

# Star Trek: Lexington Downtime

By David Falkayn

## Part 1: Port of Call

As the mushroom shape of Starbase 31 grew larger in the *Lexington's* main viewer, Commodore Robert Wesley's lips turned up in a smile. A frontier outpost, 31, for now at least, was relatively small as starbases go—it was easily dwarfed, for instance, by its larger sister installation, Starbase 11, which, under the command of Commodore Stone, served as the major fleet logistics and coordination center for this entire region of space, but the new starbase was well placed and would, in the not so distant future, become an important base in its own right. But right now, it represented a safe of port of call—a place where he could mend his ship and his crew could stretch their legs for a bit. Addressing his petite auburn haired helmsman, Wesley quipped, "Ms. Bathory? Can you take us in without a tug?"

"Aye, Sir." The young pixyish Hungarian pilot acknowledged with a smile, her voice implying, *Ask me to do something difficult*, as her nimble fingers expertly flew over the console, steering the majestic *Constitution* class starship smoothly through the cavernous starbase entry and slipping it right to the ship's assigned berth between the diminutive *Kestrel*-class border cutter, *USS Kite* to one side and the sleek, efficient, single nacelle designed *Saladin*-class destroyer *USS Scipio* on the other. "Mooring lines secure, Commodore." Ensign Bathory announced, the thunk sound made by the station's snakelike conduits securing themselves to the outer hull of the stately *Lady Lex* confirming the junior officer's statement.

"Secure all systems." Commodore Robert Wesley ordered, wincing slightly as his gaze fell on the airlock door that had just recently had a makeshift repair job done on it following the ship's recent battle with the Klingon battlecruiser *K'Mar*. "Shoreleave is authorized for all off duty personnel." Getting up from his chair, Wesley addressed the ship's navigator, "Mr. Lawford...the bridge is yours."

"Aye, Sir." Lieutenant, junior grade, Terrence Lawford replied as he took the

center seat.

Entering the turbolift, Wesley gripped the handle, twisting it as he ordered, "Deck Six." As the elevator smoothly began its descent, the commodore once again attempted to process the events of the last few days: his kidnapping—as well as the Klingon captain's—along with some of their crew—from the bridges of their own ships by strange and undoubtedly powerful aliens with unknown motives; their subsequent trek through forbidding terrain where both he and his Klingon counterpart lost crew; their encounter with the obelisk and the aliens that created it; the aliens' experiments on them and on the scientific teams sent by both ships to explore a strange space station that was also created by the aliens; and finally, the sacrifice made by one of his crew as well as one of K'Tan's in order to acquire the aliens' database. The elevator cab now shifting from its previous vertical to a horizontal direction, one question forced itself to the fore of the commodore's mind: was the information found in that database worth the lives of those two young men? The answer to that question would determine whether they had carried out an act of extreme heroism or whether it was simply an example of the foolhardiness of youth. For the sake of Xylvan and Kassan, Wesley hoped for the former, but the commodore was wise enough and experienced enough to know that in the end it would probably be the latter.

*For their sakes...Wesley prayed as the lift doors slid open...I hope it was worth it.*

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Entering Sickbay, the commodore went to each of one of the beds occupied by a casualty from the recent battle. Those that were awake and able to talk, he spent a few moments with, joking or talking or simply listening, before leaving them with a word of encouragement and then moving on to the next, all the way down the line until he spotted Dr. Vincent, wearing a short sleeve blue medical tunic, making his rounds. Walking up to the doctor, Wesley inquired apologetically, "Hope I'm not in the way, Doc..."

"Nope, Commodore...Not at all..." Charles replied with a smile as he pressed a hypospray against an ensign's neck. "Except for Petty Officers Gomez and Phillips, everyone's coming along nicely. I should have most of these layabouts..." He grinned; receiving in return a chorus of good-natured boos from his patients, "...back to work within a day or two."

"What's the problem with Gomez and Phillips?" A concerned Wesley asked as

his eyes drifted to the biobeds where those two young men lay, noting at once that most of their monitor readings were on the low end of the scale.

“They were involved in the fight on the saucer section.” The doctor replied in his usual New England twang, “Besides the cellular damage they suffered from the Klingon disruptors, they were exposed to vacuum.”

“What’s their prognosis?”

Glancing down at his data slate, the Dr. Vincent responded cautiously, “Barring something unusual, they should recover in a few weeks. After that, they’ll be looking at a couple of weeks of limited duty. On the whole...” The doctor opined, “...we got off lucky. It could have been a lot worse”

Shaking his head, Wesley responded grimly, “We paid a high enough price as it was, Doctor.” Turning his attention towards his executive officer lying on the farthest biobed, Robert asked, “How’s Alexei?”

Chuckling, Charles responded, “The Bear’s coming along nicely. I’ve given him a sedative so he’s out right now, but he should be awake in a few hours—come back then and you can talk to him.”

Taking the doctor’s thinly veiled hint, Commodore Wesley’s lips turned up into a small grin, “Ok, Doc. I’ll let you get back to work now. I’ve got an appointment anyway with the Starbase commander. Tell Alexei when he wakes up I’ll be by to see him later.”

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Entering Commodore Jerrik Kiersted’s office, Robert at once noticed his ship in the center of the large transparent aluminum window behind the station commander’s desk. Already workbees and space suited station workers were clambering about the outer hull of his vessel, inspecting the damage done in the recent fight. Reluctantly taking his eyes off *The Lady*, Wesley saw that there were two other officers already seated in chairs in front of the starbase commander’s desk. Rising to their feet as he approached, Commodore Kiersted, holding out his hand, spoke first, his wheat-blond hair and thick accent betraying at once his Scandinavian roots, “Welcome aboard, Robert!” Taking his fellow flag officer’s hand in a firm grip, Kiersted gestured at the two other officers standing before his desk, “Captain DeVeers and Commander Mitchell were just leaving. I know you and Captain DeVeers of the *Scipio* are already acquainted...”

"Captain..." Commodore Wesley smiled as he took the hand of the stunning redheaded skipper, wearing a new issue gold miniskirt with captain's stripes on the sleeves, "It's good to see you again."

"You too, Commodore..." The Scipio's skipper answered back, her lively green eyes twinkling mischievously.

"And this..." Commodore Kiersted interjected, drawing Wesley's attention to the other officer, this one still wearing the old issue gold turtleneck with the two solid stripes on his sleeves indicating his position of captain, but not necessarily his rank, "...is Commander Dennis Mitchell, commanding officer of the border cutter *Kite*."

"Commander." Wesley politely greeted as he shook the hand of the stocky grey-haired officer, receiving in return a phlegmatic, but courteous response.

"Have a seat, Robert." The station commander urged as the pretty raven-haired yeoman who had met him in reception suddenly appeared bearing a tray with a crystal decanter containing a clear liquid and two glasses. Addressing the other two ship commanders in the room, Commodore Kiersted smiled, politely dismissing them, "Marietta...Dennis...we'll talk again later."

Turning to leave the room, Captain DeVees smiled, "We'll get together later, Robert, and you can fill me in on everything that's happened since the last time we met. There's a pretty good bar here..."

