

Star Trek: Lexington

Meet the Lady

By David Falkayn

PART 1

Striding off the transporter pad at McKinley Station, Captain Robert Wesley of the *USS Ajax* put on his most professional demeanor as he immediately recognized the silver haired man standing next to a rather nervous looking transporter crewman. Immaculately clad in standard gold shirt with black pants and boots, the wide gold stripe with narrow gold stripe above it on both his sleeves declaring to all that the wearer was an admiral. *Can't blame the crewman for looking like he's about to deliver a litter of kittens.* Bob chuckled inwardly, *Must be hell having any admiral watching your every move—much less this admiral.*

Knowing that the admiral was a stickler for regulations, Wesley came to attention before reporting aboard according to form, “Admiral Komack...permission to come aboard, sir?”

“Permission granted, Captain Wesley and welcome to McKinley Station.” The admiral responded with equal formality, and then, motioning towards the door, requested, “If you would accompany me, Captain.”

“Aye, sir.” Wesley acknowledged as he fell in beside and slightly behind the admiral. Crewmen and junior officers scrambled to clear the way for the prickly admiral and the ruggedly handsome captain walking beside him as the station intercom issued calls for various officers to contact others or to contact any of the numerous departments within the busy construction and maintenance facility. After several minutes of walking, the pair reached an office door that slid open.

“Come on in...” Komack said, motioning for Wesley to precede him. “Have a seat...” the admiral further urged as he moved towards a counter holding a bottle with two glasses. Pouring the amber fluid into the glasses, Komack brought a glass to the captain before taking his seat behind a large mahogany desk. “Draylaxian whiskey...” the admiral explained, “...take it easy...a little of

that stuff goes a long way.”

Raising his eyebrows in surprise as he sniffed the fragrant aroma before taking a slight, tentative sip, letting the precious fluid coat his tongue, Wesley commented, “Not easy to get either, sir...”

“But appropriate for this occasion.” Komack replied as he took a data slate, handing it to the captain. “Go ahead...read it.”

As Robert read the slate, his eyes widened in surprise, glancing up, he took in the amused twinkle in the admiral’s eyes before setting the padd down on the desk. Sitting in stunned silence, Wesley barely heard the admiral’s next words.

“Congratulations...Commodore.” The admiral grinned. “Now...” he said, standing up, “...finish that whiskey, ‘cause I want to show you something special.”

Entering McKinley Station’s large Observation Deck, the two senior officers paused for a moment silently observing the hustle and bustle taking place all around them. Civilians from all over the Federation, mostly humans, but also Vulcans, Deltans, Tellarites, Andorians and others, gathered together at the central information kiosk, bombarding the yeomen manning the booth with a multitude of questions. Others, both civilians and Starfleet personnel, either sat or stood next to the transparent aluminum windows, watching and waving hello or goodbye as ships came and went. The *Shikoku*, one of the earliest of the new *Miranda* class vessels, moved in for docking as the destroyer *Scipio*, a *Saladin* class starship like the *Ajax*, slipped away from its moorings to begin yet another mission. *Marietta’s ship*... Bob thought, his lips turning up in a warm smile as he recalled the destroyer’s daring, sometimes to the point of recklessness captain, Marietta DeVeers, a relative rarity within the current Starfleet—a female ship captain. *She’s probably patrolling the Klingon or Romulan borders*, Wesley thought as his attention was quickly drawn to the majestic vessel sitting in a dock all to itself...very much the queen of her domain.

A *Constitution* class starship! The newly minted commodore noted with admiration as he took in the vessel’s pure, graceful lines...her twin nacelles housing the most powerful engines currently available to Starfleet...the saucer section melding seamlessly with the main hull. A ship of true grace and power, just to serve on one of these vessels was considered by many in Starfleet to be the high point of their careers. To command one of them was a

dream beyond attainment for all but a select few. Only the best of the best could ever hope to sit in the center chair of a beauty such as this.

"Beautiful...isn't she?" Admiral Komack remarked with an appreciative grin. "She's just finished her refit and is almost ready to depart."

"Yes, sir...she certainly is." Robert enthusiastically agreed as he noted the ship's registry number, NCC-1709. That's the *Lexington*...Commodore Nogura's ship, isn't it?"

"Not anymore," Komack answered back with a shake of his head, "Heihachiro just got his admiral's stripe. He's being booted up to Command." Flashing a sly grin, the admiral stated in as emotionless a tone as he could muster, "The *Lexington* is yours...that is if you want it."

Watching his subordinate in amused silence for several moments as the news slowly sunk in, Admiral Komack cleared his throat and then spoke in a clear command voice, "Well Commodore...do you want the ship or not...I don't have all day!"

"Yes sir...Of course I want it." Wesley replied, a wide grin on his face that quickly disappeared as his eyes met those of the stern admiral. "When do I take command?"

"The change of command ceremony will be in 72 hours." The admiral replied in his usual stern tone.

"Seventy two hours?" Robert echoed, more than a little surprised at the quick turnaround time. "That's awful short notice, Admiral. I'd have thought I'd have more time to get acquainted with the ship..."

"I know, Bob..." Komack interrupted with a sympathetic look on his face. "I wish we could give you more time to get to know her and to spend more time with your family." Shaking his head sadly, he continued, "But the truth is...we need the *Lexington* out there." Pausing for a moment to take a breath, the admiral explained, "There's something going on in the Typhon Sector...we're not sure what. We just know that we've lost contact with one of our scout craft, the *Voltaire*."

"What do we have in that area?" Wesley queried as his eyes took in the form of the *Constitution* class ship.

"Right now it's a lot like the Old West, Bob." Admiral Komack answered with a slight smile. "Starbase 31 has just been activated and will eventually be the command and control hub for the sector, but at this time it's more like a frontier outpost. The *Scipio* and a couple other destroyers will be assigned to that area on a more or less permanent basis and we're planning on sticking a *Miranda* class there in the near future, but for now, we need *Lexington* to act as the territorial marshal."

"I see..." Robert vocalized, weighing his options as his eyes once again gazed lovingly on the elegant lady sitting majestically in her berth. On the one hand, he knew that *Constitution* class commands didn't come around very often. Wesley understood full well that this might be the only chance he'd get to sit in the center chair of a Connie—that the odds of Komack giving him another opportunity should he spurn this one would be slim at best. In fact, he would be lucky to get another ship command at all. Knowing the stern admiral beside him as well as he did, Bob realized that, should he refuse this command, like as not he'd be pigeonholed in command of a minor star base...or even worse, they'd shove him off to one of the 'K' Class Deep Space Stations to be forgotten...to become just another data slate-pushing bureaucrat.

On the other hand though, he'd be able to spend more time with Virginia and Katie and he'd be able to take them with him to whatever Starbase or Deep Space Station he'd be assigned. But...he then considered...would his wife and child be happy there—out on a starbase away from friends. Virginia would have to give up her position at the University of North Carolina; Katie would have to uproot her life...say goodbye to all her friends. Would it fair for him to ask them to give up what they have here? Either way this was a rough call, the former Academy boxing champ realized.

"You still want the job, Bob?" Admiral Komack's stern voice, now tinged with a rare grandfatherly tone, asked as he regarded the newly minted commodore.

Seeing the admiral's appraising gaze, Wesley made his decision, "Yes, sir..." He said definitively, "I do."

"Good. We need you out there." The admiral remarked with a single nod of the head and then flashing a warm smile, advised, "Go on home and spend some time with Ginny and Katie and then take care of any business you need to on the *Ajax*." Pausing for a moment, Komack asked, "Do you have any more questions?"

"No sir..." Commodore Wesley responded in a low voice as his eyes once again found the *Lexington*.

His lips turning up into yet another grandfatherly smile, Admiral Komack quipped before turning away, "Well...I'll leave the two of you alone to get acquainted. See you later, Bob."

As the door slid shut behind the stern faced admiral, Bob Wesley turned his gaze back towards the *Lexington*. His lips turning up into a warm smile, Bob remarked in quiet voice, "Hello, Lady Lex..."

As soon as the turbolift doors slid open, Junior Lieutenant Cilla Oudekirk, the alpha shift communications officer, her blonde hair done up in the current fashionable beehive and wearing the new Standard female uniform for her position, a red minidress, the left breast bearing the Lexington's insignia, the same embroidered sunburst used by Fleet Command, stomped out of the turbolift towards the only other female currently on the bridge, a tall, statuesque Andorian woman still wearing the old uniform, blue blouse bearing the rank insignia of Lieutenant Commander, along with black pants and boots.

"Like the new look, Cilla!" The helmsman, Junior Lieutenant Terrence Lawford jibed, his lips turned up into a boyish grin as he swiveled his chair around to get a better look at the Dutch communications officer.

Studiously ignoring the impudent helmsman, Cilla glared at the Andorian woman, "Well?"

"Well what, Lieutenant?" The Andorian, chief science officer Talana Zha'Thara asked, her lips turned up in a playful grin.

"Well...this!" Lt. Oudekirk exclaimed, pointing at her minidress. "I want to know who the genius dirty old man was who came up with this...this...uniform!"

"I don't know about you..." Talana smirked, her antennae twitching in amusement as Lawford tried vainly to stifle his laughter, "...but I kind of like the new look."

"Well I don't see you wearing yours!" Cilla pointed out, a triumphant grin on her face.

Shrugging her shoulders, the Andorian replied, "I just haven't had time to change as yet." Looking thoughtful for a moment, she quickly added, "I'm afraid the light blue color they've decided on for the sciences might not match my skin though...what do you think, Cilla?"

"Oooohhhh..." The Dutch lieutenant cried out in frustration as she quickly turned about, going back the way she came, sparing yet another harsh glare for the English helmsman as she took her station.

Addressing the Andorian science officer, Terrence deadpanned, his Public School English accent giving an extra layer of dryness to his understatement, "I think she's angry, Commander."

Smiling in amusement, Talana responded, "She'll get over it. Right, Cilla?" Ignoring the glare sent her way by the temperamental communications officer, Talana's smile vanished as she warned Lawford, "You better get back to work, Terrence. If Commander Kuznetsov comes through those doors and finds you goofing off..."

"I know...I know..." Lawford acknowledged, his smile vanishing as he returned to his console, "The Bear will have me cleaning out the Jeffries tubes with a toothbrush for an entire month."

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As Commander Alexei Kuznetsov, the *Lexington's* first officer, made his rounds on the *Constitution* class starship, a young woman, attractive with red hair and wearing the new red minidress struggled to keep up with his long strides. "Yeoman..." Kuznetsov called out, his deep, rumbling voice one more reason for his nickname, the Bear. "Take this down. I want the crew in the new uniforms by the next alpha shift." He stated as he noted several crewmen wearing the older uniform. "There will be no excuse for anyone wearing obsolete dress."

"Aye, sir." The yeoman dutifully recorded.

"Also..." The Russian dictated, "I want status reports from all section heads no later than 1600 tomorrow. There will be a ship-wide inspection 0800 the next day. The new captain will be taking command in seventy two hours and I

want everything spotless when he arrives.” Kuznetsov’s alert eyes spotting a pair of crewmen wearing the loose fitting red jumpsuits of support services standing and laughing next to an opened access panel, he growled as he approached the pair. “Crewmen! What are you doing here?”

“Commander G’arv ...” One of the enlisted ratings, replied, referring to the Tellarite chief engineer, “...wanted us to check the power transfer grid in this section, sir. We just completed our diagnostic on this circuit and we were just getting ready to close up and go on to the next.”

“Then I would suggest that you do so instead of standing around acting like a pair of fools!” Kuznetsov spat out to the two crewmen as the yeoman gave them a sympathetic look. “Or I’ll make sure that Lieutenant Commander G’arv finds some other type work more suited for you...such as cleaning out the waste recycling units.”

Observing as the hapless crewmen practically jumped to their task, the first officer, nodding his head in satisfaction, turned his attention back to his yeoman as he resumed his rounds. “Where were we, Yeoman? Ah...yes...the new crewmembers...they should be beaming aboard soon. Accompany me to Transporter Room One, if you please.” Flashing an amused grin he remarked, “Let’s see what the new Academy class is made of, shall we?”

“Aye, sir...” The yeoman responded, her lips also turning up into a wicked grin as she pictured the fresh faced ensigns about to beam aboard getting their first introduction to real starship duty from the giant Russian.

Waiting until they were sure that the burly first officer had completely disappeared out of earshot, the first crewman turned to his companion, “Damn! Is he always like this?”

The second crewman, his lips turned up into a sardonic grin, quipped in response, “You should see him when he’s really pissed.”

After beaming down at Starfleet Command in San Francisco, Robert, now sporting the new gold uniform top, its sleeve proudly displaying the single broad embroidered stripe of a commodore looked on appreciatively at the Golden Gate Bridge. A world treasure, it had survived the long years of warfare which marked the twenty-first century with over half its structure amazingly almost intact, even though the city itself was devastated thanks to

a terrorist nuke. *They really did do a good job. From this distance...the commodore thought as he cupped his chin, you can't tell where the real bridge ends and the reconstruction begins.*

As he gazed upon the monument, Wesley shook his head sadly as his mind went back to his early Academy history classes. The rebuilding of monuments such as the Golden Gate Bridge, the Eiffel Tower, Big Ben, and the Vatican as well as the cities that hosted them, along with the cleaning up of the radiation and other toxic residue left by the wars, was the culmination of years of hard work on the part of humanity and its new allies, the Vulcans. The reconstruction work took the later years of the disastrous twenty-first century all the way through the middle of the twenty second to complete. But even with all that hard work, so much was lost. Much of the Middle East was devastated with very little remaining from the pre-war years—many of its cities—Mecca, Jerusalem, Tehran, Cairo, Tel Aviv, Damascus, and so many others—nothing more than glass craters. No amount of reconstruction could rebuild those cities in their original locations.

