about the blood pouring from the man's broken nose.

"I'm fine," the admiral's words sounded muffled. "This isn't anything to get all worried about. Check on your ship."

"Status!" Glover called out while helping the admiral back to his seat.

"We took the brunt of the explosion pretty hard," Kojo said from her station, her eyes glued to her console. "We've lost starboard shields, and at least four hull fractures have been reported, and one breach on Deck Eleven."

"How many casualties?" He barked.

"That information hasn't been collected yet," Kojo said.

"The other systems, weapons, engines?" Glover asked, looking from the Kriosian to Lt. Meldin.

"Warp engines have been knocked offline, but weapons were unaffected by the blast."

"Damn," Glover said softly. "And I thought that Romulan petaQ had run out of ideas!" He pounded his armrest. "How badly will this set us back?"

Kojo glanced at her console. "Commander Rojas has just informed me that several of his key personnel were injured. He's speculating that the damage and their loss will put us back four to six hours."

"That's too long," Admiral Glover said. "Terrence, perhaps Jasmine can help. She's a brilliant engineer."

Without a word of protest, Glover contacted the woman and ordered her to Engineering immediately. He was annoyed at the tiny spark of joy he felt when the woman answered his hail, her voice clear and strong, with no sign of injury.

“Until we can get warp back on line, I want us underway at maximum impulse,” the captain ordered, ignoring the told-you-so look in his First Officer’s eyes. “That’s the last time I’m going to be merciful on this mission.”  
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## CHAPTER TEN

### Aranthka IX

The *Kestrel* class shuttle screamed over the treetops. Commander Prius Domna left the co-pilot's seat. He walked to the aft section of the shuttle, where Medic Ulleri kept vigil over the dozing Shanra. "Wake her," Domna ordered.

Shanra's eyes fluttered open. "Commander Sarpan," she said sleepily.

"My name is not Sarpan," the commander replied. "And if you wish to live you will assist us in capturing your husband, mother-in-law, and the other traitors."

The young woman grimaced. "I-I can't betray them again," her eyes filled with tears. "I won't."

"Think of the child," Domna pointed at her protruding belly. "Doesn't it deserve a chance to live?"

"Live what kind of life without his father or his family?" Shanra said, her voice stronger now. "How could I even look at him knowing that I had condemned his father?"

"Your choice," Domna pulled his honor blade from the scabbard on his hip. Both Shanra and Ulleri's eyes grew wide. The doctor put herself in front of the blade.

"Sir, I can't allow this," the medic declared. "At the very least we need her alive to help us find the others."

"I've got the shuttle's sensors for that," Domna sniffed, though he didn't advance. "If the prisoner doesn't cooperate I see no reason to allow her to live. She would be too much of a liability and a threat to this mission."

"You're right sir," Ulleri nodded. She glanced back at the cowering Shanra. "For your own sake, help the commander. He'll kill you if you don't."

"Actually I'll kill you both," Domna smiled. "Since you rushed to defend this poor excuse for a citizen, her life is your responsibility now."

"Okay, okay," Shanra wailed. "I'll-I'll tell you what I know. I'll help."

"Excellent," the smile had never left Domna's face.

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### Aranthka IX

T'Prell barely recognized the sound of her own voice. She had never known that such animalistic pain and fury dwelled inside her, even though she was more in tune with her emotions than most Vulcans.

She pulled on her restraints. The Vulcan was bound by tightly corded restraints hanging from the ceiling in the cold, dank room. She had been stripped of her robes, the draft caressing her with an icy finger.

The oldest woman she had ever seen stood patiently before her. The pointed ears and upswept, white eyebrows were a common Vulcanoid feature. The crimson, brown, and black paint covering the woman's face weren't. At least they hadn't been for several millennia. The woman clutched the T'Prell's IDIC pendant in one hand, a polished onyx stone with a glittering green jewel in the other. The pendant had been a gift from Ambassador Spock, a good luck charm for her journey back to the Federation. T'Prell wished she had never laid eyes on it now.

"Tell us more, more about home," the woman said, reaching toward T'Prell with the stone. The V'Shar agent did her best to avoid the older woman's malignant touch.

"Why-why don't you just ask?" She hated how tiny and weak her voice sounded. "Why this?"

"It's not enough to know, we have to see it...again." The jagged stone cut into the flesh of T'Prell's temple again, and a powerful pulse ripped through her brain.

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Lt. Doval had sat by Uhlan Joro's corpse for hours. The young man had succumbed shortly after the last session. His mental training hadn't been sufficient. If she survived this ordeal, she promised herself that she would find his Torture-Resistance instructor and execute them personally.

Sub-Lt. Sovar was huddled in a corner, clutching his knees, his body racked by sobs. Doval feared his mind was gone, but was more afraid that her breaking point was fast approaching.

She had heard stories about enclaves of wild, barbaric Sundered littering the long path from Vulcan to Romulus, but she had never put too much truck in them. Even the histories she had learned in school she had only half-believed. Much of Romulan history had been constructed around the erroneous belief in innate Romulan superiority. But Doval had never quite bought that. If her people were so superior, how come they hadn't defeated the Klingons or the Federation yet? Or been able to strike back at the Borg for their incursion along the Neutral Zone? Why now did the Senate ponder signing a peace agreement with the Dominion instead of standing against them?

Doval was a soldier not because she believed the Empire was superior, nor even because she felt an overwhelming desire to defend the system. She had learned quickly to spout such nonsense to appear like the rest of the

throng, but deep down she knew that the military had been her best option to escape the urban underbelly of the Krocton Segment.

Dying in battle for the Empire would result in a large bereavement payment for her family. But if she died at the hands of savages on this backwater world, she doubted that her death would even get much notice at all, and there would be no way her family could benefit from it. That's the part she detested the most. But she didn't know what to do, and Sovar was no help.

Doval touched Joro's cool cheek, and made a promise to both him and herself that she would try. If she could survive, her after-action report might help increase the boon to Joro's family, and to those of the other felled members of the landing party. It was the least she could do, and something truly worth fighting for.

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"T'Prell, my gods," Dar said as he rushed to catch the woman before she hit the ground. The guards that had brought her to the cell, and pulled back the heavy boulder that blocked it, watched the two prisoners silently.

Dar didn't understand everything, but he knew enough to know that his captors were Vulcans, or better yet, offshoots. He was also certain that their presence on this planet was tied to the Sundering, the great exodus of the proto-Romulans from Vulcan. Many ships were lost along the way and others established colonies, before the majority made it to Romulus. He assumed that these feral creatures, decked in chitin armor, were either one or the other.

T'Prell babbled, drool spilling from the corner of her mouth. Her robes were torn, and crusted with dried green blood. "What did you do to her?" Dar demanded in the ancient Vulcan dialect the woman who had bandaged his injuries had used. The woman had also put back on his tunic Dar realized as soon as he had awakened.

"The Priest-Queen wishes to speak with you," the older of the guards said, the chill cave draft blowing his long, white hair. "She wants to know how you know our tongue," he paused, pointing a pincer-fashioned spear at T'Prell. "Even this one does not, though she carries the sign of the First Ones."

"If you want know something try asking," Dar said gruffly.

"Our healers will attend to that one shortly, come with us." The elder guard motioned with his spear for Dar to step forward. He stood in front of T'Prell but planted his feet.

"I'm not going anywhere", Dar said. "Not until you tell me more." The old guard chuckled, before he toyed with his necklace, which held a large jade green gem inset inside a polished stone. The gem filled with an unholy energy that poured directly into Dar's mind.

He stood helpless, unable to move as the guards grabbed him roughly by both arms and dragged him from the room.

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## **IRW Invidious (Aranthka IX)**

Subcommander Talveth was prudently awaiting her commander. Domna stepped off the shuttle's ramp, with a grim expression on his face. "This will be more difficult than we thought."

Before Talveth could ask why, her attention was drawn to a pregnant woman shackled, and situated between two guards. "Who is she?"

"Shanra, a Tal Shiar operative," Domna said. "We intercepted her comsignal. At first we thought she was one of the members of Murriss's team. Subsequently, she thought I was her contact...an agent named Sarpan." The name brought a smirk to Talveth's face. Domna noticed. "You know him?"

"Yes," she said. "The report has already been downloaded into your personal file."

Domna nodded. "Is it safe to assume that Sarpan was on that warbird that had entered the system?" The Subcommander nodded. "He's been taken care of then?" She nodded again. "Excellent. He's already cost us hours. After Shanra's intel, I didn't dare chance retrieving the prisoners without sufficient soldiers and weapons."

"What's down there that would merit such a response?" Talveth asked. "What happened to Sub-Centurion Murriss and the first landing party?"

"I thought you were a student of history," Domna admonished. "Read the file on Aranthka IX while you are preparing a strike team."

"Commander Domna," a metallic sounding voice piped through the bulkhead communicator in the ceiling.

"What is it Lieutenant Kakel?" He asked, peeved at the interruption.

"Sir, long-range sensors have detected another ship in the Aranthka System, moving at low warp toward Aranthka IX."

"Another warbird?" Domna asked.

"No Commander," there was a pause. "It's a Federation starship."

"Time of arrival?" Domna pressed.

"Five hours sir," Kakel replied.

"More than enough time," the commander concluded. "Thank you Lieutenant."

"What are your orders sir?" Talveth asked excitedly. Her desire to confront the Starfleet ship was transparent.

"I want you to lead the strike team," Domna said, enjoying the woman's deflation. "The Federation starship is mine."

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### USS Cuffe (Approaching Aranthkan System)

"Pedro, how are those engines holding up?" Captain Glover asked as he crossed the threshold into Main Engineering.

Pedro looked up from the master display console he was hunching over. Lt. Mendes stood on the other side. "We're up to Warp Five now. Lt. Mendes here is a godsend. I think I'm in love." The woman couldn't stop herself from smiling.

"How about we get back to the Federation before you start planning the wedding," Glover quipped. "When can we get the engines back to full power?"

"It's a slow process," Commander Rojas said. "I've got Lt. T'Shanir heading up the restoration of the power transfer grid. Lt. Mendes and I are working on the plasma intercooler."

"Well just keep at it," Glover said. "We're going to need all the power we can muster."

"Understood sir," Rojas said. Glover turned to leave, but stopped suddenly.

"Something else on your mind sir?" Rojas asked, a note of concern in his voice.