"Sounds good, Marietta." Wesley grinned as he once again shook the South African woman's hand. "I look forward to it."

"Commodore." Commander Mitchell remarked politely as he also again took Wesley's hand before turning to leave, "It was a pleasure meeting you."

Smoothly setting the tray and its contents on Kiersted's desk, the yeoman made her exit just as quietly as she had entered. Pouring the contents of the decanter in each of the glasses, Commodore Kiersted offered one to his guest. "Aquavit." Jerrik said as Wesley sipped the smooth anise flavored liquor, his eyebrows raised as the two other ship captain's left the office. "From home." Making himself comfortable in his seat, Kiersted noticed the appraising glance his fellow flag officer was giving the two departing officers, especially the 'Border Dog'. "Mitchell's solid, Bob..." Kiersted declared, the slight wavering in

his voice immediately drawing the commodore's attention, "...and the *Kite's* a good ship with a fine crew. He's not the sort of captain who'll set the galaxy on fire..." Jerrik admitted, "...but he'll get the job done.

"I don't doubt it." Wesley replied, "I've worked with some very good Border Service captains and crews..."

"And some very bad ones..." Kiersted completed, "Yeah...I know. The Border Dogs are a mixed bag. But Mitchell and his people are all right. And as for Marietta..." the Danish commodore grinned.

"Oh...I'm very familiar with the 'Leopard'." Bob chuckled; using the nickname bestowed upon the fiery captain of the *Scipio* after the destroyer she had commanded had single-handedly taken down a much larger and better armed Kzinti light cruiser during the recent border incursions.

Joining his fellow commodore in the good natured laughter, Jerrik added, "Her ship's part of DesRon 20, along with the *Foch* and *Pappenheim*, that'll eventually be based out of here. And *Kite's* part of Border Squadron 10 along with a couple of other *Kestrels* and a buoy tender—the *Evergreen*."

Eyebrows raised in astonishment, Wesley exclaimed as he set down the glass of aquavit in his hand, "Isn't that an old NX?"

"Ja." Kiersted chuckled, "The old *Endeavor*. They ripped out most of her armaments and upped her tractor beam and impulse drives. The old girl's gone through quite the service life: from first line to second line fleet to border cutter to the mothball fleet to buoy tender. Her next stop's the scrap yard." Pausing for a moment as he glanced down at the data slate on his desk, the Danish starbase commander's smile vanished, "I've been reading your mission report, Robert. At least we found out about the *Voltaire*. It's a shame. Commander Villars was a good man...with a good crew."

"So I've heard." Robert affirmed, emphasizing, "A lot of good people died in that nebula."

"That's one of the reasons why we're quarantining it." Commodore Kiersted flatly declared. "No unauthorized travel into that entire region until further notice." Leaning forward in his chair, the Danish commodore's voice took on a more urgent tone, "We need to know more about these aliens. Who are they? Where are they from? How were they able to just snatch you and your people—not to mention those Klingons—from your ships and transport you

to God knows where and then back again to that station of theirs? And most important..." Kiersted paused momentarily as he took another sip from his glass, "...**why** did they do it? What are their goals and agenda? To study us? That appears obvious from your report, but again, **why**? Was it simple curiosity? Or do they have something else in mind like colonization—or conquest. There are just too many unanswered questions."

"I know..." Wesley concurred, "We haven't had any luck deciphering that database we downloaded either. My science officer and her people haven't even been able to get through the first lines."

Sighing, Kiersted remarked glumly, "Brighter minds that we will probably be spending the next several years...if not decades...trying to crack that." The station commander paused as he took a deep breath, "This is all brand new territory out here, Robert, almost all of it unexplored. Who knows what sort of cultures and civilizations are out there just waiting for us to find them? Added to that, we've got the Klingons next door staking a claim to the entire sector and Orion and other pirates, smugglers, con-artists, and anyone else looking to make a quick score or an easy credit."

"A lot like the Old West..." Robert remarked with a grin, "Admiral Komack told me the same thing when I took command of the *Lexington*."

"Welcome to Dodge City." Kiersted quipped, completing the allusion. "Right now, we're just a small frontier outpost, but give it a few years and the traffic here will be as busy as at Starbase 11 or any of the other major fleet hubs—and you know, Bob..." Grinning as he saw the look of boyish enthusiasm on the face of the Danish commodore, Wesley finished his drink as the station commander remarked, "...I wouldn't be anywhere else." As the yeoman ducked her head in the office, Kiersted nodded his head, sighing, "That's Elise warning me that I've got a meeting with the local contractors' guild." Both officers standing up, Jerrik once again shook Wesley's hand, signaling an end to their meeting, "It's good seeing you again, Bob—it's been too long. Tell Virginia I said hello."

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As he walked down the corridors of the brand new starbase, Wesley nodded his head or muttered a polite "Hello" as officers and crew from the starbase as well as from the various ships docked there passed him by on their various errands and rounds. Entering the small commercial section of the station, the commodore saw mostly empty space with only a few shops and stalls

currently open for business, but, he noticed, the shops that were open were bustling with traffic constantly going in and out and lines forming with customers eager to shell out their credits. Walking slowly down the concourse, the commodore took note of the different types of establishments lining it. Chuckling, he saw Ensigns Bathory and Watley already in the clothing shop, the pixie like Aliz laughing merrily as her roommate showed off one outfit after another, until, finally settling on a diaphanous floral print gown, the olive skinned Jennifer ducked into a changing room to try it on.

Acknowledging the shy smile his helmsman gave him, Wesley smiled back, nodding his head in greeting as the high-spirited Jennifer returned, holding the gown out triumphantly in her hands. Laughing at the youthful exuberance of his junior officers, Robert made his way on down the concourse, passing by a restaurant, some small food and curio shops and stalls until coming to what he immediately recognized had to be the local saloon—with what was obviously a casino across the way. Entering the bar, Wesley saw at once that whoever was the proprietor of this establishment knew something about late twentieth century culture as it resembled, more than anything else, the commodore thought, a late 1950's—early 1960's lounge. From the wooden bar complete with stools to the cozy booths with wooden tables and upholstered seats, and even the piped in popular music, the place oozed nostalgia.

Spying one of his officers, Lieutenant Cilla Oudekirk, sitting alone at the bar, a pensive look on her face as she nursed a drink, a worried look overtook Wesley's previously cheerful demeanor. *Not a good sign.* The commodore noted, his frown deepening. *One of my officers drinking alone...* Deciding that it would be a good idea for him to get to know his Dutch communications officer a bit better, Robert began to make his way towards her only to be distracted by hearing his name called out.

"Commodore! Over here!" Turning towards the voice, Wesley immediately recognized Marietta DeVees sitting in a booth opposite Commander Mitchell. "Come join us!" The redheaded captain called out with a wave. Making a mental promise that he would sit down with his communications officer at some point in the very near future, Robert, exhaling and putting on a smile, joined the vivacious captain of the Scipio and her equally taciturn fellow ship captain. "Have a seat, Sir." Captain DeVees encouraged as she scooted over to the wall, making room for the commodore.