Europe also suffered grievously as civil war wracked the continent. On all continents, artwork, monuments, and buildings were smashed. The Sistine Chapel, Notre Dame, St. Sophia's, the Kaaba, the Wailing Wall, the Mosque of Omar, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Sphinx, the Lincoln Memorial, St. Basil's, and many other treasures of humanity were completely destroyed with virtually nothing of the original structure or work intact. Libraries and museums—and their precious collections—were ruined in the chaos. Entire ethnic populations of humanity were very nearly rendered extinct in the global bloodletting as the human population had dropped from its pre-war high of over six billion to a post war number of just under three billion souls. *Humanity very nearly played out its string...* Wesley morosely thought until his reverie was disrupted by a lyrical female voice.

"Commodore?"

"Huh?" Turning towards the origin of the voice, Robert saw a young dark skinned woman wearing the new red minidress approaching. "What is it, Yeoman?" He asked somewhat testily, irritated at having his contemplations disturbed.

"I'm sorry, sir..." The yeoman apologized, "But I thought you should know that your shuttle's ready."

"Oh..." Wesley exclaimed and then gave the pretty crewman a friendly smile,

"Thank you."

"Your welcome, sir." The yeoman replied as her lips also turned up in a smile. "The pilot says that you should arrive in Charlotte in a couple of hours, sir."

"Excellent!" The commodore replied cheerily. "That should work out just about right." *Great!* Wesley's mind raced as he made his plans, *That'll give me enough time to pick up some flowers and make it home in time for us to go out for dinner at The Pit. I can't wait to see the look on Ginny's face!* Addressing the yeoman once again, Robert grinned as he motioned with his hand, "Lead the way."

"So...what do you think it'll be like...serving on a starship?" Ensign Jennifer Whatley, now wearing the pale blue minidress of a science specialist instead of the black and yellow Academy togs that she'd worn for four long years asked as she brushed back a strand of dark hair that had slipped out of place.

"It's an assignment." The auburn haired Ensign Aliz Bathory, wearing command gold, answered in her rich Magyar accent. "Nothing more..."

"Come on now..." The olive skinned Whatley replied, refusing to let her companion's phlegmatic outlook ruin her enthusiasm. "This is the *USS Lexington* we're talking about...a *Constitution* class starship. You know there aren't a whole lot of them in the fleet right now." Cracking an evil grin, she teased, "Would you rather be serving on a *Ptolemy* class tug or something like that?"

"All right...all right..." Aliz sighed in resignation as her lips turned up into a smile as she fingered the medallion around her neck. "Yes...I am glad to have gotten the *Lexington* and I am looking forward to sitting at the helm." Her smile growing wider, she said, "And I have to admit to a certain...anticipation...at piloting her."

"I knew it!" Jennifer cried out triumphantly and then, pointing at the pendant her Hungarian companion was holding in her hands, asked curiously, "That's an interesting design...what is it?"

As Aliz stared down at the silver figure of a young beautiful woman, she answered in a low voice, "It's a family heirloom...dates back from the fifteenth century at least. It gets passed on to the first born female in our family once

she reaches puberty.” She then flashed a slight smile, “It’s supposed to be a good luck charm.”

“Oh...ok...but...” Jennifer replied and then warned lowering her voice in a conspiratorial tone, “...if you want to keep on wearing it, you better make sure it stays under your dress. From what I hear the first officer on the *Lexington* is a real a—hole.”

“I’ve heard the same.” Aliz acknowledged morosely as she slipped the medallion back under her dress. She then remarked with a smirk, “But what else can you expect...he’s a Russian.”

As the two women materialized in the *Lexington’s* transporter room, along with four other new transfers, they found that their earlier suspicions about the starship’s executive officer were indeed correct. The moment they had reported aboard, Commander Kuznetsov had them standing at attention in line. Following a blistering speech in which The Bear had made it quite clear to the new additions what his expectations were; he walked down the line, inspecting each transferee, noting the slightest flaw in dress or carriage. Reaching Aliz, he spotted the slender chain around the ensign’s neck.

“What is that, Ensign?” He demanded, his face inches from the young woman’s.

“Family heirloom, sir.” Aliz promptly replied. “Acceptable under Starfleet Uniform Regulation 44B: Neck jewelry is permitted provided it is unobtrusive and lockets or pendants are covered by clothing.” She recited with a slightly defiant and triumphant tone to her voice.

“I know what the regulations state, Ms. Bathory!” The Commander spat out. “Just be sure you do...I’ll be keeping my eye on you.”

You have no idea how the thought of that makes me feel tingly all over...the Hungarian ensign thought sarcastically as the first officer moved on to his next victim.

Upon finishing his inspection, Kuznetsov dismissed the new arrivals. Making a smart left face, the fresh faced former cadets exited the transporter room and the frowning first officer. However, as Ensign Bathory exited, the dour Russian’s lips turned up into a slight smile.

“Made an impression on you, didn’t she, Alexei?”

The New England twang of *Lexington’s* Chief Medical Officer, Lieutenant Commander Charles Vincent, attracting his attention, Kuznetsov grunted. “She has potential...”

“She stood up to you well enough.” Vincent rejoined, running a hand through his thinning sandy blond hair.

“Da...she did.” The Russian agreed and then cupping his chin, noted sagaciously, “The question is though...does she have the wisdom to know how to pick and choose her fights?”

“That, my friend...” The doctor replied with a laugh as he placed a hand on the shoulder of the larger man, “...is something you only learn after getting knocked on your ass a time or two.”

“Problem is tovarisch...” Alexei answered back as the pair walked out the transporter room together, “...in our business you often only get one chance.”

As Robert climbed up the steps to the front porch door of the Charlotte, North Carolina home that he and his wife, Virginia, and their young daughter Katie shared, he smiled. It almost seemed to the long absent husband and father that the place hadn’t changed that much since he’d left with the *Ajax* over three years ago. His fishing rods were just where he left them leaning against the wall; Virginia’s plants were blooming in their pots, African violets, aloe vera, tulips...all doing well. *Virginia always did have a green thumb.* Wesley thought fondly as an image of his wife working in her garden, her hands dirty, but with a big smile on her face as she went from plant to plant, trimming here...watering there. It was all far too complicated a process for a man who lived and breathed starships and space exploration. He also smiled as he saw the Schmidt-Cassegrain optical telescope on the porch. While a professor of literature at the University of North Carolina by day, his wife was very much an avid amateur astronomer who preferred observing through the antiquated optical telescope rather than using newer, more precise instruments. Smiling with affection, he remembered her once telling him that she wasn’t interested in the numbers...it was the soul of the heavens that she wanted to explore. *She would have made a perfect Starfleet officer,* he thought as he continued his reverie.

However, something was missing. It took the absentee father a few minutes to place exactly what it was, but when he did stumble upon the answer, he shook his head sadly. The dolls that Katie used to play with on the porch were gone now. Things had changed. He'd missed three years of his daughter's life. Katie wasn't the ten year old girl she was when he'd left. She was now three years older—a thirteen year old girl beginning her adolescence. The protective father coming to the fore, Robert realized that it wouldn't be long until his daughter started dating. And Virginia...his lovely Virginia...so patient and understanding...how would she take the news that in seventy two hours he would be going out into space again—this time on a five year tour with every probability that he wouldn't be returning to Earth again for at least a year. Although he would never admit it to anyone else—not even Jim Kirk, one of his best friends—Wesley knew that Virginia wasn't happy with the current state of affairs and, as his hand hovered over the door control, he couldn't help but ask himself whether the news he was about to spring on his wife would end up being the proverbial straw that would break the back of the camel that was their marriage.

Squaring his shoulders, Robert opened the door. Entering his house, he called out, "Ginny? You home?"

"Robert?" A voice tinged with excitement answered back. "Is that you?"

"Ginny!" Wesley responded with a wide grin as he turned to face his wife. "You're looking beautiful, today." He complimented, sincerely meaning his words as he gazed on the lovely form of his wife.

"Heh..." Virginia snorted, "...only if you're into dirt and sweat. I'm a filthy mess. I've been in the garden out back all morning..."

"You're still the prettiest sight I've seen." Robert declared as he hugged his wife close to him.

"It's been too long, Robert." Virginia declared as the pair reluctantly broke from their embrace. Giving her husband an appraising look, the chestnut haired woman remarked, "You're looking as fit as ever."

Cracking a wicked grin, Bob playfully flicked off a speck of dirt from his wife's nose, "Nothing like zero-g calisthenics to get the blood flowing."

Laughing, Virginia noticed the broad gold embroidered stripe on her

husband's sleeve. "You've been promoted!" The long-suffering wife exclaimed enthusiastically. "Does this mean what I think it means? That you're going to be assigned to Command?"

Shaking his head, Bob almost winced at the crestfallen look his wife gave him as he imparted his news to her, "I'm sorry, Dear. I've been given command of the *Lexington*."

"Oh..." Virginia responded, trying in vain to hide her discontent. Feigning enthusiasm, she inquired, "Isn't that Heihachiro's ship?"

"Yeah." Bob replied, "He's been booted up to the Admiralty and Komack personally gave me the news."

"They must have really wanted you there if Wild Bill himself gave you those orders." Ginny noted.

"I guess so." Robert agreed. Looking deep into his wife's eyes, he said in a low voice, "Ginny...it's not too late...I can still turn down the command."

"You'll do no such thing!" Virginia retorted, her eyes momentarily blazing. "This is what you've wanted all your life..." Her fury abating as quickly as it flared, she added in a quiet, almost mournful tone, "...we both know that you can't turn this down." Putting on a brave face, she then asked, "So...how much time do you have before you have to report aboard?"

"Seventy two hours." Bob replied.

"Well then..." Ginny responded with a forced grin, "...we'll just have to make the most of it. What do you want do?"

"Well..." Bob replied with an equally forced smile, "I was thinking about waiting until Katie gets home and then we would all go to The Pit for some Bar-B-Que."

"Sounds good to me!" The forlorn wife answered back as she gave her husband a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll get showered and dressed. Katie should be back from school soon."

"Ok, Dear." Bob replied, watching his wife's retreating form. Shaking his head, the rugged commodore sighed. Although neither spouse said it in so many words, they both knew that what had just happened was an important event.

Turning about, Robert sat down on the comfortable recliner that he'd claimed many years ago as his chair. Picking up a data slate, the future captain of the *Lexington* read over the crew bios of his senior staff and the particulars of his new command. He had much to do and only seventy two hours to do it in. "Time..." Bob muttered morosely, "...there's never enough time."

PART 2

As the two pugilists carefully circled each other, Alexei smiled inwardly as he spotted the slight opening his opponent had left him. *Dropped your guard, Tovarisch!* The burly Russian thought as he launched a powerful right cross at the chin of his sparring partner, only to come up empty as his opponent, easily dodging the blow, launched a right hook of his own. Staggering under the impact of the gloved fist on the side of his jaw, the *Lexington's* executive officer shook his head as his opponent retreated to the opposite corner. Taking off his gloves, Alexei worked his jaw with his left hand as the other man tossed him a towel. "Good feint." Kuznetsov remarked, a big grin on his face as he wiped the sweat off. "I thought I had you there. I can see now why you won the Academy boxing tournament."

"As I recall, you didn't do so badly yourself," His opponent, Commodore Robert Wesley, complimented as he removed his gloves and headgear. "Seeing as you finished in the final four in your class tournament."

Shrugging his shoulders, the big Russian wiped some blood off his chin. "Da. But I lost in the semi-finals."

"Nothing to be ashamed of, losing to Dodge." Bob exclaimed, referring to the current captain of the *USS Hood*, as he slapped his first officer on the back. "He still packs a mean punch," the commodore quipped as the pair, after slipping out between the ropes of the tiny boxing ring, began to walk through the ship's gymnasium. Noting approvingly the large number of crew availing themselves of the starship's exercise facilities, Wesley remarked, "Busy place. I like it this way."

"Commodore...excuse me, I meant Admiral...Nogura's standing orders were that all members of the ship's crew—senior command staff included—had to spend a minimum of ten hours per week in the gym." Alexei explained and then added pointedly, "There were no exceptions."

"I see no reason to alter those orders..." Bob replied, drawing an even wider grin from his executive officer. Then, noticing a petite auburn haired woman wearing gymnast's togs on a balance beam carrying out a near perfect routine, the commodore nodded his head in appreciation as the youthful officer moved smoothly from a handstand and then executed a flawless back-flip.

"Not bad..." Wesley remarked, clapping his hands appreciatively as the gymnast executed a near flawless dismount. "Not bad at all..." As the young woman draped a towel around her shoulders before walking away, Bob inquired of his first officer, "Who is she?"

"Ensign Aliz Bathory." The burly Russian replied with a grunt. "Helmsman. One of the new transferees from the Academy."

"Must be pretty sharp..." The commodore noted as the two officers walked towards the exit, "...to get this ship as her first assignment."

"Da." Kuznetsov nodded his head. "Very high marks from her instructors. But..." The executive officer noted, "...she also possesses a very stubborn and willful streak that got her into trouble with more than one of her instructors."

"Insubordination?" The commodore asked with a note of concern in his voice. "I don't mind my officers expressing their opinions..." Bob declared, his eyes taking on a steely look, "...but once I've settled on a course and have issued orders—I expect them to be obeyed promptly and without static."

"She was never insubordinate." Alexei answered back, somewhat alleviating the commodore's concerns. "It's just that she was very...forward...in expressing her views in class and very...very stubborn as regards maintaining her position." Laughing, the Russian executive officer recalled, "After she got my attention when she reported aboard, I checked with her instructors at the Academy. I don't like loose cannons, they get people killed and ships destroyed needlessly." The Bear explained before continuing his narrative. "Her instructors all say the same thing—that she's bright, independent, and incredibly stubborn when she thinks she's right or when she's encountered with a difficult problem. Her tactics instructor, Commander Reynolds, told me that she insisted on repeating the *Kobayashi Maru* test over and over again for three days straight. She kept on insisting that her solution was the right one."