"I...uh...just wanted to tell Lt. Mendes that I appreciate her assistance," the captain said. Mendes bowed, a full smile flowering on her face.

"You don't have to do that sir, it's just my duty," Mendes said.

"Well, it's a damn fine job nonetheless," Glover said.

"Gees, I liked it better when you two were at war with each other," Rojas groaned.

"This is only a ceasefire," Jasmine said, though there was laughter in her eyes.

"Yeah, a temporary cessation of hostilities until the Romulans are out of the way," Glover couldn't force down his grin. "After that I promise you it will be full on brutality again."

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### Aranthka IX

Two shuttles departed the *Invidious* for the planet's surface this time. Aboard the *Ekhis*, Subcommander Talveth felt like she was drowning in her armormesh outfit. The large, grenade-studded bandolier strapped across her

chest didn't help her respiration problems. But she knew it would be foolish to express her concerns to her subordinates. It would make her look weak, and if she intended to bring back as many survivors as possible they needed to trust her leadership, and whining would erode their confidence.

The *Ekhis* shuddered violently as it hit the atmosphere, a fiery red glow suffusing the cabin. Talveth ground her teeth as her ears popped. An eternity of seconds later and the shuttle had landed in a disruptor-made clearing near the opening to the underground dwelling Domna had surmised was the location where the Aranthkans were holding Senator Telaan and the others. The other shuttle, the *Ngonga* landed beside them. Sub-Centurion Pompil led his men out of the sister shuttle. The security specialist would serve as her second in command during the mission.

After the rest of the soldiers had piled out of the shuttles and began setting up a defensive perimeter, Talveth had ordered the pilots to remain onboard. She wanted the shuttles to cloak, in case the Federation starship somehow got past the *Invidious*. If that happened they would be the last line of defense, and she wanted to maintain the element of surprise.

Before she had the shuttles cloak, she ordered their sensors turned on the ground. She wanted to find confirm Domna's readings of multiple Romulanoid life signs, and also to find an access point underground. Once they had supplied her with the answers she needed, Talveth pulled her disruptor pistol from its holster, and ordered her soldiers to follow her into the bowels of the earth.

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## **USS Cuffe (Main Bridge)**

"Captain I'm picking up another spatial disturbance," Lt. Hardcastle said. Glover leaned forward in his seat.

"What's the nature of the disturbance Mister Hardcastle?"

"It's an intermittent polarized distortion field, 600,000 kilometers fore."

"Almost within firing range," the captain slapped his armrest. "Red alert, raise shields!" After Glover silenced the alarm, he turned to his father. Dr. Nemato had quickly attended to the admiral's broken nose, and Samson had returned to the bridge less than fifteen minutes after the captain had sent him to Sickbay. "Damn, how did they get so close?"

Samson turned toward the auxiliary aft Science station he was now sitting at. He began to speak, but Lt. N'Saba, at the main Science terminal, grabbed the question. The Alshain seemed oblivious to Admiral Glover's scowl. Terrence held in a chuckle. "The long-range sensors are working fine. This portion of space is saturated with magnetic distortions for some reason."

"I don't think it's a coincidence," Operations Officer Bheto said quietly, her antennae twitching nervously. "I think the Romulans are setting a trap."

"I agree," Samson said.

"So do I Captain," Commander Kojo sourly concurred.

"But the *K'Met* didn't have time to send a message," Glover said. "If there are some Rommies out there waiting to ambush us, they couldn't know that we might be able to see through their cloak?"

"Son, don't presume that *Cuffe* is the only Starfleet ship that has detected a Romulan cloak before," Samson chided gently.

Glover grinned sheepishly, his cheeks growing warm with embarrassment. "Of course I'm not assuming anything. Ben has a Romulan cloak on the *Defiant* after all."

"And you can believe that the Romulans have developed countermeasures for that model of cloak to prevent Starfleet from gleaning too much information about that device they loaned us too," Samson concluded with confidence.

"I'm aware of that too Dad," Glover huffed, feeling a little like the situation was getting away from him, and he hated that. "But we don't have a lot of time, and that field appears fairly expansive. I say we drive on. If any Romulans out there want a fight, we'll give it to them."

"You're the captain," Samson said with a grin.

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## **IRW Invidious (Main Bridge)**

The main viewer filled with the disk-shaped bow of the Federation starship. Commander Prius Domna slid to the edge of his perch, his eyes gleaming with a predacious hunger. "I like this Starfleet captain. Burrowing head-long into a certain trap, that's courage."

"Or stupidity," Lt. Kakel, substituting for Talveth, said with scathing disdain. Domna glowered at him. He preferred Talveth's gentle countering of his arguments rather than a rubber stamp. Oblivious to his displeasure, the woman continued. "It's almost Klingon in a way," she laughed harshly.

"Tend to your station lieutenant," Domna icily snapped. The haughtiness evaporated quickly from the woman and she stood woodenly at her post, her eyes riveted to the terminal's read out. "I would like to know who we are facing. Check our Starfleet ship registry."

"It's the *United Starship Cuffe*, NCC 73006, *Nebula*-class," Kakel said seconds later.

"As I suspected, the father turning to his son for this mission," Domna said absently. The Romulan scratched his temple as he tried to recall why

Glover's name was stuck in his craw. Eventually it came to him. "You might've been more astute in your observation than you realized Lt. Kakel. Glover did serve on a Klingon vessel, right before their civil war," Domna said. The Tal Arcani had done extensive surveillance of Klingon captains and commanders to ascertain which might be swayed to join the Duras family.

The handful of Klingon commanders that had participated in the Joint Officer Exchange Program with Starfleet had been targeted for immediate termination. Captain Borte of the *Dorna*, the ship Glover had served on, had unfortunately escaped several of General Movar's traps during the war. But Domna was certain that he wouldn't allow her former subordinate a reprieve. "Move to intercept," Domna ordered.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Aranthka IX

Subcommander Talveth moved cautiously down the careworn stone path. The night-vision goggles she wore made her journey much easier, but she couldn't help but suspect that Aranthkans were waiting around every corner, or in every crevice, to waylay them. She had ordered her soldiers to inspect each open branched-off corridor they encountered. The bloodthirsty reputation of the Aranthkans was well known by many Romulans, elite and common born.

Though the Empire had claimed the Aranthkan system in the great expansionary push before the war with Earth, Aranthka IX, the only habitable planet in the system, had been largely left alone while the other planets had been voraciously mined for minerals.

Several expeditions to Aranthka IX had been lost, until the venerable Commander Chulak was able to return with only a handful of his soldiers to inform the Senate about what was happening on the accursed planet.

His revelation of a lost colony of Sundered had stunned the Romulan citizenry all those years ago, and transfixed almost every generation since. Every few decades the Science Ministry would send an expedition to study the Aranthkans, most never returning. The few that did regaled the Romulan populace with tales of a lost tribe of Sundered that had reverted to a savage state similar to that of prehistoric Vulcan, and had also formed a strange telepathic tie to the large insect species that had dominated the planet before their arrival.

Talveth had never put much faith in such fanciful stories, but her stomach tangled with fear the further she ventured underground, her ears picking up the soft scurrying and scraping inside the walls around them and somewhere in the murk ahead.

She hated not being able to simply beam out her quarries, but Commander Domna's previous reconnaissance had revealed that the Aranthkans' underground layer was laced with kelbonite which precluded transport. Also, the Aranthkans' bio-signs were still too similar to current Romulan and Vulcan signatures. The subcommander wouldn't know what she had until they resolved on the transporter pad, and Talveth preferred to maintain the element of surprise as long as possible.

She knew her grace period had ended as soon as a claw swung around a corner and neatly speared Lt. Pompil. The man barely managed a scream before he was whisked away. "Subcommander!" A Decurion ahead of her

pointed wildly in the direction of where Pompil had been yanked. Dozens of small red eyes gleamed along both sides of the corridor. "They are preparing to attack us! My gods, they are legion!"

Ignoring the hysterical Decurion, Talveth looked behind her, and realized that her rear guard was no longer present. Dozens more red eyes glared at her from behind. We're trapped, she realized, though she wouldn't voice such defeatist observations to her already shaken soldiers.

She still had a sizable contingent of well-armed and armored warriors. Talveth wasn't about to succumb without a fight. She aimed her disruptor at the nearest set of eyes. She then ordered some of the front guard to the rear to cover her. "We'll see how these creatures like the taste of disruptor fire," she said through gritted teeth. "We'll create a wheel of fire and push through to our objective. On my mark, attack!"

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## **Aranthka IX**

The voices wouldn't abate in the Priest-Queen's mind. Each was hungry, clamoring for more. They never thought they would see home again, through her eyes or that of her successors.

But Divine Amonak had been benevolent to them, giving the spirits residing within her a chance to breathe the dry air, and feel the purifying heat of Minshara's fierce sun again. At first the Priest-Queen had thought the hard-brows her servants had brought to her were similar to all the rest. But while she had been preparing to harvest their neural energy to recharge the sacred psionic amulets that kept her people and their worker beasts in her thrall, she had discovered two among the intruders that had touched the sands of the hearth world.

And the souls of her predecessors had gorged on the memories of the smooth brow. It had only been the Priest-Queen's force of will that kept them from draining her completely dry. The Queen had been able to reason with the pack of le-matya to save the smooth-brow, and satiate themselves on the memories of the hard-brow.

The hard-brow hung before her now. Despite his beaten and bruised body, his eyes glowed with a dull defiance. "You'll never take my mind," he said through cracked lips. "I...think I know what you are now." She hadn't first believed it when Sobi informed her First Guard that this one spoke in the old tongue. The colony hadn't encountered a hard-brow in many moons that had could communicate with them, and it had intrigued her immediately. Once Sobi had reported that her brief mental contact with the hard-brow called Dar had revealed that he had trod the sands of their home, the voices within the Priest-Queen had jealously demanded that Sobi be executed for her

impertinence. She took a sip from a stew that should've been the preserve of the Priest-Queen alone, and all of those had come before her and whose katras she held.

The Priest-Queen smiled at Dar's futile defiance while she languished on her chitin-covered throne. "And what are we, Ou-sahn-nus Dar?"

"S'leita," he said with a harsh laugh. The Queen frowned. S'leita was an insect from the old world that had supped on the blood of the unfortunate spreading disease and despair in their wake. They were nothing like the tamed worker beasts that had helped the colony survive after they the first settlers had landed on this world.