"Thank you." Wesley responded with a smile as he joined his fellow ship captains. "I take it this is the local watering hole."

"Yup. Welcome to the Captain's Table—at least that's what we call this booth. The bar's called the *Starlighter*." Marietta quipped as she took a drink from the frosty mug of beer before her. "In case you're wondering..." she continued, gesturing with her full mug at the stocky man behind the bar, "Radek runs a clean house. Now, the joint across the street..." she warned, her eyes focused in the direction of the casino, "...that's another matter entirely. It's owned by Navel Arik, an Orion. Any of your people go in there—tell 'em to watch their credit chits."

"Rigged games?" Wesley asked as he took a sip of his beer, nodding appreciatively at its taste.

Noticing the commodore's reaction to the ale, Marietta smiled, "Good, isn't it? Radek brews it himself. And, to answer your earlier question, no..." She said, shaking her head, her red tresses brushing up against Wesley's cheek, "...nothing so crude and obvious. That would get Commodore Kiersted on him for sure. He employs shills and sharps at his tables—and the house takes a big cut. It's all legal...barely...but still within the rules."

"Thanks for the warning." Wesley responded as he turned his attention to the quiet officer sitting opposite him, his face, for some odd reason, triggering this feeling in Wesley that he should know him from somewhere, but where, the commodore just couldn't quite determine. "So, Commander, how long have you been in command of the *Kite*?"

"Two years, Sir." Mitchell replied tersely as he sipped his beer.

"And where were you stationed previously?" Wesley gently probed, seeking to draw out the taciturn commander seated before him.

"The *Skua*, Sir." The commander answered back, still laconic. Glancing down at his wrist chronometer, Mitchell rose to his feet, "I'm sorry, Commodore...but I have to return to my ship. We're leaving on patrol in twenty four standard hours."

"I understand." Wesley replied as he stood up, offering the commander his hand, "I'm sure we'll meet again and get better acquainted." Resuming his seat as the close-mouthed skipper of the *Kite* left the bar, Robert turned towards the redheaded captain sitting next to him, "So, Marietta...what's his problem?"

Exhaling deeply, the skipper of the *Scipio* explained, "You don't remember,



Bob?"

"Remember what?" Wesley asked, his voice taking on an irritated tone. Taking a draught from his beer, the commodore remarked, "I'll admit, his face seems familiar, but I can't place it..."

Quickly shaking her head, the South African captain refilled her mug from the pitcher in the center of the table before explaining, "Before serving on the *Skua*, Mitchell was posted to Space Station J-2."

"J-2?" Wesley responded with raised eyebrows, "That's in the old Delphic Expanse. Except for Northstar, the Xindi, and one or two other isolated colonies, there's nothing there worth mentioning." Giving his fellow starship captain a probing gaze, the commodore inquired, "What did he do or who did he piss off to get assigned there?"

"He didn't do anything." Marietta replied, "He was at the Battle of Beta Cygni back in '55 during the War..."

"That was a bloody one..." Wesley recollected, "I was still a commander—first officer on the *Independence* at the time." Shaking his head, the commodore exhaled, "We took heavy losses. Captain Drake and half the crew were killed and all the rest of us were injured to one extent or another—my arm was broken and I had a concussion. No one got out of that fight unscathed." Pausing for a moment he asked, "Was Mitchell there?"

"Yeah..." Marietta said softly, "He was on chief engineer on the *Capek*..."

"The *Cowardly Capek*..." Wesley growled, his voice dripping with scorn, "The only starship to break and run during that battle. Do you know what happened when that ship turned tail? It left a gap in our left flank that the Klingons drove right through. One of the reasons why we took the losses we did was because 'Yellow' Walker panicked and pulled his ship out and not one of his senior officers questioned his order to break off—even after he was repeatedly ordered to turn back to the fight. The only reason we won that battle instead of losing was because we got lucky and Fourth Fleet arrived in the nick of time."

"Mitchell got caught up in the fallout afterwards." Captain DeVeers stated softly as a waitress came with a fresh pitcher and two new frosty mugs. Pouring beer into both of the mugs, Marietta continued, "Do remember what happened then?"

"Yeah." Robert replied as the memories came rushing back into his mind, "Walker and his entire senior staff were court-martialed." Finally placing the name with the face, Wesley exclaimed, "Now I remember him! It's been so long and his appearance has changed so much from how I remember him. His hair's grey and he's put on weight and..."

"His face shows the effects of him having to live with what happened back then." Marietta completed. "Well, as I'm sure you know, Walker and his first and second officers were found guilty of cowardice in the face of the enemy, cashiered from the service and sentenced to Tantalus V for ten years each. They should either be out now or will be out soon. Mitchell was acquitted because testimony at the trial proved that he didn't know anything about Walker's actions until well after the fact."

"Right." Wesley recalled, "He was in engineering the entire time..."

"But...he got caught in the fallout along with most of the rest of the officers that were on the *Capek* at the time. He was reassigned to K-2 where he stayed until his transfer to the Border Service in 2260 when he was made executive officer of the *Skua*. Last year, they gave him the Kite." Taking another draught from her beer, she pleaded the border cutter commander's case, "He's not a bad man, Bob. Granted, he's not the most imaginative or original of individuals. He's not big on initiative nor is he the sort of captain I'd trust out on his own in the middle of the big empty, but, as long as he stays within what he knows, he's a competent enough officer. He also runs a clean ship and crew and you know as well as I do that you can't say that about every Border Dog skipper."

His lips turning up into a sad smile as the faces of his long dead comrades flashed before his eyes, Wesley finished his beer, "As far as I'm concerned, Marietta, Commander Mitchell starts off with a clean slate. It's up to him what he makes of it. Now..." The commodore said as he got up out of his seat, "I've got to get back to my ship."

"Yah...me too." Marietta replied as she got up as well. Reaching for her credit chit, Wesley shook his head, providing his to the waitress instead.

"This is on me, Marietta." He smiled as he pressed his thumb on the data slate containing the bill, "The next one's yours."

## **Part 2: Alone in a Crowd**

“Secure from stations. Shoreleave is authorized for off duty personnel.”

On hearing those words from Commodore Wesley, Lieutenant (jg) Cilla Oudekirk removed her earpiece from her ear and placed it in its receptacle where it was immediately cleaned and sanitized for her relief who had already arrived, five minutes ahead of schedule.

“Lieutenant Oudekirk. You are relieved.” A young dark haired man wearing the red of support services stated.

“Ensign Galbraith.” Cilla responded in a flat tone as she got up out of her chair, “I stand relieved.”

“Any plans for your time off?” The young ensign asked as he took the seat just vacated by the willowy blonde.

“Whatever.” Cilla responded abruptly as she made her way off the bridge, desperately trying to reach the turbolift before Lieutenant Lawford could get there.

Unfortunately for the Dutch communications officer, Lawford managed to wedge himself into the lift just as the doors were closing. “Thanks mate!” He grinned affably at the red shirted security specialist who held the door open for him. Turning towards Cilla, Terrence flashed a rakish grin, “So, Cilla, love, wanna go take a tour of the station with me? I hear there’s a casino there?”