Chuckling wryly, Bob quipped, "Wasn't she told that there was no correct solution that would save both the merchant ship and her vessel—that the whole point of the exercise was that it was a test of character?" Shaking his head, Wesley grinned, "Jim Kirk's the only one who ever beat that test—and he cheated!"

Shaking his head as well, Alexei answered back. "Da...Elliot told her after she spent twenty four hours in the simulator that there was no solution—but she wouldn't accept it. She argued and argued that there had to be a way to solve

the situation.” Laughing, the Russian first officer recounted, “After three days, she finally accepted that there was no good solution, but not before trying every possible tactic—standard and crazy.”

“Doesn’t like to give up, eh?” Bob remarked nodding his head sagely.

“No.” The Bear replied. “As I said, she’s very...very...stubborn and willful.”

Laughing as the door to the gym slid open, Bob remarked, “Some of the best officers I’ve known could be described as stubborn and willful. One of them at least...” he quipped, “...commands a starship of his own. I like an officer with fire in the belly.”

“Fire in the belly is good.” The Russian responded, adding sagely, “But so is a clear head.”

“Agreed.” The commodore conceded, “We should know soon enough whether she has that or not.” As the pair reached the turbolift, Wesley pointed at the cut on his first officer’s chin, advising, “You might want to let the doc have a look at that, Alexei, before you report to the bridge.”

“Aye, sir.” Kuznetsov acknowledged as the turbolift door whooshed open, “I’ll see to it after I shower. Speaking of which, sir...” The Bear ribbed, flashing a toothy grin, “...you might want to see about a shower yourself before you report to the bridge.”

Laughing as he gripped the elevator control, ordering it to take the pair to deck five where the senior officer’s quarters were located, Wesley riposted, “I’ll take that under advisement, Commander. After all, we can’t have a biohazard alert go off on the bridge now, can we?”

“Hey, roomie!” Ensign Jennifer Whatley called out to her roommate, Ensign Aliz Bathory, as the door to their quarters whooshed open, revealing the petite Hungarian helmsman, still wearing her gymnast’s togs. “Have a good workout?”

“Not bad.” Aliz replied in her rich Magyar accent as she stepped out of her sweaty leotard. “Had the commodore and the Bear as an audience while I did my balance beam routine.”

“Oh?” Jennifer teased as, sitting down before the vanity mirror, the olive skinned ensign beginning the process of brushing and rolling in order to fix her lovely brown hair into a bouffant style. “So...what was their reaction?”

“They applauded, of course.” Aliz chuckled as she stepped into the tiny sonic shower. “They know a good thing when they see it.” Calling out from the shower, the Hungarian pilot, changing the subject, asked, “So...how was your day?”

“Eh...so-so...” Jennifer responded as she took out a set of large rollers from the vanity drawer. “Talana...my section chief...she’s a blast! She’s funny and loves to joke around. But...” the naturally bubbly science specialist qualified, “...it’s not all laughs. She had me and another new ensign—Frank Carstairs—working on a nasty xeno-microbiology problem.” Sighing, Jennifer continued, “I didn’t think we’d ever solve it.”

“But you did solve it—right?” Aliz inquired as she stepped out of the shower.

“Yeah.” Jennifer chuckled, “The answer was so obvious too—it was literally staring us in the face the whole while.”

“Well...” Aliz laughed as she slipped on her gold minidress and then fixed her shorter hair, “...sometimes that’s what happens. Other times...it’s hidden so deep that it feels like it’ll take forever to pry it out.”

“Tell me about it!” Jennifer exclaimed with another sigh and then added with a sly wink. “At least one good thing came out of the experience. I got a date with Frank for movie night tomorrow.”

Shaking her head, Aliz quipped as she made her way towards the door. “You and your men! Sometimes I wonder how you finished as high in our class standings as you did the way you got around!”

“You know what they say...” Jennifer riposted, returning her roommate’s good natured banter, “If you’ve got it...strumpet with a trumpet!”

Laughing as the door whooshed open, Aliz called back over her shoulder as she left, “Just don’t play that trumpet too loud! Our neighbors might not appreciate it!”

***** *

"Hold the lift!" Junior Lieutenant Terrence Lawford called out to the sole occupant of the elevator, Cilla Oudekirk.

"Hurry up, then!" The Dutch communications officer shouted back as Lawford dashed towards the turbolift moments. "I'm not going to be late for my shift..." Cilla groused, "...because you can't tear yourself away from that yeoman."

"Jealous, Cilla?" Terrence jibed as he darted into the elevator moments before the door slid shut.

"About what?" Cilla fired back before twisting the lift control and giving the verbal command to go to the bridge.

Laughing, Terrence teased, "About the fact that I've got stuff going and you...don't."

"Yeah. Right." Cilla snorted derisively as the turbolift transitioned from a vertical motion to a horizontal one. "As if I'd ever have anything to do with a hormonal Neanderthal like you."

Before Terrence could utter another, this time much more biting, retort, the lift door opened. Stepping on to the bridge, the two officers immediately felt the gaze of the *Lexington's* executive officer sitting in the center seat. "I'm glad the two of you decided to join us. Take your stations—Now." The Bear growled as the two junior lieutenants sheepishly took their positions.

"You cut it awful close." Talana, sporting the new minidress, quipped, her antennae twitching in amusement as she whispered into Cilla's ear from her position over the Dutch woman's shoulder.

"The idiot held me up at the elevator." Cilla whispered back.

"You didn't have to wait for him." Talana teased as a rumbling sound that she recognized as Commander Kuznetsov clearing his throat gained her attention. "Yes, sir?" She inquired with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

"Lieutenant Commander..." The Bear grumbled, "Don't you have more important things to do than gossiping with the crew?"

Mock pouting, the Andorian science officer walked over to the command chair and held out a data slate, "Already done. Here's the report the commodore

wanted.” As Kuznetsov reached out to grasp the slate, Talana bent down to whisper in his ear, “You know you can’t scare me like you can the junior officers with that bear routine, Alexei...” she purred, “I know you’re really just a big old...”

Unfortunately—or fortunately, depending on the point of view of the individual involved in the current conversation, Talana was unable to complete her jab as the door slid open, revealing Commodore Wesley. Reacting immediately on seeing the *Lexington’s* new commanding officer, the lieutenant commander snapped to attention, “Commodore on the bridge!” She called out, all traces of humor gone from her voice.

Nodding his head with approval as the bridge staff snapped to attention, Robert responded in a crisp voice, “As you were.” Striding towards the high backed center chair, Wesley relieved his executive officer. “Status, Commander?”

“We are on course towards the last known location of the *Voltaire* following the same course that it had sent to Starbase 31 before communications ceased.” Kuznetsov promptly replied.

Taking the data slate that his first officer had given him, the commodore perused it for several moments before turning his attention to the *Lexington’s* science officer, “Ms. Zha’Thara?” Wesley called out, immediately gaining the attention of the Andorian officer, her antennae pointing towards him as he spoke, “What’s your take on that nebula that the *Voltaire* reported seeing just before communications were lost?”

“Hmmm...” Talana vocalized as she carefully considered her answer. “The *Voltaire* reported an unusually high number of tachyon emissions coming from its core. Its captain went in to investigate and shortly after their last transmission, communications were lost.”

“I see...” Turning his attention back to his first officer, Wesley inquired, “This sector is pretty close to Klingon space— isn’t it?”

“Aye, sir.” Kuznetsov rumbled, “The Klingons actually claim a fair portion of it—including the region where the *Voltaire* had disappeared.”

“So...” Bob prompted, “...you think it was the Klingons?”

“Da.” The Russian replied simply. “Who else could it be?”

"It's a possibility," Talana reluctantly agreed, "The nebula emissions could very well have screened the presence of a Klingon ship waiting in ambush from the *Voltaire's* scanners. It doesn't take a Vulcan to see the logic in that." She concluded, her lips turning up into a crooked grin as she delivered a barb at the recent Starfleet trend of relying on Vulcan science officers.

Exhaling, Commodore Wesley passed the data slate to the yeoman standing next to his chair. "Very well, then. Helm..." He ordered, addressing the two young officers sitting at their stations in front of the viewscreen, "Make for the last known location of the *Voltaire*, warp factor five."

"Course laid in, sir." Terrence Lawford responded, punching in a series of buttons on his panel.

"Engaging, sir. Warp factor five." Aliz Bathory chimed in as the majestic *Constitution* class cruiser's warp engines began to hum, the rounded fronts of the twin nacelles turning and glowing as the *Lexington* launched into warp space in a blur of lights and colors.

***** *

"What you doing in here G'arv?" Charles Vincent, the *Lexington's* Chief Medical Officer called out, a note of amusement in his usual New England twang. "Finally bust an artery from yellin' at your people?"

"Hah! If they were any good, I wouldn't have to yell at them!" The Tellarite Chief Engineer bit back, the toothy grin on his face revealing his enjoyment as the two officers renewed their traditional bickering. "Commodore Wesley's had us going at a steady warp five for several days now..."

"Don't tell me your engines aren't up to the job." Vincent smirked, knowing that the touchy Tellarite was especially sensitive concerning his engines.

"My engines are just fine!" G'arv fired back, "They're doing better than your patients I'll bet!"

"So...what's the problem, G'arv?" Charles asked, finally getting down to business.

"When I woke up this morning..." The Tellarite grumbled, pointing at his abdomen, "I felt—bloated." I ignored it, thinking it would go away, but the

pain got worse and worse until I finally decided enough was enough.”

“I see...” Vincent vocalized as he ran a medical tricorder over the engineer’s body. “Hmmm...Ok, G’arv...have you been eating enough roughage like I told you?” Seeing the guilty look on his friend’s face, Charles shook his head. “What have I told you, G’arv? Due to the nature of the Tellarite digestive tract, it’s even more important than for most other races that you have enough cellulose in your diet.” Taking a hypospray, the doctor injected his patient’s arm. “That was a laxative. I’d suggest that you locate the nearest head as soon as possible.” Laughing, he called out as the engineer rushed out of sickbay, “Remember this next time you decide to pass on those greens!”

Unfortunately, Charles could not make out his friend’s caustic rejoinder as the hall lighting changed from its normal white light to an amber color as Cilla Oudekirk’s voice rang out on the intercom, “Yellow Alert...Yellow Alert...all decks go to Yellow Alert.” Almost immediately, the crewmembers first sauntering down the corridor, laughing and talking grew silent. Now, the corridor in front of sickbay was filled with crewmen and women moving with disciplined alacrity and purpose to their assigned stations. Muttering a soft, “Dammit,” Charles turned his attention back to sickbay and his staff. “All right, people. You know what to do.”

“All decks at Yellow Alert.” Cilla crisply reported from her communications station. “Damage control parties are ready. Phaser fire control reports ready...photon torpedo room checks in ready as well. Engineering reports all systems working nominally. Sickbay reports it is prepared as well.”

“Raise shields, Sir?” Kuznetsov prompted turning towards Commodore Wesley.

“Not quite yet.” The Commodore replied, shaking his head. “Let’s see what we’ve got first. But...” Wesley qualified, “Have emergency power routed to the shields. I want to be able to raise and reinforce them immediately if we have to.”

“Aye, Sir.” Alexei acknowledged, nodding his head approvingly as Cilla passed the commodore’s instruction on to G’arv in engineering.

His digestive problem suddenly forgotten, the Tellarite engineer immediately responded, his guttural voice coming through clear on the intercom. “Shields

are ready when you need them.”

His lips turning up into a slight smile of approval at the professionalism of his crew, Commodore Wesley stared at the viewscreen, taking in the vista of the nebula ahead, blue and pink tendrils snaking out from a white core. Addressing his science officer who, at that moment, was hunched down over her scanning visor, the commodore inquired, “What are your scanners picking up, Ms. Zha’Thara?”

“Heavy tachyon emissions emanating from the core, sir,” the Andorian science officer replied, “Just as the *Voltaire* had reported. Hmmm...that’s interesting...” Talana vocalized as her antennae twitched.

“What, Lieutenant Commander?” Wesley asked, his ears pricking up at the change in his science officer’s tone.

“The tachyon readings picked up drastically shortly after I began my scans.” Talana replied.

“Any idea as to why?” The commodore asked, not really expecting a positive response.

“No, sir.” Talana answered back, “Not at this time.”

“Well...keep at it...” Robert drawled before addressing not just his science officer, but also his entire bridge crew, “And keep sharp, everyone. I don’t want any sudden surprises.”

Her head jerking momentarily jerking up from the scanning visor, Talana announced with just a note of tension in her voice, “Unknown ship approaching on intercept vector.” Bending her head down once again, the science officer spoke, now with a grim tone, “It’s Klingon.”

“I have it on the screen.” Ensign Bathory declared as a faint speck appeared moving amongst the stars.

“Magnify.” Wesley ordered as he inched towards the edge of his seat.

Following the commodore’s instructions, Aliz manipulated the viewscreen’s magnification controls, bringing the speck into sharper and sharper focus until the dot finally became an identifiable form. A shark cruising amongst the stars, the bulbous front connected by a long boom with a winged stern which

housed the craft's engines and many of its weapons immediately identified the intruder for what it was.

"A D-7 battlecruiser." Alexei observed in a quiet monotone voice. "And it appears to be making an attack run."

"Red Alert." Commodore Wesley immediately ordered, "Raise shields and sound General Quarters." As the ship's internal lights turned red, the alarm klaxons blared, and the phaser targeting scanner next to Ensign Bathory slowly rose up to near eye level of the petite Hungarian helmsman, the commodore gritted his teeth as the Klingon warship grew larger and larger in the viewscreen, "It looks like we're about to earn our pay."

PART 3

“Shields!” The commodore called out, and then addressing his communications officer, he ordered, “Cilla...open hailing frequencies. Let’s see if we can get him to talk...” Before he could finish his sentence, twin green disruptor bolts lanced out from the wing struts of the Klingon cruiser, impacting harmlessly on the *Lexington’s* shields.