"We are nothing like them," she said coldly. "Do they still plague Minshara?"

"No, they were eradicated centuries ago," Dar answered. The Priest-Queen breathed a sigh of relief, and said a silent prayer to Amonak.

"I can't wait to see the changes to our world through your eyes, the eyes of an outsider," she slid off of her throne. Her white-haired First Guard moved quickly to her side, his spear pointed warily at Dar. Bound, there was little the hard-brow could do to resist, and he had the sagacity to realize it. The Priest-Queen's estimation of him increased mightily in comparison to the foolish ferocity of the other hard brows that the colony had consumed over the years.

"If you don't resist, this won't be as painful," she said softly. The Priest-Queen gained little pleasure from causing pain to people that gave her and her predecessors such a gift as a window to the old world. "You've provided a great service, and your memory will be honored among our people," she added as she lifted the stone hanging from her necklace up to Dar's temple.

"That means a lot," Dar mumbled loud enough for the Priest-Queen to hear.

"Thank you," she said, with genuine warmth. "You are quite judicious Ou-sahn-nus Dar. Amonak will surely guide you to Sha Ka Ree." She placed the stone gently against the man's throbbing temple.

"I was being sarcas...." He started to say, before a soul-rattling scream ripped from his lips. The souls within her danced with macabre rhythm.

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## **USS Cuffe (Main Bridge)**

"Get that damn light out of my face!" Captain Glover swatted the penlight away, startling the young nurse. The frazzled, wrinkled face Edoan fell back toward the deck, its pratfall stopped by its conveniently placed third

leg. Glover placed his hands on the rattling deck, and used all his strength to push himself back up into the seat he had been thrown from seconds before. He closed his eyes, willing the spinning to go away, and ignored the crown of throbbing pain encircling his head. "Go help somebody that needs it." He told the medic. The alien swooned in response, the pitching deck not helping his balance in the slightest.

The Edoan already forgotten, Glover glanced down at the cracked armrest before gazing again at the main viewer. *At least that's still working*, he thought, as the screen filled with another of the warbird's greenish discharges. Glover thought about informing to the bridge crew to brace for another assault, but decided against it. The *Invidious* had hit them with enough blistering volleys that they shouldn't expect a respite. And the damn Rommies weren't about to give them one. He covered his eyes as the bridge filled with blinding light. The main viewer exploded, jagged shards stabbing and slicing through unfortunate crewmen.

The captain barely jumped from his seat in time, muscles moving on pure instinct. Using the chair as a makeshift aegis, Glover screamed as a fragment dug into his shoulder. *Shouldn't have opened my big mouth*, he thought again, as he looked up from his seat, reaching awkwardly at the piece, a numbing pain flaring down his arm as he ripped the serrated tripolymer aluminum from his flesh. He ground his teeth to hold back another scream. It wouldn't do for the crew to have their captain wailing like a Ferengi, he thought.

Standing up slowly, he looked to the Tactical station, and saw no one there. He blinked, shifting his eyes as he remembered that auxiliary tactical functions had been rerouted to the aft Mission Ops console after a powerful feedback loop had engulfed Lt. Meldin in flames up to his elbows.

He had called for Lt. Dryer to replace the anguished Benzite, but the woman hadn't responded to his summons. Glover hoped that she was okay, but forced himself not to dwell on the woman's fate. He had a ship to save. Admiral Samson Glover, thin beads of blood crowning his forehead like perspiration, now manned Mission Ops. "Tactical report." Glover barked, more to mask his pain and fear than from any disappointment with the admirable performance of the crew.

"Photon torpedo bays are offline, Torpedo Bay 5 has ruptured, causing a hull breach and irradiating Deck Fifteen. Containment procedures have been implemented." His father's voice was modulated, calm, and completely too sane, Glover surmised. "Fore phaser banks have been exhausted. Aft phasers are still online."

"How can the fore phasers be exhausted?" Glover exclaimed.

"Apparently, the phaser coils hadn't completed recycling when the *Invidious* showed up son."



"Great," the captain huffed, turning slowly from the admiral to the Ops console. Foam covered the ruined, smoky console. Its occupant, face crisscrossed with scars, held a small extinguisher in hand. "Damage report?" He asked. The Romulans had hit them hard and fast. Glover had hoped a series of tachyon sweeps would reveal any lurking warbirds, but the *Invidious*' Commander Domna had anticipated that. Flooding stretches of space with magnetized distortion fields had nullified their cloak detector. Glover had tried to slug it out with the warbird like he had the *Comorant*, but ultimately it had been to no avail. The *D'deridex*-class was larger and more powerful than even the *Galaxy*-class which was the biggest ship or the *Defiant*-class, which was the toughest ship in Starfleet's arsenal. Eventually, the *Cuffe*'s defenses had begun to crumble under the onslaught.

"We're in serious trouble," Lt. Bheto intoned grimly.

"That's your expert assessment?" The Andorian looked mournfully at him, saying nothing. "Take the helm then Lieutenant." Glover quickly gazed over the Flight Control Chair and the junior officer pinned to it, Lt. Hardcastle's head lolling to the side. Bheto followed the commander's gaze, recoiling before silently moving over to helm control. Glover pushed down his gorge and approached the back of the seat with measured steps. Wrapping a hand around the piece sticking out of the back of the seat, ignoring the pain as the aluminum cut into his fingers and the sickening slickness of a dead man's blood, the commander looked again at Bheto. "Okay Amanisha, on the count of three." She nodded, gingerly touching the man's arm. One, two, three." He ripped the shard through the man, out of the back of the seat, while Bheto simultaneously pushed the corpse from the seat. He fell with a muffled thud. "Turn the ship around, use the remaining sensors as best you can to lock on and nail that bastard with whatever aft phasers we've got left."

"Aye captain." He clapped the woman reassuringly, wincing as the blood from his cut hand trailed down her shoulder. The woman ignored it, her face becoming a mask of intensity as she concentrated on bringing the sluggish ship about.

Glover turned from her, staggering as another blast pummeled the ship. "Lateral shielding gone!" Admiral Glover called through the smoke and flames.

"Commander Kojo!" The captain yelled, grabbing the railing to help steady his balance as he stepped out of the command well and approached the auxiliary Engineering station. "Where's our warp power?"

Kojo was hunched over the panel, her fingers flying furiously, forehead beading with sweat from the flames roaring at the console beside her, and from her own frenzied efforts. He cursed, slamming his fists into the console. The Executive Officer looked up at the commander, her dark eyes filled with lightning bolts. "Commander Rojas says they're doing their best down there

just to keep the warp core from breaching, much less getting it back on line." Standing over Kojo, he ordered the woman to activate the comm. to Engineering.

"Lt. Mendes here," a weary voice, almost unrecognizable due to its lack of bite, issued through the comm. speaker.

"This is Captain Glover," Terrence said, wondering for a nanosecond how his voice might sound to Jasmine. "Where's Commander Rojas?"

"He's busy at the moment...attending to a rupture in the trilitium resin storage tanks. Lt. T'Shanir is with him. Right now, I'm all you've got."

"Fine," Glover said, "What's the status of the warp engines?"

"There aren't any," was the sharp reply. "That last fusillade that caused the rupture also disabled the warp core."

"Damn," the captain said, punching an overhead display. "That *D'deridex* has a ton more weaponry than we have. We need to do something to try to even the odds."

"I'm working miracles here to keep the impulse engines running," Mendes said defensively. "Perhaps if you could try not to make the *Cuffe* simulate a punching bag I might be able to do that."

"You're out of line," Samson admonished loudly enough to carry to the speaker.

"Sorry sir," Jasmine said, not identifying which Glover she was referring to.

"Sorry is not good enough. I want you to squeeze every ounce of juice out of the engines that he can!" Captain Glover commanded. A coolant pipe ruptured above Terrence's empty chair, melting the seat into slag. The lights blinked off, and the *Cuffe* groaned as the *Invidious* tore more chunks from its hide. Dim lighting returned seconds later, casting long shadows over the bridge.

"Emergency generators are on line." Lt. N'Saba, now at the Ops console, called out. "Hull breaches on Decks 6-13. Shields down to 25%. Structural integrity is at 9%. Primary life support has failed. Another blast like that and it might tear us apart."

Glover looked at the Alshain and then the remains of the bridge crew, the officers still alive and somewhat lucid fighting injury, grief, and fear to save themselves, but also him, and the dozens of civilians and families onboard.

"Dad, try hailing Commander Domna again." Glover ordered. "Tell the smug bastard we'll surrender." The admiral looked through the smoke seconds later, his face grimmer than usual.

"No response Terrence. Should I try again?"

"No," Glover swiped through the heavy air. "They haven't responded to any of our hails thus far. Why continue to waste what little oxygen we have

left on the bridge.” The captain hung his head trying to clear his mind of the cacophony of wailing and groaning, shield his nostrils from the smell of burnt circuits and flesh.

He had never run from anything or anyone in his life. It was not in his nature, and if it had been his parents would’ve driven it from him. Glover was an adventurer, a warrior who had modeled himself after the intrepid heroes of the Fleet’s yesteryears. Those men and women never run from a fight, they had always devised some brilliant or devious gambit to rescue themselves and preserve the honor of the Fleet.

He wracked his brain, his encyclopedic knowledge of battles past flowing like sheets in his mind, but he could come up with nothing save one option. “Lt. Bheto, get us out of here. Full impulse.”

“What?” croaked Admiral Glover. “Son, we’ve got a mission to complete! We’ve got people down on the planet and we can’t let the Romulans capture them!”

“I’m well aware of that Admiral!” Glover snapped, definitely not in the mood to be challenged or hear other suggestions, even from his father. He knew what he had to do, even if it galled him. Of all times he remembered one of the things Captain Diaz had told him about command, that it was not always about the captain and that the universe didn’t revolve around *them*. He had to think of others, and the well being of his crew was his paramount concern. Glover turned from his father. “Full impulse, any direction away from here. On my mark.” The First Officer grabbed his arm. He glared down at the inappropriate contact, but the woman didn’t draw back her hand.

“The admiral is right,” Kojo spoke up as she stood up from her seat, to look at Glover eye to eye. “We can’t abandon our comrades. What about the promise you made to the crew of the *Lacaille*! It would be dishonorable to retreat now...it would be cowardly!”

“Are you calling me a coward Nandali?” Glover challenged, his face stinging as if he had been physically slapped by the charge. He flicked his arm, breaking the woman’s hold.