“No...I have other plans.” Cilla brusquely answered back, hoping in vain that the abruptness of her reply would convince the young navigator to try his luck elsewhere.

“C’mon, Cil...” Lawford importuned, “You...me...out for a night on the town...what could be better.”

“What could be better?” The lovely blonde countered as the turbolift doors opened and the small group inside the cab stepped out, “Me...in my quarters reading a book. You...locked up in the Starbase brig in the same cell as a horny Nausicaan with bad breath.” Her insult delivered, Cilla strode down the corridor as Terrence looked on shaking his head.

"That woman..." he muttered dejectedly, shaking his head, "...is nastier than a spitting cobra."

"Why do you even bother with her?"

Turning about at the sound of the lyrical voice, Terrence immediately recognized the voluptuous olive-skinned woman standing alongside her petite auburn haired friend who sat next to him at the *Lexington's helm*. "It's all part of the chase." He grinned flirtatiously as his eyes took in the dark haired woman's curves.

"Looks like too much trouble to me." Ensign Jennifer Watley responded with a chuckle as her roommate, rolling her eyes, looked on with wry amusement. "You need to go out with someone who knows how to have fun."

"Know anyone who fits that description?" Terrence asked with a smirk.

"Hmmm...maybe..." Jennifer replied coyly. "Depends on what you've got planned."

"How about popping in on that station casino?" The roguish young navigator tempted.

"Me and Aliz have plans to do some shopping first..." the lovely science officer teased, "You could come with us..."

Laughing, Terrence shook his head, "I'm not much for shopping...why don't I meet you in front of the casino in say...four hours?"

Chuckling, Jennifer playfully mocked, "Chicken. All right. I'll meet you in four in front of the casino." Deliberately brushing up against him as the two women passed on either side of the young English officer, Jennifer called back over her shoulder, "Don't be late!"

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Pausing as she'd turned the corridor, Cilla listened quietly to the flirtatious exchange. Envious at how easily the two new ensigns had fit into life on the *Lexington*, the willowy Dutch woman sighed dejectedly as she once again made her way to her quarters. The door to her room sliding open, Lieutenant Oudekirk entered her small, but adequate living space. "At least I don't have

to put up with a roommate.” Cilla quipped to herself as she stripped off her miniskirt, draping it sloppily over the chair in front of her dresser. “First a sonic shower...” she said as she slipped out of her panties, tossing them carelessly into the open clothes hamper, “...and then, whatever...”

Whatever ended up being Cilla sitting on a barstool in the station bar, a retro lounge called the *Starlighter* by its owner and chief bartender, a stocky native of Centaurus III called Radek. “Hit me with another.” She said, pushing her empty glass forwards.

“Might wanna go easy on those Long Island Iced Teas.” The beefy bartender cautioned, “They got a bad habit of sneaking up on you.”

“Thanks.” Cilla replied tersely, “I’ll remember that.”

“Not much for small talk, are you?” Radek commented as he skillfully mixed the lissome blonde’s drink, “That’s ok by me. It’s a big universe. Plenty of people in it. Of course...” he concluded as he handed the drink to the young lady seated before him, “...it’s hard to meet ‘em if you don’t even smile.” Then, before his customer could utter the sarcastic comment forming on her lips, he was gone, tending to another customer.

Quietly sipping her drink, Cilla, spotting Commodore Wesley entering the bar, tried her best to meld into her seat. *Oh God...she thought as she saw her commanding officer coming towards her...please...PLEASE...Commodore Wesley...don’t come here!* Thankfully, a female voice called out to the Commodore. Sighing audibly in relief as the commodore entered a booth with a woman wearing a gold uniform and captain’s insignia on her sleeve and a man with commander’s rank, Cilla took another, bigger, sip from her glass.

“Your CO?” The bartender asked, smiling as the young woman seated at his bar nodded her head rapidly. “Doesn’t look like a bad sort.” Radek chuckled jerking his head at the booth where Wesley and the other two officers were sitting, the commodore laughing at a joke that the woman seated next to him had just told.

“He’s not...I guess...” Cilla replied, flashing a quick, shy smile.

“See...that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Radek jibed in a gently teasing voice. “You know, you’ve got a pretty smile when you want to show it.” Seeing his customer’s grin vanishing, to be replaced by a dark look, the bartender bluntly declared, “Look...I’m not trying to pick you up or anything like that.

You see this place?" He said, sweeping his arm around to take in the entire bar, "This is my lady...and believe me, it keeps me busy enough. I don't need the headaches of getting involved in a romance as well as trying to keep this place up. So don't worry about me putting the moves on you." Pushing a basket full of pretzels before his willowy blonde customer, the bartender turned away, greeting another patron who had just entered his establishment.

Watching as she saw Commodore Wesley leave the bar in the company of the other two officers and feeling both ashamed and angry at herself for assuming the worst in the kindly bar owner, Cilla grasped one of the small hard pretzels with her fingers, studying intently for several moments, so lost was she in her thoughts that at first she didn't hear the voice addressing her.

"Hey? I said, Hey!"

"Huh? What?" Cilla responded as she turned suddenly towards the source of the voice—a man approximately her age, with brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard and wearing a rather stylish brown suit. "What do you want?"

Hopping up on the seat next to the attractive communications officer, the man flashed a grin that, while appearing friendly at first sight, soon struck Cilla as actually being faintly predatory. "Hi. My name's Andre. Andre Devore. And you are..."

"Not interested." Cilla immediately answered, quickly turning her head away from the man sitting next to her as she popped the pretzel into her mouth.

"Hey...don't you know it's rude to turn away from someone when they're talking to you?" The younger man persisted, placing his hand firmly on Cilla's arm as his steely, cold eyes bored into hers. Flashing a smile that belied the intensity of his gaze, he quipped in a voice, that just like his smile, while seeming affable, sent chills down the communications officer's spine, "I promise you, you will be interested once you get to know me."

"I don't want to know you." Cilla answered back, her Dutch accented voice carrying a definite frosty tone. "Now, take your hand off me and leave me alone!"

"No." The young masher grinned, "Not until you let me buy you a drink."

"All right." Cilla growled, "If you won't leave—I will." Getting up out of her

seat, Cilla tried to pull her arm free of the man's grasp only to find that he wouldn't let go.

"Hey...I didn't say you could leave." The persistent suitor declared as he tried to pull Cilla back on to her stool. "You're not going anywhere until you have a drink—on me."

Flashing a cold smile, Cilla said as she picked up her half full Long Island Iced Tea, "On you? Are you sure?"

Nodding his head, Andre flashed a smug grin, "On me. Now...sit down."

"All right..." Cilla replied as she took her seat, "If the drink's on you..."

Smiling, Andre oblivious to Cilla's movements as she raised her glass higher, declared in a triumphant tone, "That's better," just before Cilla poured the contents of her drink on the top of the obnoxious boor's head, much to the laughter of the other patrons in the bar.

Sputtering angrily as the contents of Cilla's drink drained down his face and hair and on to and in his expensive Andorian silk shirt and leather suit, the caddish Andre, squeezing Cilla's wrist so tight that she winced, growled, "You little bitch. You don't have any idea who you're messing with. No one does anything like that to Andre Devore and just walks away. You're going to pay...one way or another..."