The bridge shaking mildly under the impact of the energy beams as the ship’s shields firmed up, Cilla quipped in a dry voice, “The Klingons have just answered our hail, Sir.”

“I see they have.” Wesley riposted in an equally deadpan tone. “Let’s return the favor.” His voice now crisp and clear, the commodore ordered, “Phasers—fire.”

“Firing phasers!” Ensign Bathory acknowledged with just the slightest hint of excitement as she pressed the firing button on her console. Twin orange beams sliced out from the tiny bubble at the bottom of the saucer, hitting the rear section of the Klingon vessel as it passed under the *Lexington*.

“Come about to 300 degrees...negative Z-axis...10 minutes of arc.” Wesley commanded. Aliz’s hands flying over the keyboard, the graceful starship pivoted about, its saucer section dipping as the *Lexington* turned on its attacker. “Prepare to fire phasers on my order...” the commodore instructed as the Klingon ship began its pivot. “Fire!”

Once again, the *Lady Lex’s* beams launched out, only this time to strike just a glancing blow at the D-7’s forward shields as the Klingon battlecruiser completing its pivot, launched another attack run.

“He’s feinting...” Alexei remarked coolly as the Klingon appeared to repeat his earlier attack.

“Setting us up for a right hook...” Robert agreed with a sly grin as he watched the enemy warship draw closer. “Ms. Bathory...” the commodore remarked as he leaned forward in his chair, “Now we get to see if your reflexes are as good as your record says they are. Be ready...you’ll only have a few seconds...”

“Aye, sir.” The Hungarian ensign replied confidently as the Klingon vessel drawing nearer, suddenly dropped its nose, yawing to the left.

“Now, Ensign!”

Her fingers pressing down on the controls, Aliz felt as if she were actually pushing the giant starship down as she attempted to counter the Klingon maneuver. The Klingon vessel now beneath the *Lexington*, the youthful ensign barely heard the commodore’s order to fire. “Firing.” She automatically replied as her finger once again hit the fire button, phaser beams striking the D-7’s top shields as it passed beneath.

“The Klingon’s shields are down twenty percent, sir.” Talana called out from her science station.

The Klingon commander, however, had a few tricks up his sleeve as well, as Wesley soon found out. Turning quickly on his opponent, green disruptor beams once again came from the *D-7’s* wings, their impact shaking the *Lexington* violently, knocking crew off their feet and seats and on to the deck.

“What the hell!” Dr. Vincent called out from sickbay as he grasped on to the edge of an examination slab. Seeing a crewman wearing the red of security bringing in a young science branch junior lieutenant, the *Lexington’s* chief medical officer patted the top of the examination table that had just so recently rescued him. “Put her here.” He directed as he took out his medical tricorder. Running a quick scan of his patient, he flashed an assuring smile as he injected her with a hypospray, “Don’t worry, Ms. You’ve got a mild concussion. This should take care of it, but I still want you to stay here for now.” Turning his attention back to his staff, the doctor growled, “What are you people doing standing around with your thumbs up your asses? Get to your posts—if this keeps up we’re going to have a lot more people coming here soon

“Damage report?” Wesley called out.

“Shields down ten percent.” Cilla replied, “Minor injuries: a couple of concussions, but mostly bumps and bruises reported.”

“That’s good.” Wesley sighed in relief and then remarked to himself, “We’re not getting anywhere going around in circles like this.” Spying the nebula’s tendrils in the main viewer, a sly grin crossed the commodore’s face as he addressed his English navigator, “Mr. Lawford, plot us a course for that nebula.”

"Done, Sir." Terrence replied as he pressed a button on his console.

"Ms. Bathory..." Robert now instructed, "Take us there...maximum warp"

"Aye, Sir." The Hungarian officer acknowledged turning the starship towards the gaseous body.

"The Klingon's pursuing..." Talana reported as the main viewer, now showing a rear aspect under the commodore's orders, showed the Klingon battlecruiser in pursuit.

"Just as I thought he would..." Wesley replied, the grin still on his face. Addressing his science officer, the commodore inquired, "What readings are you getting from the nebula now?"

Her antennae twitching, reflecting both her excitement and her curiosity, the Andorian science officer replied, "Tachyon emissions have picked up markedly since the battle started."

"Interesting..." Wesley drawled as Aliz reported that the Lexington was about to enter the nebula. "Reduce speed to one quarter impulse." The commodore ordered as his eyes tried vainly to make out features within the pink and blue gaseous cloud that now obscured the viewscreen. "What are you getting now, Ms. Zha'Thara?"

"Tachyon emissions have just increased by one hundred and fifty percent." The Andorian replied, her voice betraying her astonishment at the rapidly increasing readings.

"Ten thousand kilometers." Lieutenant Lawford interjected, "The Klingon has also entered the nebula."

"Pivot...Now!" Wesley ordered his helmsman, the tiny woman piloting the ship once again willing the giant vessel to turn as she operated the controls on her console. As the *Lexington* spun around, Robert's sharp eyes picked out his target, its silhouette barely visible in the clouds. "Fire!"

As Aliz's finger pressed the firing button, the Lexington's bridge lighting suddenly dimmed once...twice...and then went out completely.

"Emergency power..." The commodore ordered. The ship's lighting flickering back to life, Talana's voice rang out, this time, this time, her voice one of

alarm. "Tachyon emissions two hundred...strike...three hundred..." The bridge now bathed in brilliant, blinding white light, officers and crew slumped down into unconsciousness as both the *Lexington* and the Klingon vessel facing it were both englobed within that dazzling light for just a fraction of a second. And then, as suddenly as it appeared, the light vanished.

The steady beeping from Talana's scanner providing the only noise on the bridge, Commander Kuznetsov struggled to consciousness. Staggering out of his chair, he helped up the yeoman, who had fallen to the deck. Nodding his head at her muttered thanks, the first officer, taking visual stock of his personnel on the bridge, noticed immediately that two people were missing. Activating the ship's intercom, Kuznetsov called out, "Commodore Wesley...Ensign Bathory...respond immediately." After several moments of no response, the commander repeated his request, once again receiving no answer. Addressing Cilla Oudekirk, Alexei ordered, "I want an immediate count of ship's personnel. I want to know how many people are missing and who."

"Aye, Sir." The blonde communications officer responded as the bridge lights flickered back on again.

"Mr. Lawford..." The commander called out, "What's our current position?"

"Still within the nebula, Sir." The English navigator replied, "But we're drifting..."

"Correct for drift." The Bear ordered as he stared into the main viewer. "What's our Klingon friend doing?"

"Drifting as we are, Sir." The English lieutenant answered back as an ensign rushed to the empty helmsman's chair. "Our weapons and shields are still offline though," He added ruefully.

"But so are the Klingons." Talana added with a note of relief.

"I don't think we're going to get anywhere fighting our way out of this anyway." Alexei mused as his thoughts were disrupted by Lieutenant Oudekirk's voice.

"Sir...we have a count on those missing." She reported, "We have a total

number of five missing: The commodore and Ensign Bathory, Ensign Whatley, Crewman Reynolds, and Crewman Malik.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." The first officer acknowledged as he cupped his chin. Turning towards his science officer, Alexei asked, "Ms. Zha'Thara? What do you make of what just happened to us? What was that light? And what do you have any ideas as to what might have happened to our people?"

"I'm not sure, Sir." The Andorian replied apologetically, "But if I were to hazard a guess, I'd say it'd have to do with that massive tachyon buildup my scanners picked up before the lights went out."

"Make that your top priority..." The Bear growled, "I want answers." Turning toward Cilla, the burly Russian ordered, "Try the Klingons again—maybe this time they'll be willing to talk."

"Aye, Sir." The Dutch communications officer replied as she replaced her earpiece which had slipped from her ear. "Hailing frequencies open...they're responding."

"Good." Kuznetsov acknowledged. "Main viewer."

The image of the cloudy nebula faded away to be replaced by an image, fuzzy at first, that gradually resolved itself into the form of a Klingon male, his swarthy skin, jet black hair, neatly trimmed goatee and smooth forehead marking him as one of those Klingons with human augment DNA.

This is both good and bad...Kuznetsov thought as he gazed intently at his opposite number, The good news is that augments aren't physically as strong and react a bit more like humans than ridgies. The bad news, however, is that augments do act more like humans—on the whole they're much more cunning and patient. Taking a deep breath, Alexei spoke, "This is Commander Alexei Kuznetsov, temporarily in command of the Federation Starship *Lexington*..."

"I am Commander Kalas, first officer of the *IKS K'Mar*." The Klingon declared, baring his teeth in anger as he cut the Russian first officer off in mid-sentence. "You have committed acts of war against the Klingon Empire. You have attacked our shipping and have kidnapped our captain and several members of our crew! I demand that you release them immediately."

"For a Klingon..." Alexei responded, laughing as he simultaneously matched his Klingon counterpart glare for glare, "...you have an almost Russian sense

of humor!" His laughter vanishing, Kuznetsov went on the offensive, "It is you that have committed acts of war against the Federation. You have attacked our scoutship, attacked this vessel without provocation, and have kidnapped our captain and crew."

"I know nothing about your captain!" The Klingon retorted, "And it is you who are the aggressors, while we have acted in self defense! You destroyed one of our patrol vessels in our space—we retaliated."

Interesting... Alexei thought as he digested that little piece of news from the Klingon first officer. Taking a conciliatory posture, Kuznetsov replied, "Commander...perhaps neither one of us is at fault here..." Disregarding the derisive snort from his counterpart, the Bear continued to make his case. "Think about it...both of us losing ships in this same region...don't you think it's possible that there might be something else going on here? This is neutral space..." Alexei began only to be cut off once again by the angry Klingon.

"This space clearly belongs to the Klingon Empire!" Kalas declared with a smug grin.

"And you are a lying sardelka!" Kuznetsov swore in an act of calculated bluster as Cilla barely repressed a snicker at the insult that had just been delivered to the Klingon. "You and I both know that this is unclaimed space." Then, just as suddenly as he exploded, the Bear resumed his earlier peace-making pose, "But...why don't we let the diplomats figure that out. Right now, we're both missing our captains and crewmembers and there's a high probability that whoever did it is still out there. Wouldn't it make sense for us to work together to get our people back?"

Pausing for a moment, the Klingon appeared deep in thought, "I do not trust you, Earther...but...at the same time...what you say is plausible." Kuznetsov then saw the Klingon officer turn his head to speak to one of his subordinates. After several moments of conversation, the swarthy Klingon faced the screen once again, speaking in a guarded tone, "So, what do you propose?"

"For now..." The Bear proffered, "A truce..." Seeing the skeptical look on the Klingon's face, the Russian quickly added, "A temporary truce. Only until we find out what's going on and our captains and crews have been recovered. After that...it will depend on what they wish to do."

"Agreed." The Klingon replied, "We have a truce...for now. But be warned, I will be on guard for Starfleet treachery."

“And I’ll have my eye on you, Commander,” Kuznetsov answered back as he gestured to Cilla to cut off communications.

As the screen went blank, the Dutch communications officer asked, “Do you think he’ll try something, Commander?”

“Da...” Alexei replied in a grim voice, “I’m sure of it.” Turning towards Talana, the Russian first officer ordered, “Get to work on those tachyon emissions. I don’t want our temporary friends out there to get the jump on us.” Nodding his head at Talana’s prompt acknowledgment of his orders, Alexei watched as she exited the bridge. Turning once again to Cilla, the first officer commanded, “Take us to Yellow Alert, Ms. Oudekirk.”

“Aye, Sir.” The tall blonde responded as the internal lighting changed from red to normal; the alert light shifting now from the brightly flashing red indicating General Quarters to a flashing amber color. “Yellow Alert, Sir.”

Nodding his head in satisfaction, Alexei pressed the intercom button on the arm of the center chair in which he sat. “Lieutenant Mtolu?”

“Aye, Sir?” The obsidian-skinned security chief responded from his post in Security.

“We have a temporary truce with the Klingons...” Alexei advised, “...but I want you and your people to stay on guard. I don’t trust those xuebratija Klinks as far as I can throw them.”

“Right, Commander.” The Zulu lieutenant promptly responded flashing a toothy grin. “If they try anything, we’ll be ready.”

Terminating the connection, Alexei cupped his chin thoughtfully, *What did happen to the Commodore?* The burly Russian pondered as he stared at the main viewer, *And how do I get him and the others back?*

***** **

“Where are we?” Ensign Whatley asked as her eyes scanned the clearing that she, Commodore Wesley, her roommate, Ensign Bathory, and two other *Lexington* crewmen, both wearing the red shirts of the Support branch had suddenly found themselves in. “I was at my duty station when all of a sudden...”

"I was on the bridge..." Aliz began, only to be interrupted by the commodore.

"I remember Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara reporting a massive buildup of tachyon emissions coming from the center of the nebula..."

"And then everything went blank..." Aliz finished.

"So...how did we get here?" One of the security crewmen, an attractive younger human with sandy blond hair asked.

"That's a good question..." The commodore replied, taking immediate and decisive control over the situation, "...and one that we're going to have to address, but for right now, we need to know what we're dealing with here." Turning towards the olive skinned science officer standing next to his helmsman, Robert inquired, "Ensign..."

"Whatley." Jennifer promptly responded, coming to attention, "Ensign Jennifer Whatley, Sir."

"Stand at ease, Ensign." Robert replied, giving his subordinate an avuncular grin. "This isn't a parade ground." Coming over to the recent Academy graduate, the commodore asked, "What's your specialty, Ensign Whatley?"

"Life Sciences, Sir." Jennifer answered back, "Xeno-biology."

"Excellent!" Wesley exclaimed encouragingly, "Just the person we need in a spot like this. So Ensign..." Robert inquired, "What do you make of this environment?"

"Well, Sir..." Jennifer began hesitatingly, "I don't have my tricorder..."

"You don't need any scanning instruments to give me a general layout..." Robert interjected, now taking on the role of an instructor, "What does your knowledge and your senses tell you?"