“No son,” Samson glowered at the fuming Kriosian, before continuing. “We can’t let the Romulans win that’s all the Commander is saying, and I know you can find a way to best this Commander Domna.”

“It would be foolish to stay and fight a battle you can’t win,” N’Saba added.

“Perhaps for scavengers like the Alshain,” Kojo said, an old bias, which Glover had thought the woman had mastered, boiled to the surface. She rounded on the ship’s resident Alshain sitting several consoles away from her station.

N’Saba chuckled haughtily. “If the Klingons hadn’t interrupted the Exarchate’s reign of your system we wouldn’t even be having this

conversation. In fact you would probably be my servant!" The Kriosian advanced toward the leering canid Science Officer.

"That's enough!" Glover said. "Both of you!" The woman froze, a short, curving Klingon blade tucked inside her left sleeve, was already in her hand. N'Saba snorted loudly before turning back around in his seat. "Now is not the time to fall apart. I need everyone focused on our survival!"

"There's more to life than mere survival," Kojo replied, unable to let it go. Glover forcefully plucked the blade from her grasp. The woman's head snapped around, her lips twitching with anger. He had allowed the woman to carry the dagger because of its Klingon/Kriosian cultural significance. He had never expected Nandali to actually draw it on a fellow crewmember, even one as querulous as N'Saba.

"Perhaps," Glover glared at the fierce warrior. The woman didn't reply, but the tense set of her shoulders, and the fire raging in her gaze told him what she really thought, no matter how his father had tried to clean it up. But he would deal with that later. "Maybe we can find a way to get past the warbird, but not here and not now."

"What are you thinking son?" Admiral Glover asked.

"I'm not sure yet," he gave a rakish smile that plastered over his roiling doubts. "But I need a little time to think about it." He repeated his order, and the *Cuffe* turned around and limped away from the *Invidious*.

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## **IRW Invidious (Main Bridge)**

"Look at him run," Commander Domna sneered with displeasure. "And I would've thought the Klingons had taught Glover a lesson or two about fighting to the bitter end." He sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "I guess a victory is a victory, even if I have to do it from behind the back."

"The Breen way," Kakel crowed, her face flush with battle lust. Domna decided to let the woman's impertinence pass this time. She had performed ably as his second, perhaps even better than Talveth as she had carried out his orders to carve into the Federation starship. *Invidious* had taken damage, especially to its forward shields. Though the Starfleet vessel's weapons batteries weren't as formidable as those of a *D'deridex* warbird, they still packed quite a wallop. The slugfest Captain Glover had unwisely engaged in had actually caused significant damage to the ship's shields, particularly the forward shields, lowering them below twenty percent. However, the aft shields were moderately strong. Domna also had most of his phaser banks and engines at close to half power.

He stabbed his armrest. "Lieutenant Lukath here," came the squeaky reply.

"Full power to engines," Domna said, already relishing the thought of two victories against Starfleet vessels within as many weeks. "Give chase," he ordered. "It's time to finish this."

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## **USS Cuffe (Main Bridge)**

*Okay, so much for Plan A*, Captain Glover gripped the guardrail separating himself from a nasty tumble into the command well as the *Invidious* scored the ship again. His head swam in a river of pain, each explosion reverberating inside his cranium.

"Status?" He called. He squinted through the film of smoky hazy permeating the bridge, his eyes brimming with tears. Normally he would rub them away immediately, unwilling to allow his subordinates to see any hint of weakness, but at the moment he didn't care. All he cared about now was survival.

"Photon torpedoes are offline, all but the aft phasers are functional, but that bank is severely depleted. I recommend a one minute shut down to allow the regeneration of the bank's power couplings." Lt. Meldin, back at Tactical, replied. His return, against Dr. Nemato's recommendation, had been the one bright spot since Glover had chosen to leave the field of battle, the result of which had only amounted to being relentlessly pounded from the aft quarters instead of the front.

"And leave us defenseless?" He looked at the unruffled, bandaged Benzite. The man's placid gaze unsettled him. "Can't we take power from another system?"

"Captain, we've already done that to keep life support and structural integrity systems active. If we go to the well once again, it will overtax the ship's systems." Bheto answered him, her voice high strung with uncanny frustration. The woman pounded the Helm console.

He returned to the auxiliary Engineering console. Commander Kojo's previously spewing anger had been contained behind a steely professionalism. She slid over to allow the captain to look at her terminal's readout. "Where's a nebula when you need one?" Glover gripped as his eyes scanned the panel relaying information from the *Cuffe's* remaining sensors. A large green blip represented the Romulan ship on the small screen's black and gold grid. It was gaining on the *Cuffe's* chevron. The commander pounded a button. "Lt. Mendes," he barked into the open line. "What's the condition of our warp engines?"

His chest tightened as the restored comlink filled with static after another hit from the *Invidious*. Prepared for another dejected response from the engineer, his head snapped back with surprise when Commander Rojas answered. His voice tired, but strong, the chief engineer said. "Warp engines back online." The man paused, obviously waiting for Glover to give the order to initiate the warp drive and speed them away from the *Invidious*.

The captain turned from the console, leaving it on and Rojas and the rest of the crew waiting. He walked down to Flight Control. Tapping Lt. Bheto on the shoulder, he jerked his thumb in the direction of the upper ring. The woman reluctantly slid out of the seat. "What are you doing sir?" The Andorian looked at him askance.

"Something I haven't had a chance to do since my days in Nova Squadron at the Academy." He turned his back toward the open link. Raising his voice, he ordered the engineer, "Full power to warp engines. I'm going to do an *Immelmann Turn*."

"That's pretty standard stuff," Rojas remarked over the comm. "I thought Nova Squadron was the haven of the flyboy elite."

"You didn't let me finish, an *Immelmann Turn* leading into a modified *Kolvoord Starburst*." The captain smiled at the gasps and stunned expressions of his officers. Even the fearless Commander Kojo looked uneasy.

"But sir, the mechanics of navigating a single pilot shuttlecraft for such a maneuver is dangerous enough, but an entire starship? Our structural integrity is overwhelmed as it is. This could rip the duranium off of our skeletal frame," Rojas said.

"We're dead either way," Glover replied. "The Romulans won't accept our retreat or take prisoners, and I'm tired of running."

"I agree." Admiral Glover said with obvious reluctance. His father was sagging against the bulkhead, a fire extinguisher hanging loosely in one hand. Terrence couldn't remember a time when he had seen his father look so tired, not even during his mother's funeral.

"Me too," he heard Jasmine chime in. Glover masked his shock at the vote of confidence coming through the intercom from Lt. Mendes. The woman added, "I don't think we have nothing to lose."

"The Romulans have shifted their shields fore, to deflect our aft phasers. Their aft quarters are lightly protected." Meldin chimed in. "We only have aft weapons, and the phaser array in the upper module." Perhaps the most unique feature of *Nebula*-class ships was the module built on a superstructure above engineering. The captain had reconfigured it to serve as an additional tactical platform for this mission. So far, it hadn't affected the outcome of the battle, but Terrence was hoping to change that.

"I agree," Glover nodded. "Most of our torpedo delivery systems are offline, but we should have enough. Mr. Meldin, I want you to coordinate with

Commander Rojas and Transporter Chief Balk. As soon as we go to warp, I will start the turn. Reaching the dorsal mid-ships of the *Invidious*, I want three photon torpedoes transported to just behind the Romulan vessel."

The Benzite nodded, the corners of his mouth almost turning upward in a smile. "I speculate that you intend to ignite the photon torpedoes with a combination of our upper tactical platform and the warbird's own plasma exhaust."

"You got it."

"It's bold, risky," Commander Rojas said. "But I must admit its brilliant, and doable I think." The captain was further emboldened by the silent nods given to the plan by both Commander Kojo and Lt. N'Saba.

"Let's get it done," Glover said.

"Aye sir." Meldin said, and the remaining bridge officers responded. Glover opened a ship wide channel, or at least where communications had been established. The unfortunate others would have to figure it out. "This is Captain Glover, secure yourselves and any items that might cause injury. Secure all hazardous materials. We might experience an extreme loss of artificial gravity and structural integrity. Glover out."

The captain gestured for Bheto to relieve her replacement at Ops. Terrence ran his fingers along the battered Helm, adjusting himself in the seat. He hadn't steered a starship in far too long, and he looked forward to dusting off his skills. Of course he wished the opportunity was under less dangerous circumstances. But it was all part of the job, Glover guessed, his fingers running over the controls, pulling up navigational schematics, relaying calculations to the *Cuffe's* central computer, preparing the ship for its precipitous climb.

Another console blew up behind him, reminding him that this wasn't a simulation. Glover transmitted his final coordinates, and whispered a prayer. "Warp power. Now!" Instinctively he looked at the screen expecting the comforting morphing of stars into penciled streaks that accompanied a ship's implementation of warp drive. The gutted viewer was another sobering reminder of how perfect he had to be in order to get everyone home. "Everybody hang on!"

Shutting off thought and emotion as best he could, his fingers flew across the console, his mind and body melding with the ship's computer, calculations flying furiously from the depths of his consciousness. Glover imagined he could actually feel the ship as he begun the sharp turn upwards. The captain definitely knew he felt the groaning of struts as the ship rattled under the strain. The bridge lights blinked madly. Sweat ran into his eyes, but he kept his focus. It was almost over, almost...

"Photon torpedoes have been transported." He heard Meldin's voice somewhere in the distance. And suddenly he was behind the ship, passing right below it.

"Aft phasers!" He was sure he bellowed, but his voice felt as distant as Meldin's. "Fire!" Once the ship had completed the turn, Glover ordered the Benzite to unleash a barrage from the ship's upper tactical module. He wished he had a screen to witness their handy work, contenting himself as the *Cuffe* jerked sideways, tumbling frenetically in the grip of the shockwave.

"Did we destroy them?" Glover yelled out as soon as he had righted the ship and his teeth stopped clattering.

"The warbird has not been destroyed. However, it has lost aft shielding," Meldin said, a bit dejected. "Forward shields had already been weakened in the previous exchange. Warp engines and aft weapons are presently offline."

"The ship is moving," Bheto said with alarm, "It's trying to move to face us."

"Where its shields are still holding," Kojo darkly summarized. "And where its weapons batteries are still operational."