Watching out of the corner of his eye as the scene at his bar played out, Radek quietly slipping around the bar, moved quickly behind where the young man sat. Grabbing the young oaf by his collar, the bartender quickly snatched him up out of his seat as he grasped the arm that held Cilla's wrist in a vise-like grip. "Let the lady's arm go, Devore." The bartender ordered, his voice a low rumble, "Right now. Or I'll break it."

"All right...All right..." The young man answered back, immediately releasing Cilla.

Releasing his grip on the young man's shirt collar, Radek quickly yanked Devore's arm behind his back, causing the would-be tough to wince in pain. Pushing him to the bar's threshold, the bartender whispered menacingly into the tough's ear, "I told you what would happen to you last time. From now on, you're perma-banned from my bar. I don't care who your old man is or what he can do. This is my bar and my rules—stay out or next time you'll be

looking down Matilda's business end—you got me?" Taking Andre's quick nod of the head as understanding, Radek shoved the cad roughly on to the concourse with such force that the fool stumbled all the way down to the deck. Dusting off his hands, the bartender returned to his position behind the bar. Mixing a fresh drink for the still red faced communications officer, the *Starlighter's* owner grinned affably, "Here...on the house."

"Thank you." Cilla stammered and then, remembering their last conversation, she apologized, "I'm sorry...I shouldn't have..."

"Don't worry about it." The bartender replied affably, smiling at the lovely blonde. "I run a clean place here where people can get together and have a good time—or just sit by themselves and mope—if that's what they want to do. It don't matter none to me—as long as no one's doing anything to anyone else that they don't want done to 'em." His face taking on an earnest demeanor, Radek advised, "If you're ever in here and some jerk's giving you a hard time, you just give Uncle Radek here the high sign and I'll boot that jackass out so fast it'll make your head spin. We got a deal?"

"Yeah." Cilla smiled back as she sipped her drink. Noticing a painting of a *Valley Forge* class cruiser hanging on the back of the bar's wall, Lieutenant Oudekirk pointed, asking, "What's her name?"

"The *Rattlesnake*," Radek answered back with an affectionate smile. "I was Chief of the Boat on the old girl until I retired a few years ago. Took my life savings and..." the burly former chief said, choking up just a bit, "...the credits from a collection made by Cap'n Duncan and the rest of the officers and crew and sunk it all into this bar."

"What made you want to come all the way out here?" Cilla asked, her curiosity beginning to overcome her shyness as she smiled at the bartender who had just rescued her.

Shrugging his shoulders, the former chief replied, "Because everything's new here and..." he grinned, pointing at a large glass covered display case on the wall which, at the moment, held only three ship patches: one each from his old ship, the *Scipio*, and the *Kite*, "...I want to fill that case over there up."

"Well..." Cilla smiled, "I can help you out a little there. Tell you what; I'll bring you one from the *Lexington* tomorrow."

"Thanks!" Radek smiled broadly, a wide, toothy grin, "My first Connie." His



smile vanishing to be replaced by a look of almost fatherly concern, the former chief said in a low voice, making sure that no one but her could hear his words, "Look...I promise, this'll be the last time I say anything about this. It looks to me like someone really did a number on you once. Don't worry, I'm not gonna push it and I'm not gonna pry into your business. I just want you to know that if you ever need an ear to bend..."

"Thanks..." Cilla replied, her head drooping momentarily as she choked back a sob. Getting up from her seat, she flashed a sad smile, "Maybe one day..."

"I'll be here when you're ready." Radek answered back as he wiped off the bar, smiling warmly as the young Dutch woman who reminded him so much of his own dearly departed daughter whom he had lost so long ago walked out of his establishment.

Another figure was also watching as Cilla made her way down the concourse now crowded with Starfleet personnel from not just the station, but also the three starships currently docked there. Realizing that there were too many people for him to make his move now, Andre Devore stared malevolently as the young Dutch officer walked down the corridor away from him. Leering at her retreating form, the dissipated youth muttered, "Don't worry, babe. We'll meet again."

### **Part 3: Redshirt's Elegy**

"Hello, Talana." Dr. Charles Vincent greeted as the lovely blue-skinned science officer entered his sickbay, "If you're wondering whether Alexei's awake or not..." The *Lexington's* CMO declared, "...the answer is yes." Seeing the broad smile on the Andorian woman's face, Charles grinned broadly, "You can talk to him..." holding up a finger, the New England born doctor admonished, "...but only for a little while."

"Thanks, Doc." Talana smiled back as she approached the biobed containing the Russian executive officer, "I won't be long." Taking the burly XO's hand as the doctor discreetly made his exit, Talana flashed a sad smile as she looked down on the still groggy patient. "You never know when to stay down, do you, Alexei?" She chuckled, her laughter containing just the slightest note of anxiety within it.

"Heh..." The Bear grunted from his bed, frowning. "Damned *Vybljadok* Klingon caught me like I was a green cadet."

"That's not the way I hear it." Talana answered back, her problems momentarily forgotten as she gratefully took the chair a thoughtful med tech had provided her before scooting off. "The Commodore doesn't think that either seeing as he's putting you in for a Bronze Star." Chuckling at the surprised expression on the burly executive officer's face, the lovely Andorian continued to speak, "From what I was told that Klingon was a lot bigger than you and was supposed to be one of the best warriors on that ship and you were ready to take him and his friends on alone. By doing what you did, you held him off long enough for Mtolu and his people to knock him and the other Klingons out. Ask me..." The lovely science officer concluded, "...you did a damned good job and you should be proud of yourself—I know I am."

His grunt turning into an embarrassed chuckle, Alexei replied, "If I'd done my job right, that Klingon would be lying in this bed and not me. Still..." his laughter fading away, he looked up into the Andorian woman's eyes, gazing deeply into them, "...thank you." Several moments of silence passed as the two officers enjoyed a communal silence until the Russian first officer grunted, "I hear your command was also eventful."

Her smile disappearing, Talana replied in a somber voice, her antennae drooping, "Too eventful. Xylvan and Sanchez...two of Mtolu's new

ensigns...they..."

"I know." Alexei interrupted, his rumbling voice now a comforting sound as he placed his hand over hers, easily covering her slender and gracile digits with his larger and thicker paw. "It's never easy to lose someone under your command—especially someone so young."

"Sanchez was with Lyssan's team..." Talana explained, referring to the Klingon science officer from the *K'Mar* with whom Talana had shared command of the mission. "Her death was so sudden...so brutal...that I can't even begin to comprehend it. And as for Xylvan..." The beautiful Andorian lamented as she daubed her eyes, "He might have done it all for nothing." Shaking her head, the science officer explained, "All we've gotten from that database is a mix of pictographs, images, ideographs and glyphs. We can't even begin to make any sense out of it."

"You can't make any sense out of it—now." Alexei corrected as he struggled up to a sitting position on the bed. "You're afraid that Ensign Xylvan died for no reason..." The Russian executive officer declared, his eyes boring straight into the Andorian's, "I won't lie to you, Lieutenant Commander, he might have. But it was his choice—his decision. You cannot blame yourself for what he did."