"Well, Sir..." The science specialist began, "I'd say from the vegetation that we're dealing with what would be the Earth equivalent of a late Cretaceous-early Paleocene environment. A lot of the trees I'm seeing here..." She remarked, pointing at a nearby tree, "...are angiosperms. If we were dealing with an earlier epoch, we'd be seeing a lot more ferns and cycads."

"What about animal life?" Aliz asked as the security guards automatically assumed a defensive posture, their eyes continually scanning the perimeter, as well as the sky for any possible signs of movement.

"Depends..." Jennifer replied, "If you're asking whether there are any dinosaurs or not...I don't think so. For one thing..." She chuckled, "...if there were, we probably would have either seen one by now or seen some evidence of one. The larger ones aren't exactly inconspicuous, you know."

"Point taken." Robert laughed, joining in the momentary good humor. "So...what might we see?"

"Well...I'm not sure..." The youthful ensign responded, "Just because it looks like a late Cretaceous-early Paleocene environment here, doesn't mean that life will evolve in a similar manner as it did on Earth." Pausing for a moment to take a breath, Jennifer continued, "For instance, this planet probably didn't have to deal with the K-T extinction event that marked the end of the Cretaceous on Earth..." However, before she could continue, she was interrupted by Commodore Wesley's urgent orders as a large shadow of a winged creature appeared on the ground.

"Cover! Now!" The commodore yelled as he waved his crew to nearby tree line. Running alongside her roommate, Jennifer heard a high pitched whine growing louder and louder and then the beating of wings and a scream as a gust of wind knocked her off her feet. Looking up, she saw the blond security guard snatched up into the air by the talons of a large creature that looked, to the frightened young woman's eyes, to be a cross between a bird and a reptile. Clutching tightly to its prey, the blue scaled predator let out a loud call as it winged its way skyward, its opened mouth revealing row after row of sharp white teeth. Feeling something moist falling on her hair, Jennifer touched it. As she brought her fingers to her face, the young ensign immediately recognized the crimson fluid that was now beginning to spot her formerly immaculate blue dress. Waves of nausea growing within her, Jennifer, bending over, gagged as she disgorged the contents of her last meal on the ground as Aliz knelt beside her, her eyes watching the skies as she stayed with her friend.

Turning about as soon as he heard the scream from his crewman, Robert, grabbing the tiny phaser one from his belt, pushed the firing button, but to no avail as nothing happened. Cursing, the commodore saw Jennifer, crying, bent over heaving, Ensign Bathory by her side. Keeping a constant watch on the sky, Wesley made his way to the distraught officer and her companion,

kneeling on the opposite side of the heaving woman. "I know you're scared Ensign..." The commodore said sympathetically, "But we need to get moving. That thing—or one of its friends—might come back." Seeing that the dark haired ensign had finished her heaving, Robert helped her to her feet. "Let's go, Jennifer..." He encouraged, deliberately using Whatley's first name as he, along with Aliz, urged the terrified young woman to safety, staying by her side every step of the way until they had reached the safety of the forest.

Turning Jennifer over to her roommate, Wesley spoke to Aliz in a low voice, "See to Ensign Whatley. I have a feeling we're going to need her knowledge and expertise if we're going to get back home ok." Hearing the Hungarian helmsman's whispered acknowledgment, Robert turned his attention to the sole remaining security officer, standing watch at the tree line. "Crewman..."

"Malik." The swarthy skinned enlisted rating answered promptly, "Crewman Nassir Malik, Sir."

"All right, Crewman Malik," Wesley directed as his eyes took in the tree branches and scattered small rocks lying on the ground. "Since our phasers don't seem to work here, we're going to have to improvise." Picking up a sturdy wooden stick approximately his height and a sharp edged stone, Robert grinned, "We should be able to make ourselves some makeshift spears out of these."

"Aye, Sir." The Moroccan crewman quickly acknowledged with a toothy grin. His smile vanishing, the security specialist pointed towards the setting sun. "Sir? We should also probably see about building a fire—in case we've got nocturnal predators too."

"Good idea." The commodore affirmed. Turning his attention to his helmsman who had just wiped the spattered blood off her roommate's face, Wesley asked, "How's your friend doing?"

"I'll be ok, Sir." Jennifer responded in a low voice, answering in the place of Aliz. "I was just..."

"It's all right, Ensign." Bob replied in a fatherly tone as he put his hand on the science officer's shoulder. Kneeling down in front of the olive skinned biologist, Wesley advised, "I know this isn't probably how you pictured your first away mission to be like, Jennifer, but we're all going to have to rely on each other if we're going to survive. It's ok to feel fear—I'd worry about you if you didn't." He said, eliciting a shaky grin from the young woman, "But you

don't want to let that fear take you over." His voice now taking on a more soothing tone, Robert concluded, "You'll get through this just fine if you remember your training and stay on your toes—right?"

"Right, Sir." Jennifer replied, managing a shaky grin. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it!" The commodore exclaimed as he stood back up, a glint of sunlight reflected off of something in the distance suddenly catching his attention.

"Sir? What is it?" Fighting down the fear growing within the pit of her stomach, Aliz repeated her question, "What did you see?"

Barely making out the form of a metallic spire rising towards the cerulean sky, a grin slowly appeared on the commodore's face. "Well, Ensign..." He said as he pointed towards the spire, "If we're lucky, we might be able to get some answers to our questions over there." Quickly deciding on a course of action, Wesley issued his orders, "First thing we do—we build a fire. Then...we see to weapons and finding something to eat. Lastly, we set up a watch schedule and get some sleep—we're going to have a long day tomorrow."

"Gitan was overconfident." A tall, lithe augment-descended Klingon warrior wearing an honor sash declared as he speared a piece of cooked meat on the point of his *d'k tahq*. "And he was too slow." The Klingon added as he admonished the three warriors gathered around the fire. "So..." He said as he chewed the piece of meat taken from the slain avian creature roasting above the fire, "...instead of bringing back prey, he became prey." Flashing a toothy grin, the captain concluded his lecture, "Let that be a lesson to you all. Never underestimate your opponent."

"Hunh..." One of the Klingons grunted, "Gitan's ambition always did exceed his wisdom."

"True..." Another Klingon agreed, nodding his head as he speared a piece of meat, "But he died in battle, right Captain K'Tan?"

"Correct, M'Kal." The Klingon captain replied, "He died as a Klingon."

Looking up from his meal, the third Klingon warrior, this one younger than the others, inquired of his commanding officer, "Captain K'Tan? How was the

Federation starship able to transport us to this place?”

“I don’t know, K’Temoc,” The captain answered truthfully, “But I intend to find out.”

“So...” The first Klingon asked after letting out a satisfying belch, “How do we start?”

Spying the metallic spire lit up by the setting sun, now a deep red as it sank on the horizon, the captain replied smiling as he pointed with his knife at the spire, “See that, D’Kell? I will start there.” Turning towards his men, K’Tan commanded, “Eat your fill. M’Kal, you have the first watch...then K’Temoc followed by D’Kell. I will stand the last watch. Sleep well tonight—you will need your strength for tomorrow.”

IKS K’Mar

“What are your intentions Commander?” The Klingon third officer asked from his station at the weapons console. “Do you truly intend to cooperate with that Federation *Pet’aQ*?”

“Of course not, D’Kor!” Kalas replied laughing. “It was merely a ruse intended to put him off guard. I have a plan...” The *K’Mar*’s first officer grinned, “But...” he cautioned, “...it will require patience. Pick twenty of our best warriors...men trained in combat in zero gravity.”

Nodding his head once in acknowledgment, D’Kor immediately responded, “I will see to it at once.”

As his third officer departed the bridge, Kalas gazed into the viewscreen trying to make out the faint outlines of the Federation starship amongst the whirls and vortices of the nebula, “Soon...my arrogant friend...” Kalas muttered softly, “...soon we will meet. And when we do...I will look forward to personally introducing you to our mind-scanner.”

PART 4

Sitting on the ground, Robert leaned back against a thick conifer as he looked up at the clear, starlit night sky. As he relaxed, images of Virginia and Katie appeared in his mind. Virginia, as she looked the day they said goodbye, her face radiant as always, but something was different. Her smile was the same; she held her head up in the same manner she had always done. But, something was wrong. It was her eyes. When the couple was first married, they shined like tiny stars, illuminating the way home for him. But, as he stood at the transporter pad that would beam him up to the *Lexington*, her eyes bore a more somber...distant...cast. As if they were drawing their light away from him. And Katie...little Katie wasn't little anymore. After the initial rush of welcoming that came with her first recognizing that her father was home had subsided, father and daughter quickly discovered that they had nothing to talk about. She was now a teenager—interested in boys and hanging out with friends and all the other things thirteen year old girls wanted to do. After three years apart, her father had become little more than a stranger to her. *Three days...* Robert mused mournfully as he gazed upwards, *"...cannot make up for three years.* Wesley continued in his melancholic reverie until the Magyar accent of his youthful helmsman broke his concentration.

"It's beautiful..."

Turning his head towards the young ensign, Commodore Wesley replied, dispelling his earlier dark mood through sheer force of will, "It might be beautiful, but it also tells me something else..."

"That we're not anywhere near the nebula." Aliz finished as she handed the commodore a hollowed out gourd containing water. "It's ok—it's from that stream to the north...we boiled it so any germs should have been killed."

"Not like we have much choice in the matter," Robert quipped, patting the ground near where he sat. "Have a seat, Ensign."

"Thank you, Sir." The petite Hungarian smiled as she sat down opposite the commodore, his light from the nearby fire giving the pugilist's craggy features a warm quality that gave him a certain rugged handsomeness the youthful ensign thought. Taking a deep breath as she tried to dispel that particular thought regarding her superior officer from her mind, Aliz asked, stammering slightly, "So...what do we do if we don't find a way back?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, Ensign." Wesley replied in a confident tone as he smiled warmly at the younger woman, "It's a little early to give up hope now, Aliz—we've just got started."

"Thank you, Sir." Aliz responded; flashing a smile of her own as, taking the gourd from the commodore's hands, she took a sip of the cool water. Looking up at the stars, the auburn haired helmsman asked, "I wonder where we are...I can't place any of the constellations..."

"I don't think we're too far off from where we started." Bob replied as he pointed at a faint smudge near the zenith. "See that?" As Aliz nodded her head, Robert continued, "Five'll get you ten that's our nebula."

Shaking her head, the Hungarian ensign asked, "How can you be so sure, Sir?"

Laughing gently, the commodore responded, "I can't. But it's just as likely to be our nebula than not and I'd rather be working towards a goal rather than just slogging along." His face now taking on a serious look, the former Academy boxing champ counseled, "Never underestimate the power of hope, Ensign. It can keep you—and your people—going when you've got nothing else."

"Yes, Sir. I'll remember that." The young officer replied in a soft voice as she stood up. "Ummm...Sir..." The young ensign stammered, "Don't you think you should get some sleep now?"

"Yeah." The older officer smiled as he leaned back against the tree, "I'll just go ahead and sleep here—it's a pretty nice spot."

"Good night, Sir." Aliz said softly as she turned away, her eyes involuntarily drifting to the figure of the commodore in repose before she forced herself to walk away. *Easy, Aliz.* The Hungarian woman thought as she made her way back to the fire. *Not only is he your superior officer, he's a good twenty years older than you are and he's married with a child.* Reaching the fire, she took a quick drink of water. Closing her eyes, the petite ensign fingered her medallion before drifting off to sleep, the last image in her mind that of the commodore resting peacefully underneath the tree.

"All right, everyone! Up and at 'em!" Commodore Wesley called out as he

roused his fellow castaways. "Here you go." He grinned, handing Ensign Watley a gourd filled with water. "Have a drink, Jennifer...then go get some breakfast. We've got plenty of berries and the snares we set out nabbed us some small game." Laughing, the commodore, after he was sure that the youthful ensign had fully awakened, went from crew member to crew member, repeating his performance.

"You're certainly in a good mood this morning." Aliz grumbled as she cleared the sleep from her eyes.

"Remember what I said last night, Aliz..." Robert grinned as he handed the young Hungarian helmsman a piece of meat skewered on a stick, "Never underestimate the power of hope."

"Yes, Sir." Ensign Bathory replied as she fingered the medallion hanging around her neck. Her mouth watering at the taste of the meat, Aliz asked, "What is it?"

"What does it matter?" Wesley quipped with a shrug, "It's edible and it'll keep us alive—and that's what's most important." Grinning, he handed the young officer a water gourd, "Now drink up and get ready...we've got a good day's march ahead of us."

Swigging the water from the gourd, Aliz smiled back, "Aye, Sir." Walking over to where her roommate sat picking at red and black berries, Aliz asked, her voice edged with concern as she noticed the dry blood on her friend's sky blue mini-dress, "How're you holding up, Jennifer?"

"Better." The dark haired exobiologist replied, managing a shaky grin. "It all happened so..."

"I know." Aliz responded sympathetically as she took one of the black berries, popping it into her mouth. "Not bad." She remarked as she took another.

"You should try the red ones." Jennifer said as she took a bite of the meat. "They're just a little tart—but not too bad."

"Hmmm..." Aliz vocalized as she tried one of the red berries, making a face as she bit into the berry. "A little too tart for me. I think I'll stick to the black ones."

"Sirs?" Crewman Malik interjected, coughing discreetly. Seeing that he had the

two junior officers' attention, the security rating handed each of them two sticks with points and another stick, this one crudely notched. "Spears...and an atlatl." He said, explaining, "After sharpening the points, I put them in the fire for a while—that hardens them. These..." He instructed, holing out his atlatl, "Will give you a bit more range and power. You put the end of the spear here..." He coached, "...and throw it like this..." The Moroccan demonstrated, launching his spear smoothly towards its target, a nearby tree. "Now..." he smiled, "You give it a try."

Both women, imitating the security specialist's actions, after several fumbling attempts, finally succeeded in launching their spears, Ensign Watley's attempt falling far short of the mark; while her roommate, Ensign Bathory, using her gymnastics training, enjoyed a bit more success, almost reaching the tree.