"Whatever we have left in our weapons banks transfer it to the tactical platform and pour into the aft quarters of *Invidious* now!" The *Cuffe* trembled as phased energy charged from above the main bridge and speared the warbird. Glover hated that the viewscreen had been destroyed because he would've loved more than anything to see Commander Domna's face at the moment.

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## **IRW Invidious (Main Bridge)**

Commander Prius Domna held his face together with a gnarled, charred hand. He could feel the blood oozing between his fingers, the skin, viscous muscle and tissue underneath slippery. He was in a place far beyond pain.

"Commander Domna," he heard a voice calling him far away.

"Hersilia," he cried softly.

"Who?" A strong grip dragged-pulled him back onto his torn seat. Domna shook his head, the memory of the common woman he had once loved, but abandoned after forcing her to abort their child, slowly receded to the depths of his memory. A scion of the elite, it wasn't his choice whom he could love or marry he had been forced to learn the hard way. Hersilia's 'accidental' pregnancy, which Domna's father had convinced him, had been a



scheme to escape her low station, had hammered the point home almost as ferociously as his ship was being battered now. "What?" Domna said, still caught between dream and reality.

"Our aft shields are gone!" Kakel screeched. Surprisingly, the woman bore little injury, except for a laughably tiny scratch running down the right corner of her mouth. "And our weapons are severely depowered."

"What about forward shields?" Domna asked, his survival instinct cutting through his mental haze.

"Those are still operating," wheezed the Uhlan at Tactical. The man's uniform had a bright green stain in its chest. Domna was amazed, and inspired, by the young man's commitment to duty.

"Then turn this bird around," Domna ordered. "We won't make it easy for them." The Helm Officer had just typed in the new transmitting new coordinates, and the commander could feel the ship turning, and see it on the main viewer shift.

"It's too late!" Kakel said morosely, standing up from her console. Domna could clearly see what had riled the lieutenant's feathers. The tactical platform sitting atop the *Cuffe* like a great eye was turning red with energy build-up. "We're not going to make it."

Domna sought to allay the shrill woman's fears. Talveth would've never displaye such rank pessimism on the bridge. Prius was the product of the finest tactical education the Star Empire could provide. He was superior to any Starfleet captain. He had already proven that with Captain Tsang of the *Lacaille*. Captain Glover was to be commended for his deceptive stroke, but Domna wouldn't be fooled again. His ship was still in better condition, and victory would be his, even if he had to snatch it from the fickle gods that had thrown this slight complication in his way. "It's never over," he said, right before it actually was.

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## **USS Cuffe (Main Bridge)**

"Hmmm," Meldin frowned at his instrument panel.

"I don't like the sound of that Mr. Meldin," Captain Glover left the helm and strode over to the Tactical station. "What's happened?"

"The *Invidious's* structural integrity in the aft section was softer than our sensory data suggested," he said, a sad expression on his face. "Our fire punched through the hull and pierced the ship's quantum singularity engine. The warbird can't be saved."

"And neither can we if we don't get out of here immediately," N'Saba replied. Glover raced back to the helm and typed in coordinates. He sent the

command to engage warp engines seconds before the blast hit, shrouding everything in a black embrace.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### Aranthka IX

A powerful mental anguish interrupted the Priest-Queen's feeding. She staggered, falling back into the arms of her First Guard.

"Holiness," he said with in obvious distress, "are you ill? What did he do to you?"

"Not him," the Queen said dismissively as she pointed at the sagging hard-brow. "Others have dared to violate our sanctum!" she said, shrugging out of the First Guard's grasp. "They are killing my children at this very moment!" She was aghast, each wound and death lacing her own body with pain.

"Impossible," the First Guard roared, "We are Amonak'ai!"

"We are also flesh and blood," the Queen replied wearily. "These desecraters must be stopped before they reach this chamber. The transference is not complete."

"It will be done," the First Guard crossed his arms and pounded his chest in salute. He ordered the Second Guard to remain, but the Queen reversed his order.

"My children all the assistance they can get," she said wearily. "I can handle this one," she said, turning back to Dar while the men dashed away.

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### USS Cuffe

#### (Shuttle Bay One)

One hour since the battle....

"Captain, I should be leading this mission," Commander Kojo said.

"You know that's not going to happen," Glover said, with a definite edge to his voice. He hadn't forgotten the Kriosian's earlier outburst. But even if it that happened, there was no way the captain wasn't going to be on hand for this retrieval. "I want you to proceed back to Federation space. I'm not risking any more lives than absolutely necessary."

"This is a little extreme...even for you," scowled Lt. Commander Rojas, scorch marks covering his forehead and cheeks. Almost everyone aboard had been banged up in the battle or from the shockwave caused by the rupture of *Invidious'* quantum singularity drive. But to a sentient, each of his crew that was able to had delayed dealing with their injuries to attend to their duties. Terrence clapped his old friend on the shoulder.

"Make sure you get this old girl home," he said, choosing to ignore Rojas's criticism. He nodded at Lt. Dryer. The woman, decked out in a tactical vest, with a rifle strapped behind her back, was a model of composure. She was handling Hardcastle's death well. Too well, Glover surmised. He hadn't had any time to talk to her about it, and Dryer didn't particularly look eager to discuss it with him. "Lt. Dryer, load up the Away Team." The Cuffe had suffered tremendous damage after being caught in the wake of the *Invidious*' destruction. Warp power was gone, shields were minimal. The ship was running on auxiliary generators, and was in no condition to fight a cargo ship, much less another *Cormorant*-class destroyer or Warbird.

"Sir," Meldin said. "I must protest. I should be leading the Away Team. I am the Chief Tactical and Security Officer." The captain noticed Lt. Dryer tensing, but to her credit the lieutenant began corralling the Away Team toward the shuttlecraft *Contest*.

"And that's why I need you here," Glover said, pouring grit into his voice. He had already had this conversation with the Benzite, and he didn't like repeating himself. "Commander Kojo will need your Tactical expertise as much as she'll need Pedro's engineering virtuosity."

"I'm flattered," Rojas bowed. "But you've got damn fine an engineer going with you." He nodded at Lt. Mendes, eliciting a smile from the woman.

"I second that," Admiral Glover said. He was standing beside Jasmine. "But we don't have a lot of time to rehash the last conference briefing," the man said with uncharacteristic gruffness.

"You heard the Admiral," Glover said. "Let's bring our people home."

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## **Aranthka IX**

At first the battle had gone more favorably than Talveth had originally feared. The close quarter fighting in the cavern corridors benefited both sides in different ways. The Arankthan claw-spears, lirpas, and ahn-woons, had long reach, but when the Aranthkans packed together, it allowed her landing party's weapons to punch through several with one shot each.

But the numbers were against them. It seemed like two Aranthkans would appear from the ether to take the place of one of their fallen comrades. Talveth screamed out as one of the ahn-woon tails whistled away with a good deal of fabric and skin from the forearm of her gun hand. The disruptor was lost, and the subcommander knew it would be suicidal to reach down for it. She pulled her honor blade instead, and sought the nearest compound eye to jab it into.

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"Can you hear it?" Lt. Doval asked excitedly.

"Huh-hear what?" Sub-Lt. Sovar said.

"Listen," Doval hissed. "There's a terrible commotion right outside!"

Sovar cocked his head, and then uncurled himself from the fetal position he had balled into hours ago. "I...do hear something."

"I knew that Commander Domna would not forsake us," Doval said. "His ego wouldn't allow it." She let slip. Sovar seemed not to have heard the criticism, for which she was grateful. Doval would hate to survive this ordeal merely to be executed once she was back onboard the *Invidious*.

Sovar shuffled over to the boulder trapping them in the cave-cell, and placed his ear against its rough surface. "There is quite a battle going on!" Doval rushed to his side. The rock felt ice-cold against her skin, but she didn't mind. Soon she would be free.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I do hear something," Telaar said after a minute. "But are you certain it's the sound of battle?"

"It could be one of those savages' celebrations," Narvek sullenly replied. "They're probably preparing to eat us." The senator looked at him aghast. Lt. Commander So'Dan Leva glared at him.

"I've been in enough battles to know what they sound like Senator Telaar," he said. "I've got a feeling that things aren't going along the Aranthkans' script, and we need to prepare ourselves for whatever will come next."

\*\*\*\*\*

T'Prell placed her hands against the boulder, hoping it was Samson somewhere on the other end, fighting his way through the horde to save them. The Vulcan couldn't help but chuckle at the mental image of her old acquaintance swinging a phaser rifle at the Amonak'ai. Samson was a scholar, a bureaucrat, not a warrior. Funny enough, it was the warriors, her, Dar, So'Dan Leva, and Narvek, that had been so easily overtaken.

"Whatever's going on out there Sam, I pray you know a regulation that covers it," T'Prell whispered.

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Ousanas Dar smiled. "I guess I won't be the main course after all," he said, pulling on his bindings. Though he was troubled that raucous din of the battle had abated.

The Priest-Queen glared at him. "Don't be so presumptuous," she said. "Amonak'ai have tamed this land, bringing the worker-beasts to heel, and repelling countless invasions from the hard-brows."

Almost on cue, the First Guard entered the room, carrying an unconscious Romulan over his shoulder. He threw the young woman down roughly at the feet of the Priest-Queen.

"She is the leader, and the last one," the First Guard said. The Priest-Queen glanced down at the woman, and then looked back at Dar. A cruel smile split the paint covering her face.

"Time to dine," she said. "But first...get the other captives. We shall celebrate this blessing from Amonak with a mass sacrifice."

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Shuttle Contest Aranthka IX (Sky)

Captain Terrence Glover eased up on the controls as soon as the *Contest* punched through the planet's atmospheric barrier. He glanced out of the front viewport, appreciating the lush, verdant spread of the world's jungles. He glanced over to the adjacent seat.

"Nyota, anything on sensors?" He asked the security specialist.

"No sir," was the laconic reply.

"Care to elaborate?" He asked. Terrence knew the woman was mourning Lt. Hardcastle's death, and he didn't want to push her. However, the captain also wanted as much information as possible to plan his next move. He was certain that Domna had dispatched at least one craft to retrieve Dar and the others, and if he knew where it was they might be able to swoop in and nab their colleagues without engaging in another fire fight.

Dryer glanced at him before responding. Glover was unsettled by the blank look in her eyes. Perhaps he should've taken Meldin instead he wondered. The captain was worried that Dryer might not have her head in the game. But it's too late to ponder that now, Glover told himself. "Sir, sensors aren't detecting any life signs, traces of warp signatures, plasma trails, or any signs of cloaked vessels within scanning perimeters."