"But he was under my command...my responsibility..." Talana protested, "I shouldn't have let him catch me by surprise..."

"No, you shouldn't have." Alexei bluntly responded and then added in a more compassionate voice as he saw the crestfallen expression on the Andorian's face, "But it was a mistake easily made. Next time, you'll know better."

"You don't sugarcoat anything, do you, Alexei?" Talana remarked, her eyes moist with tears.

"Nyet." The Bear replied with a shrug. "Why? Did you expect me to? Is that why you came to see me? For absolution?"

"No." Talana answered back with more than a faint note of harshness in her voice as her antennae pointed towards the *Lexington's* executive officer, "I know better than to do that."

"Good." The big Russian grunted, ignoring the blue-skinned woman's anger, "Because you won't get any from me." Pausing for a moment, Commander

Kuznetsov regarded the tormented woman seated next to him. His stern expression now softening, Alexei added, his voice softening ever so slightly, "Because I don't think that's what you really want. I cannot give you assurances, Lieutenant Commander, that the information gained will be worth the sacrifice of that young Vulcan's life. The future will decide whether Ensign Xylvan is to be regarded as hero or not." His eyes once again boring into hers, Alexei continued, "If a hero, he'll be remembered by many. But..." the Russian admonished, his voice taking on a grim tone, "...if not...if the future decides that he was a fool, then few—if any—will remember him. If you wish to honor him, Talana..." Alexei said as he grasped her hand in his, squeezing it with surprising gentleness, "...then remember him when the rest of the universe forgets."

Holding back her tears as she listened to the burly first officer's words, Talana choked back a sob, "Thanks, Alexei. I mean it."

"You're welcome." The Bear smiled back. His grin vanishing as the Andorian science officer rose from her seat, Alexei added, "You might like to know, Lieutenant Commander, that Lieutenant Mtolo and his people will be holding a private memorial for Ensign Xylvan and the other security personnel who died before the Commodore holds the main service. I don't think the redshirts will mind if you attended."

"I'll think about it, Alexei..." Talana replied as she took a tissue to her eyes. Turning away, she said in a soft voice, "Thanks again."

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Entering the *Lexington's* chapel, Talana almost gasped as she took in the crowded meeting room. With every seat in the chapel taken, men and women stood against the walls. Her eyes scanning the room, the blue-skinned science officer easily spotted the two men—one wearing a gold shirt and the other blue amongst the sea of red—standing against the back corner wall on the left. Making her way towards the two men, Talana at once recognized that the two men were Commodore Wesley and Dr. Vincent.

"Ms. Zha'Thara..." The commodore greeted with a single nod of his head.

"Talana..." Charles then said, offering his greetings. "Glad you could make it."

Before Talana could reply, Lieutenant Mtolo took the stage, standing behind the podium; the ebony-skinned Zulu security chief cleared his voice before

speaking in a ringing tone, "We are gathered here today to bear witness to the bravery and courage of our fallen comrades. This red shirt we wear..." He proclaimed, placing his hand over his chest, "...means many things to me. It means courage. The courage to stand against hopeless odds. The courage to step first into the unknown. The courage to protect not just those we love most, but also those we might not ever know, and even those who might hate and despise us." Pausing a moment for emphasis, he took a breath and then continued, "It means sacrifice. The willingness to sacrifice our blood...our flesh...our lives—knowing that in doing so no one might ever remember our names. We give of ourselves willingly...without complaint...without regret. Like the Spartans of old who stood at Thermopylae, we do what we do because it is our duty. And, like the Spartans, we wear red so that none may see us bleed. We are part of an unbroken tradition of service and we take pride in that. Our friends that we are honoring here today took pride in that. That is why we honor them." Pausing for just a moment to take a breath, Lieutenant Mtolo asked for the assembly to stand, "A moment of silence please..." he requested, "...to honor the fallen." He then called out the names of the fallen, beginning with those who died in the battle on the saucer section before calling out the last names, "...Crewman Malik...Sanchez...Ensign Xylvan." Motioning for the mourners to be seated once again, the Zulu security chief spoke, "Any here who wish to share their thoughts about their fallen friends may now do so."

Slowly, one at a time, people stood up, walked up on the stage and expressed their feelings about one or another of their lost comrades until, Talana, seeing that no one had gotten up to speak for the fallen Vulcan under her command, raised her hand. Receiving a nod of affirmation from both Commodore Wesley and Lieutenant Mtolo, the Andorian science officer slowly made her way to the stage. Taking her place behind the podium, she spoke in an initially halting, stammering voice, gaining more confidence as she continued to speak, "I did not know Ensign Xylvan before he accompanied us on his last mission. All I knew about him was that he was recommended because he had a background in the sciences. I do know what he did was the most altruistic act I have ever witnessed. I don't know what the future will bring...but I do promise this: I will always remember him and remember what he did for us all." Choking back her sobs, the blue-skinned Andorian woman walked off the stage and back to where the commodore and Dr. Vincent stood.

Taking the slender science officer in his arms, Charles hugged her close, "You did good, Talana." He said in his New England accent, "I'm sure Ensign Xylvan appreciated your words."

Returning the balding doctors hug, Talana said through her sniffles, "Thanks." Breaking from his embrace, the science officer, her eyes taking on renewed purpose, declared, "I have to go now. I want to get with my people and the science staff at the Starbase and see if we can get any further on that database before we ship out. Ensign Xylvan and the others deserve a fitting memorial"

Nodding his head, Commodore Wesley acknowledged in a fatherly voice, "Carry on, Ms. Zha'Thara. I can't think of a better way to honor their sacrifice."

## **Part 4: Loose Ends**

Returning to his quarters, Commodore Wesley ordered as he pulled his shirt over his head, "Computer...any messages since I last checked?"

"One." The feminized mechanical voice responded, "From Virginia Wesley received 1100 hours."

"Playback, please." The Commodore instructed as he slipped into his bathrobe.

*"Hello, Robert..."* As the image of his wife appeared on the computer monitor, Wesley's lips turned up in a warm grin, *"...I hope everything's going ok with you out there. Well, another semester has started at Chapel Hill which means I'll be grading more papers and exams soon. Katie's started school too. She's enjoying her new classes and even has an admirer who's been coming by to see her fairly frequently..."* As his wife's image flashed a mischievous grin, Robert's smile was replaced by a worried frown known only too well by the fathers of teenaged daughters the galaxy over, *"Robert!"* Virginia chided, anticipating her protective husband's likely reaction, *"Now quit acting like an overprotective Rottweiler and trust your daughter. You know Katie's a smart girl and can take care of herself."* Her face taking on a more serious countenance, Virginia finished, *"She's growing up, Dear. I wish you could see her now...so full of life. We miss you...I miss you."*

As his wife continued to relate the events of her and Katie's lives since he'd departed, the expression of the commodore's face grew more and more pensive. *Maybe I am getting too old for this.* Wesley thought morosely as his wife's message terminated. *Perhaps it's time for me to step aside to make room for younger men like Kirk or Dodge?* As a blue funk descended on Commodore Wesley, he ran a hand through his graying, yet still full, head of hair. Hoping that a workout in the gym might chase his depression away, Robert, after changing into his sweats, stepped out into the corridor. As he made his way down towards the gym, the commodore ran into a familiar face also making her way to the exercise facility.