"Not bad, ladies!" Commodore Wesley praised, clapping his hands. "Take some more time to practice while I break camp. I expect both of you to be able to hit that tree by the time I'm done." His voice taking on a more serious tone, the commodore explained, "I don't expect either one of you to become experts, but you do need to know how to use these. Your life...or the lives of those around you...might very well depend on you striking your mark on the first attempt."

"Aye, Sir!" Both officers promptly acknowledged as they each reloaded their atlatls with fresh spears, repeating the exercise again and again until finally, several attempts later, both officers struck the tree trunk, Aliz's spear actually penetrating the bark.

"Good job, Sirs!" Crewman Malik praised as the commodore approached.

"Better..." Wesley chimed in, nodding his head approvingly. "We should be ready now. Go and pick up your spears..." He ordered as he handed each of his people two empty gourds. "First stop is the stream to fill these up. And then we make our way for that structure—whatever it is—and see if we can get some answers."

Far behind the rest of his companions cutting their way through the thick underbrush, K'Temoc, in his position of rear guard moved slowly, carefully following the path blazed by his compatriots. Hearing the sound of a twig snapping ahead of him, the young Klingon warrior, his black beard freshly grown, paused for a moment. Engaging all his senses, he sniffed the air while

his eyes scanned the forest, missing nothing as his ears picked up on the slightest sound. Hearing the faint snapping of another twig, the youthful hunter smirked as he picked up a scent. Hefting his *d'k tahq* in his hand, K'Temoc hunted.

Further up the trail, K'Tan, the captain of the battlecruiser, K'Mar, heard the snapping of a twig as well. Flashing a feral grin, the Klingon warrior motioned with his hand, his men fanning out on either side of him as K'Tan turned about, dodging just in time the swipe from sharp claws. His eyes seeing a bipedal creature approximately the size of a fully grown Klingon with a long, narrow neck, feathered crest and blue-green scales, its open mouth revealing rows of sharp teeth and fangs, the Klingon warrior smiled, his own feral grin nearly matching that of the creature.

Lunging as he dodged, K'Tan's knife struck into flesh, the resulting howl of pain bringing a triumphant, "Maj!" from the captain as he withdrew his knife. Their captain having drawn first blood, as was his right, M'Kal and D'Kell leaped from their flanking positions, their knives punching through the creature's sharp hide as its claws swiped again, this time raking D'Kell's chest, cutting through the armored mesh of his shirt into flesh.

Hearing the sounds of battle as he drew closer, the youthful warrior, resisting the calling of his blood to leap into the fight, spotted a movement in the woods, circling around the struggle. Smirking triumphantly, K'Temoc stalked the stalker as it crept around the three Klingons battling its mate.

Howling his rage, D'Kell forced the pain out of his mind as his knife struck again, slashing into the scales of the monster under one of its armpits, twisting his knife, the burly Klingon barely dodged the sharp teeth of the creature as his companions struck again and again with their knives until finally, after making one last swipe of its claws at its tormentors, the creature died.

"Yaj!" K'Tarn called out, soon to be joined by M'Kal and the injured D'Kell, "Yaj!"

Creeping up, K'Temoc hearing his captain's jubilant victory cry as well as the death howl the creature he had slain, watched as the predator he had been stalking, having witnessed its mate being killed, tensed its muscles to lunge at the back of the Klingon captain who was at that moment celebrating his triumph. K'Temoc, striking before the dead creature's mate could pounce, struck, his knife piercing the back of the animal's neck. Leaving his *d'k tahq*

embedded within the creature, the young Klingon grappled its neck just below the head with both his hands. Planting his feet firmly on the ground, K'Temoc jerked on the reptile's neck, sending it flying back towards a large tree.

Roaring its anger as it impacted on the tree, the reptilian creature staggered to its feet as K'Temoc, taking advantage of the animal's stunned condition, leaped on it, forcing it to the ground. Taking his knife out of his prey's neck, the young Klingon struck again, this time burying his knife through the lower jaw of the creature, piercing all the way through into the mouth. As the animal tried to close its mouth, it howled in pain as its upper jaw closed on the blade protruding from its lower jaw.

Hearing the sound of the battle behind them, K'Tan and the other warriors turned to watch as K'Temoc, withdrawing his knife, struck again, this time driving the blade into the creature's braincase, killing it as its body twitched one last time.

"*MajQa'!*" K'Tan cried out, a broad grin on his face as he approached the young warrior. Taking a badge from his honor sash, the Klingon captain stood before the youth. "You are no longer a mere soldier..." The captain proclaimed as the young man before him smiled triumphantly. Pinning the badge on to the young warrior's chest, K'Tan announced, "You are now '*utlh*...an officer. Wear this on your honor sash when we return to the *K'Mar*!" Taking a step back, the captain grasped the younger Klingon's shoulders with his hands, "*Qapla!*"

"Do you have news, Ms. Zha'Thara?" Commander Alexei Kuznetsov asked, swiveling his seat around as the *Lexington's* Andorian science officer strode on to the bridge.

Her antennae bending towards the burly Russian, Talana smirked, "Am I good or what?"

"I take it you have something for me then, Lieutenant Commander?" Alexei somewhat impatiently responded, "Do please..." He added, a faint note of sarcasm in his voice, "...enlighten us?"

"You're no fun, Alexei..." The Andorian woman riposted with a half grin. Her

smile fading as she took her station, Talana, activating the main viewer, made her report. "I was right about our answer lying in that massive tachyon surge that took place before the commodore and the others disappeared. Essentially, what happened was that the *Lexington* and the Klingons were enveloped in a spatial displacement field..." She said, the viewscreen displaying a schematic of the two ships being first surrounded by the field and then disappearing into the opaque field.

"I don't understand..." Alexei replied, his voice reflecting his confusion, "...the field is gone, but we're still here."

"We're here...now!" Talana corrected, "But...for a brief period of time...mere microseconds in fact, we weren't. We were...for lack of a better way of putting it...out of phase."

"Out of phase?" The Bear repeated, "What do you mean, Lieutenant Commander?"

"I'm not sure yet, Sir." Talana replied truthfully, her voice filled with awe at the technology of whoever possessed the capability to accomplish this task, "I just don't have enough to go on."

"I thought you had good news, Ms. Zha'Thara..." Alexei remarked sourly.

"I do, Sir." The Andorian smiled back. "While I can't tell you exactly where we went or how it was done, I can tell you that whoever did this left us a trail to follow."

"The tachyon emissions?" Kuznetsov ventured, his lips now turning up into a smile.

"The tachyon emissions." Talana reiterated, her initial smile fading, "But we don't have much time to act before the tachyons dissipate and the trail disappears."

"What do we need to do?" Alexei quickly asked as he leaned forward in the chair.

"We can't do this alone..." The science officer replied, "For this to work...we're going to need the Klingons' help."

Sighing deeply, The Russian first officer answered back in a dubious tone,

"Are you sure there's no choice?"

"For this to work..." Talana explained, "...we need two ships. The power requirements are just too great for one ship alone to pull it off. The Klingons will have to reconfigure their disruptor arrays to emit steady neutrino streams that will 'paint' the tachyons while we will have to reconfigure our scanners to read them."

"I see." The Bear replied, cupping his chin, "How extensive will the sensor reconfigurations have to be?"

"Very." The Andorian science officer answered back, her antennae drooping slightly, "It'll leave us completely blinded to everything but the tachyon emissions."

"Leaving us in the same situation as a horse with blinders on." The Bear concluded grimly. "Meaning we won't be able to pick up on any possible moves the Klingons might make."

Nodding her head, the science officer answered back, "Right. But at the same time..." She smirked, "It'll leave the Klingons without their disruptors." Frowning, Talana cautioned, "Alexei...if we're going to follow the trail, we have to move quickly and both ships will need to put all their resources into it."

"Mmmmm..." Alexei murmured as he considered the situation, "There might be a way for us to follow the trail and ensure that the Klingons can't blindside us." Activating the intercom, the first officer spoke, "Lieutenant Commander G'arv and Lieutenant Mtolo report to the bridge at once."

Her lips turning up into a sly grin as her antennae once again bent towards the burly Russian, Talana quipped, "You look like you've got something up your sleeve, Alexei?"

"Da, Ms. Zha'Thara, I do" The Bear replied, "It's an old Russian saying..."

"So..." Talana teased, "Which one is it this time?"

Smirking, Alexei quoted, "Trust in God but lock your doors."

Taking point, Commodore Wesley cut carefully through the brush, the rest of his group following close behind, the calls of the different animals creating a symphony that kept the Starfleet party constantly on its toes. One call, however, soon came to dominate the others. A high pitched call, it sounded for several seconds before ceasing, only to pick up again several seconds later at a slightly different pitch. Several seconds later, the call sounded yet again. Ensign Jennifer Watley raised her hand as she spoke out in a carefully modulated tone. "Stop. Wait a moment."

"What is it, Ensign?" The commodore asked as he came to an immediate halt, crouching low.

"I'm not sure, Sir." The olive skinned xenobiologist replied, "But those might be calls from a hunting pack."

"Would they be stalking us?" Aliz asked with a worried expression.

"Not necessarily." Watley replied. "They could be going after other prey, or it could be mating calls, or..."

"So, we're not really sure of what we're dealing with." Robert finished, "Still...we don't want to take chances." Hefting his makeshift spear in hand, the commodore cautioned, "Stay alert."

"Are we actually going to go along with this *dogh* scheme?" D'Kor asked as he gazed into the eyes of his acting commanding officer, the first officer of the *K'Mar*.

"Is that a challenge, D'Kor?" Kalas growled menacingly as his hand went to the *d'k tahq* at his waist.

"No, Sir." The second officer quickly replied, shaking his head vigorously. "I was merely curious."

Relaxing visibly now that his dominance had been acknowledged, a broad smile appeared on the first officer's face, "Don't worry, D'Kor. I know why you are concerned—that the Federation starship will attack us once our disruptors have been taken off line." Seeing his subordinate nodding his head, Kalas' broad smile became an evil grin as he explained his plan, "Remember, old friend, that they must recalibrate all of their sensors in order to pick up

the emissions given off when the tachyons are bombarded by the neutrinos fired by our retuned disruptors. That means they will be totally blind..." Gazing intently into the eyes of his subordinate, the Klingon acting captain inquired, "Have you gathered the twenty warriors I told you to?"

With a single nod of his head, D'Kor promptly responded, "Yes, Sir. All well versed in zero gravity combat."

"Excellent." Kalas grinned. "When I give the order, those men, with you as their leader, will take a shuttle. Using just maneuvering thrusters you will draw close enough to the saucer section of the *Lexington* to where you can exit the shuttle, walk on the Federation starship itself, and cut your way directly into their bridge."

Smiling broadly at the chance for glory that he had just been given, D'Kor exclaimed in a loud, enthusiastic voice, "It will be a glorious battle."

As the high pitched calls grew louder and more insistent, nerves began to fray amongst the tiny party. "Where the hell are they?" Malik grumbled; his spear at the ready. "I wish they'd do something!"

"Easy, Crewman..." Wesley counseled as he motioned for the group to halt. Pointing, he whispered, "Clearing ahead. Ensign Watley?" Gesturing with his hand for the young xenobiologist to come forward, the commodore, once again taking on the role of instructor, inquired as the calls picked up even louder in volume. "Assuming you're one of the pack that's stalking us, what would you do here?"

"That clearing would be where I'd make the ambush." Jennifer promptly responded. "The pack will try to cut one of us out. While some of the pack would drive the rest of us apart from their target, the others would try to bring their victim down."

"Very good, Ensign." Wesley praised, smiling approvingly as he continued to test his new officer. "Now...we have to cross that clearing to get to where we have to go. How would you recommend we do that?"

"We don't have much time, Sir..." Watley pondered, carefully considering her answer, "From the sound of those calls, I'd say they're getting ready to..." Before she could finish her sentence, a shout of alarm followed very quickly

by a yelp of pain came from behind her as Crewman Malik threw his makeshift spear at one of the predators, a wolf sized cross between a bird and reptile with a dark blue crest on its head and sharp fangs lining the jaw of its beak. Screaming in pain as the first creature's mate tore a gash into Malik's leg with its fangs, the Moroccan struck down with his second spear, its point breaking off inside the body of the animal.

"Break for the clearing!" Wesley ordered, "And whatever you do...stay together! Don't let those things separate us!" Stepping out into the clearing first, the commodore shepherded his people out into the open, Aliz supporting the injured Malik as the friends of the creatures that had attacked them earlier struck from both sides.

"They're going for Malik!" Jennifer yelled as she launched her spear at one of the pack members, missing it.

"Stay together!" Robert cried out as the group ran, stumbling for the other side. Watching with alarm as Malik began to fall behind, the commodore and Aliz launched their spears, both striking one of the animals which, at that moment, was lunging towards the security trooper. Bringing the snarling animal down with his spear, Wesley gestured wildly with his free hand, calling out to the women, "Go! Make for the tree line! I'll get Malik."

"Hurry, Sir!" Jennifer called out as she and Aliz threw fresh spears at the howling pack which was trying to separate out the humans into two groups, "We'll try to draw them off!"

Grabbing the injured Malik by one arm, Wesley and the security trooper staggered towards the others, lunging at the growling pack while at the same time trying to avoid their slashing teeth. Wincing in pain as one of the creatures slashed at his leg, scratching the skin as it tore through cloth, Robert lunged down yet again with his spear; piercing flesh as the pair finally reached the tree line. Driving the remaining members of the pack back with the last of their spears, the commodore sighed in relief. "Good work, everyone." He praised as he made his way to Crewman Malik. Examining the security trooper's wounds, Robert took one of the gourds containing fresh water. Pouring water over the wound, the commodore cleaned it as Jennifer ripped the collar off her minidress.

"Here, Sir." The ensign said as she handed the dark material to Wesley who then used it as a makeshift bandage for the injured crewman. Hearing yet again the sound of material being torn, Robert turned his head to see that Aliz

had just ripped part of her dress off at the hemline.