"Keep at it," Glover said. He toggled the comlink to the runabout.

"Glover here," the admiral rasped. Terrence smiled.

"That's my line." The captain quipped. Samson grunted. The captain gave a short laugh. "Have your sensors picked up anything Dad?"

"No son," the disappointment in the admiral's voice was palatable, "but we're going to keep trying."

"Same here," Glover said. "Perhaps we can speed up our search if we split up."

"Good idea," Samson replied. "We'll take the western and eastern hemispheres."

"I'll start in the north and work my way south," Terrence said. "We'll crisscross this planet until we find them."

"Uh...sir," Dryer said slowly. He looked at her.

"Yes Lieutenant?"

"I don't think that will be necessary," Nyota said, pointing out of the viewport. A proximity alarm blared, and Glover followed the woman's directive to the undulating patch of air right in front of the shuttle. It resolved

into the hard, avian curves of a Romulan shuttle. "Its weapons are hot!" Dryer yelled.

"Going evasive," Glover shouted. "Hold on!" He jinked the shuttle's controls hard to port, just missing the furious barrage spewing from the shuttle. The shuttle's hold filled with the sounds of grunts and thudding bodies.

"Sir, we've got another Romulan craft decloaking aft," Dryer said.

"Domna's Revenge," Glover said dryly before asking, "Where's the *Zambezi*?"

Despite the admiral's consternation, Glover had insisted that Petty Officer Jean Hajar fly the runabout. Hajar had been a member of Nova Squadron during the time Glover had served as a mentor. After he had taken an assignment aboard the *Cuffe*, his mentees had unfortunately become embroiled in a scandal that cost the lives of one of their teammates. Compounding that tragedy was the cover-up they had engineered to avoid responsibility. Glover couldn't help but feel somehow responsible, even though he hadn't been there when the Squadron had attempted the illegal Kolvoord Starburst in an attempt to graduate with a bang.

Inspite of the condemnation and punishments the Squadron had received he knew that they had been good kids, and Terrence had done what he could to help as many of them cope with their newfound and seemingly permanent pariah status. Hajar had quit Starfleet Academy and returned to civilian life, but Glover had convinced her to enlist and made a spot for her on the *Cuffe*. It was his hope that once Hajar realized that not everyone in the Fleet would treat her harshly that she would return to the Academy and get the officer's billet she deserved.

"*Zambezi* has moved to engage the other shuttle," Dryer reported.

"I hope Dad knows what he's doing," Glover said softly, before taking the *Contest* into a steep drop to avoid another volley.

"Sir?" Dryer asked, "Did you say something?"

"Yeah," Glover licked his dry lips. He angled the *Contest* around on an attack vector. "I think I've seen one too many Romulans today and it's time we do something about it. Weapons free!"

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## **Aranthka IX (Underground)**

So'Dan Leva sprang as soon as the boulder was rolled back. He crashed into the complement of guards, crushing the larynx of the guard he landed on with a swift, stiff fingered jab. The two other guards were on him



immediately. The half Romulan craned his neck, to glare at Narvek. "A little help here please," he grumbled as he struggled with the guards.

The summons jolted Narvek into action. Telaan screamed as the young man ran to assist Leva, tackling one of the guards. The two rolled around on the ground. Leva's foe, a big brute that reminded him of the Klingon marauders that had laid waste to Henaka Colony, his home planet, locked him in a crushing bear hug.

Leva's breath expelled from his body, and his vision was rimmed with blackness as the vise tightened. Marshalling his dwindling strength, the Tactical Officer threw back his head and smashed it into the guard's mouth. Pulling back to review his handiwork, a trail of the man's blood and saliva on his forehead, and the vibration of the collision ringing in his ears, Leva's heart sank when he saw the guard smiling at him with a splintered tooth-bloodied smile. "Frix!" He muttered, with gallows humor. It was one of Nora Laas's favorite swear words. The Bajoran had taught it to him when the two had served at Deep Space Two, along with a lot of various other curse words the veteran Security Officer had picked up on various tours of duty.

He hated the fact that he might not ever see her again. He had recommended her to serve aboard the *Eagle* with him, and the growing realization that he wouldn't be able to continue their friendship and share adventures with the *Eagle's* crew saddened him deeply. The brute's grip grew even tighter, and Leva winced as he felt a couple ribs starting to give way. He closed his eyes, anticipating the pain of the broken bones, when all of a sudden he hit the stone floor.

His eyes fluttered open, and he took in a ragged gasp of air. His chest felt on fire. Telaan was standing over him, marveling at her hand for some strange reason. "Wuh?" So' Dan asked.

"I really didn't think that Vulcan hand thing worked," she said. "Oh well. Mr. Leva, I need you to help Narvek right now!" The third guard had the young Decurion pinned beneath him. The guard raised the curved end of his lirpa high above, ready to cleave Narvek's head. Leva searched the ground around him, picking up the lirpa from the guard that Senator Telaan had just knocked unconscious.

Without thinking, he swung the lirpa, the weighted, clubbed end of the weapon adding to the force he threw behind it. The curved fan blade neatly separated the guard's head from his body, a green fountain gushing out of his neck stump. The large, headless body slumped over as the head hit the closest wall with a wet slap.

Narvek sat up slowly. The young man was covered in blood. Nostrils flaring, he grabbed the lirpa that almost killed him. "Let's go," he said.

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When the door opened, T'Prell was meditating in the center of the room. By the sound of their footfalls, and the smell of their skin and clothing, she knew it was the Amonak'ai. Her heart fluttered with sadness. Whoever had been overcome by the warriors, she prayed again that Samson was not among them.

"You are to come with us," the beefy guard said. She acceded to their wishes without protest.

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Doval's smile faltered when the boulder rolled back to reveal three guards, their faces covered with demonic war painted symbols. They held claw-spears at the ready, and gestured for her and Sovar to exit the cell.

Doval didn't know what they wanted, but she was sure it wasn't going to be pleasant. However, she still held out hope that she could be rescued. She reminded herself that it did her family no good for her not to die in defense of the Empire.

Sovar had a different point of view. He charged the guards, babbling madly. He ran right into their spear tips. The guards dispassionately pulled him off, and let the oozing body sink to the floor. Sovar convulsed for several more seconds before going still. The guards looked on at the dying man, allowing him to issue his final breath for gesturing for Doval to come with them again.

"You're going to pay for that," the Lieutenant promised.

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## **Aranthka IX (Sky)**

"Damn he's good," Petty Officer Jean Hajar said through gritted teeth.

"Watch your language young lady," Admiral Glover admonished, gripping the edge of the console hard as Hajar made an abrupt starboard turn. However, the move wasn't fast enough to avoid getting caught by some of the quiver of blasts released by the shuttle on her tail.

"We've got to do something to shake this guy sir," Hajar said. "I'm running out of moves here!"

"I'm sure you'll think of something," Glover said tightly. The admiral activated the shuttle's aft phaser bank. "Damn, I missed him!"

Hajar glanced with a raised eyebrow at the older man. Glover looked chagrined. "On second thought sir, I might be able to do something. Your son's nifty move on the *Invidious* got me thinking about aerial combat, and I'll think I'll try a Scissors move."

"Forgive me Petty Officer Hajar," Glover said. "But I never cared as much for old Earth aerial combat as my son or you obviously."

"How about I just show you," Hajar said, right before she was jerked forward as the shuttle rattled.

"Direct hit to our port nacelle," Lt. Mendes called out. "We can't take another one like that!"

"Get cracking crewman," Samson ordered.

"All right sir, but I hope you didn't eat a heavy lunch," Hajar quipped. "Let's see if our friend bites."

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## **Aranthka IX (Sky)**

Though Glover should've known better than to take his eyes off the flight controls, the sight on the periphery arrested his attention. "She's going to get a commendation if we get out of this," he remarked as he watched the *Zambezi* execute a perfect Scissors move, zigzagging up and down, causing her pursuer to do the same. Within a few seconds, Hajar had maneuvered above and behind the Romulan shuttle. The runabout's forward phasers cut loose, shearing off one of the shuttle's wings. The Romulan craft tumbled from the sky.

The *Zambezi* quickly swung about. "Captain, mind if we join you?" Hajar asked.

"Not at all Jean," Glover smiled. "The more the merrier. That was some mighty fine flying back there."

"I'm not quite done yet Sir. We've got one more bogie."

"Any suggestions?" The captain coyly asked. The ship rocked as the lone Romulan craft connected again. His eyes misted as the acrid odor of smoke and burnt circuits filled the cabin.

"I'm on it," a member of Dryer's security detachment called.

"Yes sir, ever heard of a Thach Weave?" Hajar asked.

"Hajar, you're breaking my heart here," Glover laughed. "Of course I have. Let's bait and hook this Rommie and call it a day."

The *Zambezi* came alongside the *Contest*. "With two targets, he can't resist sir," Hajar said. "And I think he might a piece of me for downing his buddy."

"He's all yours," Glover said.

"I'll try to draw his attention," The runabout's aft phaser array began to glow with charging power. Glover tracked the shot on sensors as it blasted against the Romulan's shields. The attacking ship began to turn toward the runabout. The runabout poured on the juice, and Glover struggled to keep up with it. The *Contest's* propulsion system had taken much more damage.

Once the two Starfleet craft had gotten an acceptable distance from the chasing Romulan, they turned in toward each other, crossing paths. The Romulan stayed with the *Zambezi*.

Glover was glad about that. He didn't want Jean to have all the fun. She had a lot more practice at this than he did now, the captain thought with a smidgen of regret. Now behind the Romulan shuttle, the captain ordered Dryer to target it and fire.

He transferred power from several systems, including shields, to give the shuttle's phasers more power. After almost a minute of intense fire, and aided by the *Zambezi* which swung around and joined in, the last Romulan shuttle cracked open like a stormbird egg.

The captain excelled after the carcass of the half-vaporized ship was blown to the winds. "I hope we're done fighting for today," he said.

"Not by a long shot," Samson replied grimly.