"Commodore Wesley!" The auburn haired Ensign Aliz Bathory, also wearing a sweat suit, called out. Seeing the troubled look on the older man's face that the commodore had quickly masked behind an affable grin, Aliz barely restrained herself from asking him what was wrong. Maintaining propriety,

she looked up, gazing into the troubled man's eyes, "Sir?"

"Ensign Bathory." The Commodore replied, setting aside, for now, his lingering doubts, "I see you're headed for the gym too."

"Yes, Sir." The pixyish Hungarian answered back as she fell in beside the commodore, "I was feeling a touch of cabin fever."

"Same here." Wesley remarked, "I thought that jumping some rope and maybe a bit of a run."

"Yeah," Aliz smiled as the pair entered the nearly unoccupied gym, "I like to jump rope too. It helps keep me limber." She said as she handed the commodore a rope, taking another for herself. Flashing a mischievous smirk, she challenged, "Want to bet I can jump longer than you?"

Never one to duck a challenge, Robert smiled back, "All right, Ensign. You're on. But no bets except for bragging rights."

"All right, Sir." Aliz smirked as the pair began jumping, the young gymnast quickly discovering that even though she possessed the advantages of youth and a well conditioned body, that the older man's physique and endurance was easily a match for her own. After several minutes, both officers, looking at each other, laughed as they both simultaneously stopped jumping.

"What say we call it a draw, Ensign?" Wesley offered with a chuckle.

"Agreed, Sir." The youthful Aliz readily agreed, the sweat glistening off her as she reached for a towel, handing it to the older man before grabbing one for herself. Quickly banishing the inappropriate thoughts that were impulsively rushing through her mind as she saw the muscular commodore towel the sweat off his face and arms, Ensign Bathory cautiously ventured, "That was fun."

"It was." Wesley agreed as he picked up his boxing gloves. "I miss having Commander Kuznetsov here. Usually we'd switch off holding the bag for each other."

"I thought Dr. Vincent had checked him out, Sir." Aliz remarked as she unzipped her sweat suit, taking it off to reveal the close fitting low cut pink gymnast's leotard she was wearing underneath it. Beginning her limbering exercises, she inquired, "Where is he, Sir? If I might ask?"



Laughing, Robert responded as he tried to avoid gazing too intently on the petite lithe woman stretching before him, "He said something to me about making sure that delta shift hadn't been slacking off while he was out."

Chuckling merrily, Aliz quipped, "Uh Oh! Jennifer traded shifts with Ensign Renaud on delta shift this week so that she could go with Terrence to the movies! She thought she'd have nice quiet week. I'll bet she's wishing she hadn't done that now."

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"Ensign Watley!" The *Lexington's* Russian executive officer bellowed, "Not only did you hesitate in reporting your sensor readings when I called for them, you didn't even get them right!" Growling, the burly first officer demanded as he leaned forward in his chair, "Care to explain why you allowed that Klingon cruiser to get close enough to us to damage us so severely that Lieutenant Commander G'arv was forced jettison his precious warp core?"

Flustered, the olive skinned science officer stammered, "I...the image...it appeared..."

"Yes, Ensign..." Commander Kuznetsov glared.

"I thought it was a ship at first, Sir!" The anxious ensign blurted out, "But then..."

"But then, what?" Alexei pressed.

Beads of sweat appearing on her forehead, the raven haired junior officer stuttered, "I remembered the multispectral analysis from the nebula. That made me think that it might be just a sensor ghost."

His voice dropping to a low rumble, the Bear fixed the skittish young ensign in his gaze, "In a situation such as this, Ensign, where you might not have the time for a detailed analysis, do not be afraid to go with your first instinct. Better to call an occasional false alert than to be taken by surprise just once. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir." Jennifer replied in a soft voice, holding her breath as her tormenter's eyes seemingly froze her in place.

“Good.” Alexei exclaimed, nodding his head once, confident that his point had been made. His gaze now turning away from Ensign Watley, the first officer declared, his voice resounding throughout the *Constitution*-class starship’s bridge. “Delta Shift: Alpha Shift will enjoy a longer breakfast today as we are going to do this again until you get it right. Computer, replay Simulation Foxtrot-3, applying random parameters.”

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Setting down her coffee cup as she listened to the Andorian woman seated across from her in the ship’s main mess hall, Cilla Oudekirk chuckled as Talana relayed her account of the trials and tribulations currently being endured by Delta Shift. “So...from what I heard...” the lovely Andorian science officer narrated, “Alexei comes storming on to the bridge with that big booming voice of his and immediately orders a simulated battle drill.”

“And how did they do?” The Dutch communications officer asked, her lips turning up into a rare grin as she talked to one of the few people whom she regarded as a friend.

“We’re still here talking and drinking coffee and tea instead of being on the bridge, aren’t we?” Talana replied with an impish grin. “He’s got them replaying the entire simulation over again. I figure we’ve got another hour before we have to report on duty.” Taking a sip of her green tea, the blue skinned Andorian then cautioned with a sardonic grin, “But we better be at the top of our game when we do. Alexei’s got a lot of energy pent up from his stay in sickbay and I think he intends to take it out on all of us.”

“But you think we’ve got an hour?” Cilla asked again as she finished her coffee.

“Yeah.” The lieutenant commander answered back, “It’ll take them at least that long for the simulation to run its course—but, like I said, don’t think that’ll mean we’re going to get a short shift. Alexei will find something wrong with what we do—you can bet on that. And then...once we complete whatever it is the Bear has planned for us, we’re supposed to be departing the station.” Shaking her head, the lovely Andorian woman smirked, “No...it’s going to be a busy day for us.”

“I better get moving then!” Cilla exclaimed as she got up out of her seat, “An hour’ll give me just enough time to run a quick errand on the station and get back before our shift starts.” Picking up her tray, she smiled, “I’ll see you later,

'Lana!"

"Where are you going, Cilla?" Talana called out to her departing friend.

Shouting out over her shoulder, the lissome Dutch woman answered back, "I promised to give a friend of mine on the station something."

"Well..." The science officer called back, "Just sure you get back here on time!"

As Cilla disappeared out the door, her friend shook her head in quiet astonishment, "Cilla made a friend?" Talana muttered, nodding her head contentedly as she took a sip of her tea, "Good. Maybe she's finally getting over what happened to her."

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Watching in rapt fascination as the youthful gymnast almost literally launched herself into a bounding leap, smoothly transitioning into a tumble and then a handstand, Robert shook his head in amazement, "How do you do that?" He asked as she finished her routine, "If I were to even try to do something like that, I'd pull at least a dozen muscles."

"Practice, Sir." Aliz laughed, "Lots and lots of practice. I started when I was seven. My teacher told my *anya*...my mother...that I had talent..." she blushed, "...and recommended that I go to a special school in Budapest. And the rest..." she grinned, "...is history." Looking up at the ruggedly handsome commodore, Ensign Bathory shyly asked, "When did you take up boxing, Sir?"