"Sit down, Sir." The ensign requested in her thick Hungarian accent.

"I'm fine." The commodore replied, fighting down the desire to wince in pain.

"I'm sure you are, Sir." Ensign Bathory retorted as she reiterated her earlier appeal, adding, before the commodore could overrule her, "I just want to make sure you stay that way." Cracking a sly grin, the youthful ensign quipped in a low voice that only the two of them could hear, "Remember what you said about hope, Sir? Well...we need you to stay strong to lead us. If your wounds should get infected..."

Sighing in resignation, the former pugilist cracked a wry grin as he sat down, extending his leg. "All right...all right, Ensign...you win."

Smiling as she cleaned and bandaged the commodore's wounds, Aliz chuckled, "I almost always do, Sir."

"Are we ready?" Commander Kuznetsov asked the *Lexington's* Andorian science officer, inching forward in his chair as he addressed her.

"The sensors are recalibrated." Talana promptly replied from her science station.

"Ms. Oudekirk..." Kuznetsov then ordered, addressing the blonde haired communications officer, "Inform the *K'Mar* that they can fire when ready."

"Aye, Sir." The Dutch comm specialist acknowledged.

Toggling the intercom switch on the chair arm, the *Lexington's* first officer spoke, "Misters G'arv and Mtollo...are you prepared."

"Yes, Sir." The Tellarite engineer responded. "Just give the word."

"If the Klingons try anything..." the Zulu security chief promised, "...we'll be ready for them."

"Very good. Mr. G'arv..." Alexei smirked, "...you may release our watchdogs."

"Watchdogs away." G'arv exclaimed as he pushed a button on his console, releasing two of the small buoys that normally contained the ships' logs and were usually ejected in the event of the possible destruction of the ship. The chief engineer had, however, modified these buoys. Instead of containing log entries, these markers were loaded with passive sensors and one other modification: once they had drifted far enough away from the *Lexington*, each of them shot out a line with a magnetic attachment that affixed itself to the ship's hull.

"A trick from old Earth naval warfare." Alexei had explained earlier to both G'arv and Lieutenant Mtolo when he had outlined his plan. "Naval vessels would tow sonar and other sensors behind them. By doing so they both extended their detection radius and prevented having their own ships detected by the opposition's detection devices." Lieutenant Mtolo and his people provided the second part of the Bear's scheme, "Mr. Mtolo..." The burly Russian boxer explained, "The buoys are my guard...you and your people will be my left jab and right cross. If Kalas tries something—I'm counting on you to deliver the knockout punch."

As the sun began to set, Wesley smiled as the object of his party's trek grew larger, now taking on the shape of an obelisk. Leaning on the large stave that now served as a walking stick, the commodore grinned, "Take a look, people! We're almost there."

"What do you think it is?" Aliz asked; squinting her eyes as she tried to make out details in the distance.

"I'm not sure." Robert replied with a chuckle as he placed a hand on the young ensign's shoulder, "But we'll all find out together, tomorrow." Scanning the terrain, the sharp-eyed commodore spotted a clearing located on a slight rise, "We'll camp out tonight over there..." he pointed, "It's the highest ground in the immediate area, making it a good defensible position."

"It's probably pretty close to water too, Sir." Jennifer noted as she helped Crewman Malik to the ground. "I'll bet there's a pond or a stream or something similar over in that direction..." She remarked, pointing towards the west. "I spotted what looked like the local equivalent of water fowl setting down for the night." The xenobiologist then cautioned, "But we better be careful—we don't want to run into this planet's version of crocodiles either."

“Good point.” Wesley agreed. “All right, then. We’ll take five and rest up and then hike on over to that hillock and make our camp for the night. Get plenty of rest...” he admonished as he pointed at the obelisk, “...I have a feeling tomorrow’s going to be an even bigger day than today.”

“Our goal is within reach!” K’Tan called out triumphantly as he spied the obelisk. Taking note of the rushing water and rocky terrain, the Klingon captain smiled. “This is a good place to rest for the night. We build our fire here...” he commanded, pointing at a clearing. As he and K’Temoc set down the butchered meat from their earlier kills, the Klingon warrior grinned, “Tonight we feast!”

“Fire!” Kalas ordered as pale green beams lanced out from the Klingon battlecruiser’s wing struts.

“It’s working!” Talana cried out as she peered into her sensor viewer.

“Transfer to main screen.” Alexei commanded. The viewscreen shimmered for a moment to reveal a pale blue path through the starry field. “There’s our tachyon trail.” The Russian first officer declared, slapping the arm of the center chair he currently occupied. “Inform the Klingons and set course to follow that trail at maximum impulse.” Kuznetsov ordered, smiling in satisfaction. “And monitor the watchdogs...I don’t want any surprises now.”

“Look!” K’Mar’s weapons officer called out, pointing at the main viewscreen.

“I see...” Kalas grinned as the tachyon trail appeared on the viewer. “Maintain firing rate and match the Federation ship’s course and speed.” Nodding his head as both the weapons and helm officers acknowledged his commands, the Klingon acting captain toggled his intercom, “D’Kor...stand ready, but do not move until I give the order.” Flashing an evil grin, the ambitious first officer concluded, “I want to see where this trail leads us first.”

PART 5

"We're almost there!" Wesley called out, encouraging his tired and bedraggled party as they scampered up the ridge line. Climbing to the top, the commodore pointed towards the object of their trek, "There it is!" He exclaimed, pointing towards a large black obelisk standing all by itself on an empty plain separated from the group by a wide chasm, a flimsy rope footbridge the only apparent way across.

"How tall is it?" Ensign Aliz Bathory asked as she tilted her head back in awe at the huge structure jutting heavenward.

"It must be a good fifty meters or more in height." Jennifer Watley chimed in as she helped the injured security crewman, Malik, up to the top. Looking up, the olive skinned ensign exclaimed in an awe inspired voice, "I wonder who built it."

"That's one of the questions I'm hoping we'll find the answer to." Wesley replied with a grin.

"Before we do that, Sir..." Ensign Bathory interjected, her eyes glancing down to the makeshift bandage tied around the commodore's leg, "I want to take a look at that."

Chuckling, Robert shook his head, "It's ok, Ms. Bathory."

"Are we going to go through this again, Sir?" Aliz grinned, "Now...do we do this the easy way—or the hard way? See..." She added, pointing at Jennifer who was already inspecting Crewman Malik's wound, "...Malik's being a good boy..."

"All right...all right!" The commodore exclaimed, throwing up his arms in mock resignation as he sat down, "You win!" Shaking his head, Robert remarked in a joking tone, "You must be a holy terror at home."

"I am, Sir." Aliz rejoined as she knelt down next to the ruggedly handsome older man. Removing her makeshift bandage, the young Hungarian nodded her head approvingly as she poured water from one of the gourds tied around her waist. "It's cleaned up nicely. No sign of infection. Those poultices Jennifer made from those herbs that she found seem to have done the trick."

"This does seem to be a resource rich world." Wesley noted as his self-appointed nurse placed another poultice on the wound, "Hopefully we'll be able to find its location once we get back to the ship. Although it has its dangers, it looks to be a prime world for colonization."

"Maybe, Sir." Aliz agreed and then joked as she tore off another piece of her hemline and tied it around the older man's wound, "But for now, I'm just hoping we find a way back to the ship before I end up naked."

Chuckling, Wesley struggled to his feet, politely refusing Aliz's offer of assistance, "I've got it, Ensign."

Laughing out loud, Aliz shook her head, "How does your wife put up with you, Sir?"

His smile vanishing, the commodore looked down as he mumbled, almost inaudibly, "That's what I keep asking myself..."

Seeing the pained look on the older man's face, the young Hungarian placed a tentative hand on his shoulder, "I'm sorry, Sir...I didn't mean...I was out of line."

"You didn't say anything wrong, Aliz...don't worry about it." Bob answered back, a warm smile returning to his face as he regarded the auburn haired woman standing before him.

Flashing a slight smile of her own as she looked up into the craggy face of her commanding officer, Ensign Bathory replied in a soft voice, "Thank you, Sir." Then, as her eyes appraised the flimsy looking bridge crossing the chasm separating them from the obelisk, the former Academy gymnast asked as she tilted her head towards the security trooper sitting next to Ensign Watley, "What about Crewman Malik? Can he make it across with his injury?" Gazing down into the chasm, she dropped a pebble. Counting down the seconds before hearing a barely audible splashing sound, she remarked, "That's a long way down, Sir."

Cupping his chin, Robert flashed a grin, "We'll get across Ensign..."

"I know, Sir, I know..." Aliz joked, flashing an amused grin, "Don't give up hope..."

"You're learning." Wesley jibed back before turning his attention towards the other male in his party, "How're you holding up, Crewman?"

"I'm fine, Sir." The Moroccan security trooper replied confidently as, with Ensign Watley's help, he struggled to his feet. "You all go on without me. Don't worry about me...I'll be all right here."

"I don't want to hear that talk, Crewman." Wesley answered back, his voice tone leaving no room for disagreement. "We all stay or go together!" Dashing towards a nearby tree line, Wesley pulled down a vine. "Help me out here..." He called out as he pulled down yet another long, thick vine. "We can use these as ropes..."

"Tying us all together." Jennifer exclaimed as she and Aliz helped pull down more of the thick, long vines. Hefting one in her hand, the exobiologist observed, "They seem to be strong enough to support one of us should we slip and fall off, but I'd like to be sure..."

"One of those rocks over there?" Aliz asked, pointing at the ridge line they had just crested. "I'm sure one of them would weigh about as much as one of us."

"Good thinking, ensigns." Wesley remarked approvingly as he pulled down yet another vine. "We'll use this as our test line. Now..." he smiled as he began to walk towards the rocks, "Let's see whether our makeshift ropes can do the job or not."

"Well..." The commodore grinned as he and Malik pulled the rock up, "...we know now that the rope'll hold." Tying a rope around his waist, Wesley instructed, "We'll tie ourselves together, that way, if one of us slips, the rest of us will be able to pull whoever it is up." As the others tied the vines around their waists, Wesley further ordered, "Ok...Malik, tie the loose end of this rope to the vine around your waist and Jennifer'll tie the other around hers, that'll connect us all together. Aliz, since you're a gymnast, you probably have the best balance of all of us, so you'll lead. Crewman Malik will follow you, then Ensign Watley, and I'll anchor us. Ready?" Seeing everyone nodding their heads in reply, Robert's smile returned, "All right...we've got a bridge to cross. Let's do it."

Moving slowly, Aliz grasped both sides of the rope bridge as she carefully placed one foot in front of the other on the slender board that served as

bridge. Everything seemed to be progressing smoothly until she heard a yelp coming from Crewman Malik behind her and then the bridge began to sway violently from side to side, the young gymnast struggled mightily, pressing down with her arms to stop the violent motion.

Watching with alarm as he saw Malik stumble, Commodore Wesley matched the motions of his Hungarian helmsman in the lead, adding his strength to hers in an effort to stabilize the bridge as Ensign Watley struggled to help the Moroccan security officer regain his footing. Sighing in relief as the security officer recovered, the commodore called out, "Everything ok up there?"

"We're fine, Sir!" Jennifer called back, "Malik just slipped."

"Ok, but try to be a little more careful. Take your time; we don't have to rush it."

Feeling the breeze beginning to pick up, Aliz looked up in the air. Noticing the darkening clouds, the young Hungarian shouted back, "Sir...we might want to pick up the pace a bit. If that wind picks up too much..."

"Right, Aliz!" Robert answered back. "You set the pace. Everyone else, watch your footing." The wind growing more violent, the tiny party struggled to retain their footing as the swaying of the bridge grew ever more violent.

Drops of water now stinging against her face as she made out their goal just a few meters away, Aliz gritted her teeth as an especially violent gust of wind struck, accompanied by the crack of thunder and a brilliant bolt of lightning snapped the flimsy rope bridge, "Hold on!" She shouted, as she and the others held on for dear life. Grunting as she slammed on to the cliff face, Ensign Bathory, holding on tightly, called out as she glanced down. "How is everyone?"

"I'm ok!" Jennifer called back, her voice hoarse as she tried to make herself heard over the whistling wind.

"I'm fine!" Commodore Wesley responded, "Just a few bumps and bruises."

Hearing nothing from the Moroccan security officer, Aliz called out again, "Malik?"

Looking up, Jennifer cried as she saw the redshirted crewman plastered against the rock face, a jagged rock jutting from his chest. Her tears

indistinguishable from the falling rain, the young science officer shouted, "He's dead."

Watching the horrible tableau from below, Commodore Wesley called out, "Jennifer...Aliz...we'll grieve for him later. Right now we have to make it up this cliff before the other end of the bridge decides to snap.

"Yes, Sir!" Aliz called back as, using the rope bridge, she began to make her way up the rock face, the others following. Robert, stopping at Malik's body, said a silent prayer as he gently closed the young Moroccan's eyes. Resuming his climb, he made rapid progress, nearly catching up to the stumbling Jennifer. Catching her as she lost her footing, the commodore smiled encouragingly.

"We're almost there, Jennifer. Just a little bit more. You can do it!"

Scampering to the top, Aliz, ignoring the rain and wind, held her hand out to her roommate. Grabbing her friend's hand, Jennifer pulled herself up to the top, soon followed by the commodore. As the trio paused to catch their breaths, Jennifer asked in a somber tone, "Does anyone know if Malik had any family?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Aliz replied somberly, "I don't know. I didn't know him before we all got pulled here." Turning to the commodore, she asked, "Do you know, Sir?"

"No." Robert admitted, shaking his head in shame, "Lieutenant Mtolu—his immediate supervisor would know. Unfortunately, I haven't had time to get to know the details on more than a few people yet." His eyes now reflecting his determination, he added as he struggled to his feet, "But I intend to when we get back."