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## **Aranthka IX (Sacrificial Chamber)**

"Where are the others?" The Priest-Queen asked, the spirits within her boiling with impatience, and burning with hunger. The smooth-brow and two hard-brows sat inside a circle of stones with Dar. Their shackles had been removed, and their loin-clothed bodies sprinkled with the blood of the worker beasts. A phalanx of guards stood watch over them. Behind the circle towered the fierce, beautiful visage of Amonak, carved from the stone wall. She had already sent couriers to their nest-cities to bring the clergy from each enclave to attend the sacrifice.

Though it would be hours before they arrived, she wanted to taste the prisoners one more time before their blood and flesh would satiate Amonak's appetite. She would receive not only the soul, but the totality of these creatures. They would become a part of her, a piece of the creation. It was a great honor. The Priest-Queen was a little jealous in fact. But she was angry that several of the guards hadn't returned with the remaining prisoners.

Even if they resisted, she had little doubt the hard-brows could overcome the Amonak'ai. Besides, the Priest-Queen couldn't conceive of anyone truly defying the opportunity to be gestated by a goddess. It was a small price to pay for the breath Amonak had given them.

"I shall find the others," her First Guard said, after casting a disparaging look at the rest of the shoulders. He started toward the entrance to the chamber, but was thrown back when the club end of a lirpa smashed into his face. One of the hard-brows moved quickly to lock an arm around the First Guard's throat, flipping around the sharp end of the lirpa to stick in her loyal

servants back. The other guards turned quickly to engage them, but the Queen ordered them to desist.

"Let the prisoners go, or I'll kill him," the half-brow said. The Priest-Queen noticed two other hard-brows, the older female and a young, fiery stripling creeping into the entrance. Both held lirpas and stood beside the one that had bested her First Guard.

"If he could be so easily overcome, he's not worthy to be my First," the Priest-Queen said dismissively, "Kill him if you wish."

The half-brow looked at his compatriots, hesitation obvious in his expression. The stripling said, "Do it." The woman said nothing.

"Before he falls to the floor, my guards will be upon you," the Queen said with knowing confidence. "Release him, throw down your weapons, and embrace your destiny. It's the only way."

"The Hells it is," the stripling said. He gored the First Guard, slicing his lirpa into the man's side. The guard grunted, sagging. The hard-brow holding him yelled, "Narvek, what are you doing?"

The hard-brow female that had been the sole survivor from the incursion into their lair, jumped up suddenly. She flew at the Priest-Queen, knocking the woman over. The other guards hesitated, giving the hard-brow time to wrap her fingers around the Queen's neck.

She gasped for air, reaching wildly at the mad hard-brow. The katras she carried had crossed over, and viewed her imminent passing with an unnaturally quiet grace. The Queen wasn't so sanguine. "Drop your weapons, or she dies!" The woman's spittle hit her face.

"Do it," the Priest-Queen wheezed, but she wasn't sure if the guards heard her. The hard-brow relaxed her grip slightly. The Queen's throat was raw, and burning, but she repeated her order. The chamber filled with the clanging of dropped weapons. The voices within were now silent. The Priest-Queen turned her eyes away from Amonak's stone face in shame.

"I know it can't be that easy," Dar said, amazed. He slowly got to his feet, stretching his aching limbs.

"I've learned to never underestimate Romulan tenacity," T'Prell said, following suit.

"Or their thirst for vengeance," Doval said, whipping around on one of the guards that had brought her in. She planted a fist deep into his crotch. The man fell like a stone. The other guards moved toward her, but the Priest-Queen stopped them.

"Leave this chamber," she wheezed, "while you still can." Talveth got off her slowly, keeping her eyes on the wizened woman the whole time.

As soon as the hard-brow had turned, the Priest-Queen struck. She dug her fingers into the unsuspecting woman's temples. Her soul, and those of the others, poured into the hard-brow like a lava flow. She would never be able to

remove the shame of not preparing this feast for Amonak, but the Priest-Queen at least would have her revenge.

Both women staggered, but the Priest-Queen held on long enough to say, "Hail the new Queen," before she passed beyond the veil.

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## **Aranthka IX (Surface)**

"I'm not going to the Federation," Narvek was adamant. He glared at Captain Glover and the other Starfleet officers forming a perimeter around their two vessels. "I won't trade a Romulan jail for a Starfleet one!"

"But son, we can't stay here!" Telaar said. "And we can't go back to Romulus."

"Shanra's out there, somewhere with my child," he said, tears staining his face. "I will find her, and then I'm going to find the people that made her betray us."

"How do you know they made her?" Telaar gently asked. Narvek whipped around on his mother. Captain Glover moved to intervene, but the Vulcan T'Prell placed a hand on his chest.

"How could you say such a thing mother?" Narvek cried. "She loved me, and I loved her! She respected you, often told me how much she wanted to be like you!"

"It could've all been an act," Telaar said, shaking her head wearily. "Either to snake her way into our family for selfish reasons or on behalf of her masters."

"Are you calling my wife a spy?" Narvek's tone was dangerous. Captain Glover tensed, and inched a hand toward the phaser clipped on his belt.

"I'm not sure son," Telaar admitted. "I've navigated the worlds of intrigue for far longer than you. It's taught me to trust very little."

"But you accepted Shanra," Narvek challenged.

"Yes," Telaar. "I did for you. But that was obviously a mistake." Narvek roared, but the anguished shout quickly dissolved into sobs. Telaar gently took her son's head and placed it on her shoulder.

"What about the other Romulan?" Glover turned to T'Prell. "She actually wants to stay here?"

T'Prell looked at Ousanas Dar before answering. "Yes," she said slowly. "She's been possessed, attainted in the most profane manner. It's a complete perversion of fal-tor-pan. Even if we were able to fight our way through a legion of Amonak'ai, I doubt that the Masters at Mount Seleya can expunge the other spirits, and restore the Romulan's. Something like this hasn't happened since the worst days of Vulcan prehistory."

"I guess that answers my question," Glover remarked. "Time to go before any other Romulan vessels show up, or before those Amonak'ai change their minds."

"I take it I am a prisoner then," Doval stepped forward, standing at rigid attention. The captain smirked at her.

"If you say so, or I could just leave you here."

"I would prefer to go with you," Doval said. "To be taken prisoner couldn't be worse than dying on this forsaken planet." Terrence looked at his father, and then Dar and T'Prell. Each of them looked troubled, but kept their thoughts to themselves.

"Have it your way," Glover said. He turned to leave.

"I'm staying behind," Narvek repeated.

"No, son I can't allow that." Telaan cried.

"There's nothing for us anywhere," Narvek replied. "Father is dead. We can't even make a home in the Federation now. And without Shanra or my child, it would be a half-life anyway. I will find a way off this planet, and exact my revenge. That is all I care about now." He turned away from her. She clutched his arm, trying to turn him around, but he shrugged her off. "I'm sorry mother."

"Senator," Dar said gently, prying her fingers from her son's arm. "We have to go."

"I won't leave him! He's all I've got!" Telaan wailed. "I won't go! I'll face whatever fate the gods have for me by my son's side."

Dar looked at Admiral Glover. "You know we could stun them all and just carry them aboard?" The admiral nodded.

"Yes, we could," Samson agreed. "But that wouldn't be too neighborly."

"We just can't let them stay here!" Lt. Dryer thundered. "We lost a lot of people over these Rommies! They don't have a say in the matter if you ask me."

"I'm sorry Nyota, but no one is asking you," Captain Glover snapped. "We've retrieved Agents Dar and T'Prell. I say we call it a day, count our blessings, and get the hell out of Romulan space."

"Agreed," Samson said.

"If I could I would leave you a ship, but I can't risk high-level Starfleet technology falling into the wrong hands," Glover offered.

"I want nothing from you Starfleet!" Narvek said, his back still turned to the group.

"Alright," Glover said, peeved by the young man's disrespectful tone. "Nonetheless I will leave ration packs, water, a communication device, and other equipment to help you survive until help comes."

"And I will contact my friends in the underground as soon as possible," T'Prell offered. Senator Telaan smiled, clasping the Vulcan's hand.

"Thank you T'Prell" she winked. "For everything."

"How-how can you say that?" The Vulcan asked. "I've caused you so much pain."

Telaan shook her head. "We Romulans don't believe in paradise or other utopian fantasies like many in the Federation. We are fully aware of the capriciousness of life, but we strive to master it nonetheless."

"I will remember that the next time I return to Romulan space," T'Prell bowed, before splaying her fingers in a V-shape. "Live long and prosper."

Telaan copied the gesture. "Peace and long life."

"Couldn't think of a better closer myself," Captain Glover quipped.

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## **USS Cuffe (Conference Room)**

This was the only part of the captain's job Glover didn't like he glumly realized as he gave the order. The small gathering watched as the photon torpedo casing carrying Lt. Shane Hardcastle's corpse shot out into space. The request for a space burial had been found in the man's will. Sadly, Shane was an orphan with no siblings. So there wasn't anyone to take the body back to. Though perhaps that should've made Glover feel somewhat better about not having to bear such terrible news, it made the captain feel worse. He couldn't imagine going through life so alone. But Hardcastle had been a chipper sort. Whatever private pain or despair he carried, the Flight Control Officer never shared it with him.

The thought gave Glover pause. He glanced at Lt. Dryer. The lieutenant was pressed against one of the windows, tearings running down her face. Petty Officer Hajar was similarly distraught. Ensign Detmer was holding her in a strong embrace. A heavy hand clamped Glover's shoulder, breaking his dark reverie. He turned around slowly to gaze at his father and T'Prell. The Vulcan looked radiant even in the dark mourning robes she wore. She appeared to have recovered almost fully from her ordeal on Aranthka IX.

"Your eulogy was very moving," T'Prell said, grief evident on her face. Though Samson had told him that T'Prell didn't subscribe to the rigid emotional repression that the majority of Vulcans did, Glover knew it would take him some time not to be unsettled by a Vulcan expressing emotion so freely.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I only said what was in my heart."

"That's always the best thing," Samson nodded. "I've never been prouder of you."

"Yeah," Glover said absently, already thinking about the last four memorial services he would conduct in the coming days. The captain had



already decided to accompany each of his crewmen home and explain to their loved ones in person how heroic their sacrifices had been. He hoped to provide some type of closure and acceptance for the families, though Terrence knew it would take time. It had taken years for him to accept his mother's death.

"I want you to know that I will never forget that some of your crew gave their lives so that I could continue living," T'Prell declared. "I'll do everything in my power to honor their memories."