"When I was ten." Robert chuckled, "The neighbor boy, Chucky Ransom..." the commodore reminisced, "...used to pick on me all the time. Then, one day I had enough and challenged him to a fight after school."

"Did you win?" Aliz asked as she wiped the sweat off her face and arms.

"Hell no!" Wesley laughed, "He kicked my ass. He was three years older than me and a lot heavier. But I got one good lick in before he mopped the floor with me and Coach broke it up. When my father found out..." the commodore recalled, "...he sat me down and told me that he was disappointed in me—not for defending myself—but because I was the one who challenged the other guy to the fight. He said that I'd given old Chucky exactly what he wanted—he got to kick my ass without having to take the blame for starting the fight. He told me that a wise man—a smart man—knows when to fight and when not

to and is always in control of himself and his temper. He then took me to the gym in town and gave me my first boxing lesson. There are a lot of good things you can pick up from boxing.” Robert admonished as he put away his gloves, “Endurance...strength...speed...coordination...but most important, Aliz...control. Control of yourself—both physically and mentally.”

“Just like gymnastics.” Ensign Bathory noted with a wry grin as she slipped back into her sweats.

“Just like gymnastics.” Robert chuckled as the ship’s intercom rang out, Commander Kuznetsov’s voice filling the room, “Alpha Shift will report one hour later than normal for this duty shift only. I repeat, Alpha Shift will report for duty one hour later than normal. That is all.”

“Sounds like Commander Kuznetsov’s working Delta Shift a little overtime.” Robert grinned as he and Aliz walked out of the gym.

“Poor Jennifer.” Aliz remarked in mock sympathy as the pair reached the turbolift, “She’s going to be in a bad mood when she gets off.”

“You better be on your toes as well, young lady.” Robert warned in a friendly, yet earnest voice, “Not only will Alexei be putting Alpha Shift through your paces today, I will be too. We’re going off into the Expanses in twelve hours and I expect everyone to be on top of their game.”

“Understood, Sir.” Aliz promptly replied, not shrinking at all from the implied challenge. “We’ll be ready.”

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Looking up as he wiped off his counter, Radek grinned as he saw the tall willowy figure wearing a red Starfleet minidress walk into his bar. “Well, hello there, Cilla! Come in! Care for a bite to eat? Breakfast crowd should be arriving shortly—my cook, Angelo, makes a mean Spanish omelet.”

Shaking her head, Lieutenant Oudekirk’s lips turned up into an affectionate smile as she regarded the heavy set Centauran bartender. “I wish I could, Radek, but I’ve got duty in half an hour and then we’re shipping out.” Stretching her hand out, the communications officer slipped a piece of fabric into the lounge owner’s hands, “But I wanted to make sure you got this before I left.”

"A *Lexington* patch!" Radek grinned as he examined the piece of cloth in which the *Constitution*-class starship was displayed prominently in the center, the starry field of the Federation in the background. Embroidered on the edge of the circular patch were the words: *USS Lexington: NCC-1709 We need those who can dream of things that never were.*

"Thank you." The burly former chief petty officer responded, his eyes moistening as he read the inscription on the patch, his grin now becoming a warm, winsome smile as memories of his days in Starfleet flashed through his mind. "Here..." He said as he opened the glass display case behind the bar, placing the *Lexington's* patch next to the unit patch of his old ship. "I'll put the patch right here where everyone can see it." Turning back to the lovely Dutch woman, Radek grinned, "So...you're off soon."

"Yeah..." Cilla replied as she glanced down at her chronometer. "In fact, I'm going to have to go now—I've got thirty minutes before my shift and our first officer—well he's not the sort of man..."

Laughing heartily, the bartender answered back, "I understand. Better go, Lieutenant—I'll see you when you get back."

"Count on it!" Cilla called back as she dashed out of the bar, unaware of the man watching her every movement since she entered the bar.

"Not yet, my dear..." Andre Devore muttered as he noticed the crowd of Starfleet personnel coming and going. "Later...yes, later...you and I will have a long talk..."

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### ***Tantalus V Penal Colony***

"All right, 'Yellow'." The deputy warden of the Federation penal facility, wearing the gray uniform of Federation Security, declared in a tired voice, "Your out-processing's been completed. You're a free man." Lowering the forcefield, the man gestured with his thumb to an antechamber where a man and woman waited, "Go on...your fellow cowards are waiting for you."

With a derisive snort, the brown haired disgraced starship captain walked away, the forcefield reappearing with a shimmer as he crossed into the antechamber that led to the medium security wing's exit.

“Elliot.” The woman, dark skinned and with piercing brown eyes, nodded her head as Walker approached.

“Hey, Boss.” A barrel-chested man with a shaved head and thick auburn beard, called out as he stood up from the chair where he had been seated.

“Karen...Artie...” Walker greeted, placing a hand on each of their shoulders.

“So what do we do now?” Karen, the Capek’s former first officer and navigator, asked.

“Not here...” Walker cautioned as he guided his compatriots towards the exit. Nodding their heads in compliance, they joined their former commanding officer as the exit door slid open. Walking out the door, the trio was met by a human wearing what appeared to be an expensive two piece business suit—the white Nehru collar styled silk shirt covered by a navy blue jacket with no visible buttons or pockets.

“Captain Walker...” The man said, flashing an insincere grin, “And Commanders Soren and Rychek.”

“Not anymore.” Karen Soren spat out, “In case you’ve forgotten, we were stripped of our ranks.”

“That’s why I’m here.” The man smoothly replied, “You should know that my employer is most appreciative of your loyalty for all these years. As you’re probably well aware, the funds agreed upon have been transferred into an Orion bank. My employer also has another proposition for you. One that I think you will all find most intriguing...”

“Well...” Walker replied with a scowl, “I don’t know about the others, but I don’t have anything to do at the moment.”

“Very good, sir.” The man said as he gestured towards an awaiting ground taxi. “This will take us to a shuttle. We can talk en-route.”

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“You’re cleared for departure, Robert.” Commodore Jerrik Kiersted, the Danish commanding officer of the newly commissioned Starbase 31 declared, his image appearing in the Lexington’s main viewer. “Have a good voyage and we’ll leave the porch light on for you.”

“Thanks, Jerrik.” Commodore Wesley replied from his position in the center chair, “Tell Marietta to keep out of trouble.”

“I’ll try.” The blond haired commodore laughed, “But you know how it is with her—she never finds trouble, trouble finds her.”

“I know...I know.” Robert chuckled, “Take of the place and first round’s on me when we get back.”

“You’re on!” Jerrik grinned, “Kiersted out.”

As the station commodore’s image disappeared, to be replaced once again by the view of the station’s interior, Wesley nodded his head as the cavernous outer doors opened. “Ms. Oudekirk...report.”

“All sections report ready, Sir.” Cilla Oudekirk announced from her station.

“Very good.” Commodore Wesley replied as he turned his attention to the petite auburn haired woman at the helm, “Ms. Bathory, take us out. It’s time for us to go and see what’s out there.”

**The End**