"I have no doubt of that," Terrence answered after a few seconds. "You've done that time and again for the Federation already. My crewmen all knew the risks and they died with honor and dignity." He declared, his voice as hard as stone. "I only hope the same can be said of me...when my time..."

The Admiral frowned. "Don't talk like that," he admonished.

Glover looked at his father. "You know the clouds are gathering again father. I can feel them. If it's not the Romulans, it'll be the Cardassians, or the Dominion. Something bad's coming." The captain just wished he could see what it was.

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### **USS Cuffe (Detention Center)**

As Lt. Commander Leva entered the detention center he felt a twinge of something that he could only describe as homesickness. A strange feeling for a man who had vowed never to return home again.

Both the *Cuffe* and the *Eagle* were *Nebula*-class vessels, and despite small engineering and design modifications, they were almost replicas. Even the layout of the *Cuffe's* detention center was similar to his own.

He greeted the security officer on duty before he approached the only occupied cell in the brig. Lt. Doval sat on the cell's sole bench, her back to him.

"Lieutenant Doval," he said over the constant hum of the forcefield keeping the woman imprisoned. She turned around slowly. Her expression was morose.

"Yes Commander Leva," she said standing. She stared him squarely in the eye. "If they think you will have more success interrogating me because of our shared blood, tell your superiors they are wrong. I will not betray my oath."

"I didn't come here to ask you to do so," Leva replied.

"Then why are you here?" Doval asked, her voice laden with suspicion.

"I...uh, want you to tell me about ... Romulus," he said.

Doval huffed. "Is this some kind of indirect method of questioning?" She asked, before answering her own question. "Of course you wouldn't tell me if it was."

Leva's face flushed green with frustration. This wasn't going the way he had hoped at all. It had been an ill-conceived idea to begin with, he realized. The children of the Sundered could perhaps never build a bridge over centuries of built up enmity.

"This was a mistake," he growled before turning towards the exit.

"Wait Commander!" Doval called. "Are you really serious?"

"Yes, I have no need to lie to you," he said resuming his spot in front of the cell.

"Like I haven't heard that one before," Doval grimly smiled. "I will tell you about Romulus...but first you must promise to do something for me."

Leva's stomach tightened. Here it comes, he thought. The commander said, "I'm not releasing you."

"My life is over," Doval stoically remarked. "I just want you to send word to my family. They'll be pleased to know that I still draw breath, despite the ignominy my desertion will heap upon them."

"I'm sorry," Leva said, "but I can't make that promise in good faith."

Doval smiled, a knowing gleam in her eyes. "You're a lot more Romulan than you might know or care to admit. I trust your resourcefulness. Deal or not?"

"Deal," Leva replied, with less hesitation than he ever thought possible.

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## **USS Cuffe**

### **Outside the Detention Center...**

Most people would've been startled, but Leva knew enough about Ousanas Dar to be expecting that the older Romulan would be waiting.

"Satisfied Mr. Leva?"

The commander paused, thinking over the conversation he had just had with Doval, the harrowing days spent on Aranthka IX, and before that the nearly constant brushes with death inside the Star Empire as they planned and executed the extraction of Senator Telaan and her family. There had been so much loss, on all sides. But at the same time Doval's recollections had ignited old memories he no longer thought he possessed, of the sights and sounds from another life time that Leva still couldn't quite believe he had lived.

"No Mr. Dar," he replied gravely, "but one day I might be."

"Sounds like progress to me," Dar bowed gracefully before leaving Leva alone with his thoughts again.

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## EPILOGUE

### **Deep Space Five Stardate: 488349.4 Transporter Room One**

The first thing Admiral Glover noticed after he materialized on the pad was Commander Donners's dazzling smile.

"Good to have you home sir," she said, stepping up to the pad. She offered a hand to help the man step down. Despite feeling far more spry than his adjunct gave him credit for, Samson took the proffered hand without complaint.

Donners nodded at Ousanas Dar and T'Prell. But her eyes alighted on Lt. Commander Leva. "Commander Leva, Captain Owens has been clogging our station's comwaves inquiring about your status. Would you please let him know how you're doing," she smiled.

Leva looked at Admiral Glover. "May I be excused sir?" Captain Glover had maintained radio silence after rendezvousing with the *Cuffe* on the edge of Romulan space. The captain hadn't lifted it until they reached DS5.

"Of course," Samson smiled. "And tell Michael that I'll be sending a commendation for you his way. You're a fine officer Mr. Leva."

"I second that," Dar added. "You're a great example of what our people could be, or should be," the older Romulan said. "It was an honor to serve with you once more, and I hope to do so again soon." The half-Romulan's cheeks turned a pale shade of green. He couldn't help but smile.

"Thank you sirs," he curtly bowed before taking his leave.

"Commander Donners, please escort our guests to the Wardroom. The debriefing starts at 0900 hours."

"Not joining us for breakfast?" T'Prell pouted coyly.

"Unfortunately duty calls," Glover sighed. "I have to submit an after-action report to Starfleet Command."

"What about Captain Glover?" T'Prell asked. "He's not you of course, but I'm sure he would be a fine breakfast companion. And there's so much I don't know now about your son Sam. I thought he was on the pad right behind us?"

"Terrence is a little busy at the moment," Admiral Glover said. "Let's just leave it at that."

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### **Deep Space Five (Holosuite One)**

"Dad," Terrence groaned as soon as he materialized on a windswept beach, the gently rolling surf splashing at his feet.

"Pretty close recreation, but not quite Pacifica," Lt. Mendes remarked. "Are all the Glovers so relentless?"

"I think so, yeah," Glover shrugged. He turned around to look at the woman, his voice catching as he stared into her soft, caramel colored-eyes. He took a few seconds to gather his words. "I had nothing to do with this."

"I know," she said. "This took some planning, and thoughtfulness. Not your trademarks."

The captain frowned. "Not impressed by me saving your life a few times huh?"

"Not particularly," Mendes riposted.

"There's just no pleasing you is there?" Terrence threw up his hands.

"So, you are trying to please me? Is that what you call it?"

"No, I call it doing my duty. But I guess nothing is good enough for you!"

"I wouldn't say that," Mendes said more softly. She placed a cautious hand on Glover's shoulder. The man calmed down almost instantly. "You really did show some impressive moves and quick thinking on the mission. I do want to thank you for saving my life, all of our lives really."

"You really mean it?" Glover asked, skeptically.

"Deflate your ego, and take my compliment seriously will you?"

"I'm taking, I'm taking," the captain remarked.

"And you displayed a lot of compassion toward the people under your command. Perhaps there's more to you than I thought."

"Of course there is," Terrence smiled. Jasmine rolled her eyes. "Care to find out?"

"Actually....I am intrigued," she said, with an appraising smile. "Game for a third date?"

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### **Mentarii Prime (Romulan Space)**

"Captain Viredis," General VoloK turned around slowly in his seat, a disruptor cradled in his lap. "Why am I not surprised?"

"Let's dispense with the niceties," Viredis said. "You played the game and you lost. Chairwoman Helanor is itching to speak with you."

"I'll never surrender," VoloK reached for his weapon, but Viredis was quicker. His beam slammed into the older man, knocking him out of his seat and to the floor.

"Disruptors come with stun settings these days old man," Viredis sniffed. He slowly approached the general, expecting some type of trap. Reaching him without incident, he placed a transporter locator on the man's

padded shoulder. "I can promise you though that there will be no stun settings, or mercy where you're going." He flipped open his communicator, and then proceeded to send Volok to the Hells.

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**USS Cuffe  
(Captain's Ready Room)  
Two Days Later...**

"I'm putting a reprimand in your personnel file," Captain Glover said. Standing at parade rest in front of him, Commander Kojo nodded curtly.

"I understand sir, my behavior was uncalled for, and I apologize."

"Damn right it was," Glover sat up in his seat. "And you're going to issue an apology to the entire ship. Before that though, you're going to apologize personally to Lt. N'Saba. I won't accept intolerance on my ship!"

The Kriosian wrinkled her nose. She opened her mouth, but then closed it. "Wise choice," Glover said. "Dismissed." Kojo turned swiftly on and left the ready room.

The captain was surprised, but not terribly so to see Lt. Dryer waiting in the wings. "Permission to enter sir?"

"Granted," Glover gestured for her to come in. "Care for a drink?" She waved away the question. He got up from his seat, and went over to the replicator alcove. While his lemonade was materializing, he gazed at the picture of the *Enterprise NX-01* hanging over the replicator. It had been a gift from Captain Diaz, a big fan of that ship's captain, the legendary Jonathan Archer. Though Glover felt something of an affinity for Kirk, and he admired Garrett as well, he thought most of the *Enterprise* captains were overrated. However, he couldn't help but wonder if Archer would've thought either Diaz or now he measured up.

He sipped the tart beverage before sitting down. "What's on your mind Nyota?"

"I...I want to transfer off the *Cuffe*," she said softly.

"You're joking right?"

"No," she said, her eyes brimming with tears.

"What's wrong?" Glover asked, putting the lemonade to the side. "Are the grief counseling sessions not going well? Perhaps I could arrange some longer term therapy."

"I can't do this anymore. I can't be in limbo. The last time...it should've never happened."

Glover understood. "But I thought we had a good time."

"Is that all I am to you?" Anger slashed across Dryer's face. "A good time?"

"That's not what I meant," the captain frowned.

"Then what did you mean?" Dryer pressed.

"Well...uh...I..." Glover stammered.

"Exactly," Nyota concluded. "I just need some time to myself."

"Are you sure it's what you want to really do?" Glover asked, concerned about her emotional well-being. "At a time like this, having a routine and friends around can help you cope."

"Not when everything onboard the *Cuffe* reminds me of Shane...or you."

"I didn't realize he meant that much to you."

"I didn't either."

Terrence rubbed his face as he contemplated his next move. He cared about Nyota. She was a friend, and a great officer. If Meldin hadn't had more experience and a great record, he would've chosen her as his Security Chief. But it seemed like he had let her down at almost every turn, choosing Meldin over her on a professional level and Jasmine over her personally.

He couldn't deny that if Dryer stayed aboard, especially since he intended to see where things might go with Jasmine, it would be a thorny situation. Plus, he didn't foresee her relationship improving with Meldin anytime soon. Glover came to painful realization that perhaps the best thing, the most compassionate thing he could do was let her go.

"Do you have a list of postings you're interested in?" He asked. "I'll do all I can to get you where you want to be."

**THE END**