"Sir..." Aliz cautiously ventured, "There's no way you could have known what was about to happen..."

"Aliz is right." Jennifer chimed in, "What happened to Malik could have happened to any of us. You shouldn't blame yourself."

"I know..." Bob conceded, a sad smile on his face, "I've seen more than a few young men and women...friends...shipmates...crew...die, and I've sent more than a few off to die—that's one of the decisions that comes with captain's stripes. Still..." he admonished as he once again took on the role of teacher,

“...the decision to send someone off on what is likely to be a fatal mission or the loss of a crewman in an accident or in the line of duty should never become something you see as routine. One of the most important possessions a starship captain has is his...or her...” he emphasized as he gazed into the eyes of the two women before him, “...humanity.”

“Yes, Sir.” Aliz and Jennifer responded softly, taking in the commodore’s words as he struggled to his feet. Holding out his hand, he helped both young ensigns up as he turned his gaze to the obsidian obelisk standing before them.

The rain slacking off, Robert’s voice took on an enthusiastic tone. “Why don’t we see what this thing is?”

As the three Starfleet officers walked around the obelisk, searching in vain for what looked like an opening, Aliz remarked dejectedly as she shook her head, “I can’t find a way in.”

“Neither can I.” Jennifer added, her voice taking on a dismal tone as well until she spotted something out of the corner of her eye. “Commodore...Aliz...I think I spotted something!” A broad smile on her face, she cried out, “They’re right here, but they’re easy to miss. You have to look at eye level and use averted vision to spot them.”

Following the science officer’s instructions, grins broke out on the other two officer’s faces as they also spotted the three shapes etched faintly into the face of the monolith.

“They’re patterns.” Aliz exclaimed. “There are three parallel lines and three triangles. But what do they mean?”

“Hmmm...I wonder...” Wesley muttered softly as he approached the etched patterns. Touching the first line, he found, to his astonishment, that he could move it. Using his finger, he moved the line to where it bisected the first triangle from top to bottom. Smiling, he repeated the process with the second line and triangle. Touching the third line, he drew it in such a matter that it bisected all three triangles from left to right. As he completed the pattern, the face of the obelisk started to glow a warm yellow. Stepping back a couple of paces, the commodore and the two young women with him looked on with astonishment as an opening appeared.

"Well..." Robert remarked, flashing a slight grin, "Looks like someone just answered the doorbell. Let's see who's at home," he urged as the trio walked through the opening, the entrance returning to its former obsidian form after the last of the group had passed through the threshold.

K'Tan and his party, now less one warrior, having approached in the opposite direction from the group from the *Lexington*, didn't have to face the challenge of the chasm. They faced another obstacle—one that brought a gleam of anticipation to the eyes of the Klingon starship captain. Standing before him and his two remaining warriors, blocking their progress to the obelisk was a giant creature. Like most of the predators they had encountered, it was part reptilian and part avian. Standing erect, it was approximately ten meters in height, with a red feathered crest that looked like a fan on the top of its head. Its reptilian heritage showed in its blue scales and fore-claws as well as the sharp teeth that lined its long beak. Its challenge call, a loud hiss, brought a smile to K'Tan's face.

"This..." The Klingon exulted, "...is a challenge worthy of a warrior! Brandishing his *d'k tahq*, he raised it above his head, shouting out to the monster, "*Tai-kleon!* Today is a good day to die!" Turning to his men after issuing his challenge, the wily K'Tan issued his orders, "We must lure it here, where the terrain favors us." Hefting a rock in his hand, the warrior declared, "I will act as bait. You two—wait in ambush in the trees."

"Understood!" K'Temoc and M'Kal acknowledged in unison, uttering a proud, "*Qapla!*" as their captain stepped confidently towards the growling creature, honor blade in one hand, rock in the other. "Let's take our positions, M'Kal!" K'Temoc urged as he began to ascend the tree closest to him, "Don't worry..." he laughed as he noticed the sour expression on his fellow warrior's face, "...there will be glory enough for us all!"

As K'Tan drew closer to the hissing, growling monster, it lunged at him in a gesture the Klingon warrior instinctively understood to be a challenge. Smiling, he drew back his arm containing the rock, throwing it with all his strength at the animal, hitting it square in the snout. Laughing as the creature howling its rage at the tiny Klingon's impertinence, charged, K'Tan turned and ran, leading the giant into his carefully conceived ambush. Diving into the underbrush, he shouted, "Now!" as the monster charged into position.

Jumping down from their concealment atop the canopy of trees, M'Kal landed

on the back of the creature as K'Temoc struck its neck. Piercing flesh as they dug their *d'k tahq's* in between the animal's thick scales, both warriors flashed savage grins as the beast howled in pain. Rising to his feet, K'Tan joined in the carnage as he dashed beneath the beast, grabbing on to its legs as he jabbed into its flesh, his blade searching for ligaments and tendons to slash.

The behemoth, however, did not stand helpless before its assailants' onslaught. Twisting its serpentine neck around, it struck the Klingon stabbing into its back, its powerful jaws severing the warrior in two. Shaking its head, the creature devoured the hapless M'Kal, splattering his blood on to everything and everyone in the vicinity.

Ignoring the droplets of their comrade's blood landing on his face and body, K'Temoc struck and again, digging his dagger deeper into the monster's flesh until finally, he achieved his goal, the creature's spinal cord. Twisting his wrist and slashing upwards, the Klingon warrior, with a triumphant shout, severed the cord as his captain, also shouting a victory call, succeeded in severing the creature's ligaments. Leaping off as the giant monster fell to the ground, K'Temoc rolled on hitting the ground, coming to his feet at the same time as K'Tan, who, jumping off the monster's leg, tumbled safely away. Rushing at their now helpless prey, both warriors plunged their knives deep into the magnificent monster until, with a last cry, it moved no more.

"Glorious!" K'Tan shouted, exulting in his and his officer's triumph, "Glorious! We will have songs written about us!" The Klingon captain boasted as he clasped K'Temoc on the shoulder.

"Indeed!" The young officer replied with a toothy grin as he and his captain looked on triumphantly at their conquest. "A most magnificent victory!"

"Yes." K'Tan agreed as he turned his eyes to the obelisk. "And now..." He declared pointing at the monolith, "...it is time to seize our prize."

As the two warriors drew closer to the looming black structure, a series of reddish shapes appeared on its face. Watching as the swirling shapes slowly coalesced into Klingon letters, K'Tan read aloud, "Through battle you have arrived...through blood you will enter." Then, as he read the last word, two recesses the size of Klingon hands appeared below the writing. With a grunt, K'Tan, taking out his *d'k tahq*, sliced his palm, drawing blood. Nodding his head at his subordinate, K'Temoc, immediately understanding, copied his

captain's action. Both warriors, stepping up to the obelisk, placed their hands within the recesses. As their blood touched the surface of the obelisk, the face of the structure glowed. Stepping back, the Klingons smiled triumphantly as an entrance appeared. "Let us see what awaits us." K'Tan declared as he and K'Temoc stepped through the entrance.

"What are our 'allies' doing?" Commander Alexei Kuznetsov inquired as he pivoted his chair towards his communications officer.

"They're behaving themselves so far." Cilla Oudekirk, the Lexington's Dutch communications officer noted. "No transmissions out of the ordinary and nothing suspicious coming from the sensor pods outside the ship.

"Good." The burly Russian first officer replied, "But keep a careful watch—I don't trust those Klinks as far as I can throw all of them together." Addressing his Andorian science officer, he further inquired, "What are you picking up, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Nothing so far...wait!" The lovely Andorian exclaimed, her original statement forgotten as her eyes, invisible to the others as she was hunched over her sensor visor, widened in astonishment, "I'm picking up what appears to be a large structure in the center of the nebula.

"Main viewer!" Alexei ordered as the navigator, Lieutenant, Junior Grade Terrence Lawford, rushed to comply, his fingers flying over his console. Seeing nothing but swirling clouds of gas, the Russian officer nicknamed the Bear commanded in his usual gruff tone, "Magnify and go to tri-xenon filters. Let's see if we can clear some of this clutter."

"Aye, Sir." Terrence acknowledged in a crisp English accent as he moved to comply with the acting captain's command. "Got it, Sir." He called out triumphantly as a form took shape.

"*Bozhe moi!*" Alexei swore as his eyes took in the sheer magnitude of the object before them: a central spire, pointed at both ends, surrounded by a ring, with spokes connecting the spire with the ring. Jet black in appearance, the structure possessed elegance in its simplicity. "I wonder who built it..." The big Russian mused in an unusually contemplative tone.

His science officer, also speaking in an awestruck tone, voiced her opinion, "I

don't know, Sir, but I'm dying to find out."

"Look at it." Acting Captain Kalas proclaimed from his place on the bridge of the Klingon battlecruiser, *K'Mar*, practically drooling as his eyes took in the magnificence of the structure before him. "And soon it will belong to the Empire!"

"Shall we begin the attack on the Federation starship?" His acting first officer, D'Kor inquired, his lips turning up into a feral grin.

"Not yet." Kalas replied, holding up a cautionary hand. "If I know the Starfleeters, they will want to study..." the Klingon warrior said, putting all his scorn into that last word, "...it." Flashing a sly grin, he continued. "We shall let them...in fact...we shall join them. Then, once they have plumbed its secrets, we shall strike. We will take the *Lexington* and the alien structure at the same time."

"Sir!" The warrior manning the communications console called out, "The Federation starship is hailing us."

"You see, D'Kor?" Kalas gloated, "Even now, the Federation commander is about to make his proposal." Signaling for his communications officer to put the signal through, Kalas settled back into the captain's chair as the image of the burly Russian appeared on the viewscreen.

"I'm sure by now..." Commander Kuznetsov declared, "...you have seen the alien structure."

"I have." Kalas answered back, "What do you propose?"

"I suggest..." The Russian first officer replied, "...that we launch a joint expedition to study it. Of course, we will share all information."

"That's all well and good..." Kuznetsov's Klingon counterpart rejoined, "...but how do we determine who owns the structure?"

"I recommend..." Alexei responded, "...that for now we leave that question to the diplomats."

Cupping his chin, Kalas deliberately held back his response for several

moments, giving the appearance of carefully considering the commander's words. His lips turning up into a grin, the Klingon answered back, "Very well, Commander. This is my proposal—it is not..." he added in a grim tone, "...subject to negotiation. Each ship will send one shuttlecraft to the object with no more than six. The shuttlecraft will launch simultaneously. Any information gained by either party will be shared equally. Then, after our landing parties have finished their work, they will return at the same time."

"Accepted." The Russian officer agreed, "With one stipulation." Matching the Klingon officer glare for glare, Alexei continued, "No weapons other than standard sidearms permitted with weapons locked on a stun setting only. For us that will be phaser ones. For you, disruptor pistols—leave the *bath'leths* and *d'k tahqs* on your ship—and I don't give a damn about the *d'k tahqs* being honor blades—no edged weapons and no weapons set to kill. Each team will inspect the others' weapons on arrival to ensure compliance with the terms." He then concluded in a voice that clearly indicated that he would not accept any compromise, "It's that or no deal."

With a low growl, Kalas replied, "Very well...I agree."

"Good!" Alexei responded, plastering an insincere grin on his face. "I'll have my science officer coordinate with whoever is leading your landing party regarding landing points on or near the structure for our teams. Kuznetsov out."

As the Starfleet officer's image faded off the screen, D'Kor cursed, "*Pet'aQ!* He is afraid. He knows he and his people cannot defeat us in honorable combat."

"You're right, my friend..." Kalas replied condescendingly, "...the Federation commander is afraid—but he is also very smart. He seeks to minimize our advantages while maximizing his. Still..." The Klingon commander said, his lips turning up in a sly grin, "...it will avail him naught. One Klingon warrior is worth three humans." Grinning as D'Kor nodded his assent, the acting captain further ordered, "Also, have your strike force ready to move the moment we receive the results from the expedition. I want the *Lexington* taken before that *Pet'aQ* of a first officer knows what hit him."

"Do you think the Klingons will honor their side of the agreement, Alexei?" Talana asked, her antennae twitching nervously.

"Hell no." The Russian growled. "Oh...they'll send real scientists to work with you, but...once they've gotten all they think they're going to get, they'll strike. That's why I want you to be prepared."

"How?" The Andorian science officer queried, "We will have equal weapons and they'll have the initiative."

"Ah..." The Bear grinned, "That's where you're wrong. "Remember, odds are, you'll end up controlling the flow of data. Also, I will be disguising three security specialists as science officers..." Seeing the dubious look on the lovely Andorian woman's face, Alexei chuckled, "Don't worry, Lieutenant Commander, I want you to coordinate with Lieutenant Mtolu—I'm sure he's got three security officers who have at least a working familiarity with the sciences. Regardless of what you might have heard, security specialists are not knuckle-dragging Neanderthals."

"I never said they were, Alexei..." Talana replied with a frown, "But I should remind you of the same thing, not all Klingons are mindless killing machines. Remember, they possessed interstellar travel and had already conquered an extensive empire long before your species had even ventured beyond your atmosphere. Don't make the mistake of underestimating them."

"You make a good point." A chastened Alexei responded. "Be sure that those you choose to pose as science officers can, in fact, act as such—at least in a limited capacity. We can disguise them as ensigns—that should help maintain their cover should they trip up in some way or other." Taking his science officer's smile and nod of her head as agreement, the Russian commander proceeded with his instructions. "As you complete your mission, try to maneuver yourselves where you can react quickly should the Klingons break the truce. Don't let them get too close to you. Even without their damned blades they're dangerous. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir." Talana responded crisply. "If it's all right with you..." She ventured, "I'll contact my opposite number on the K'Mar and get the ball rolling."

"Go ahead, Lieutenant Commander. And..." The Bear added, his voice taking on a cautionary note, "Be careful."

"Don't worry, Alexei..." Talana replied in a teasing voice as she began to walk towards the turbolift doors, "I always am. And now..." She joked as the doors slid open, "I've got stuff to do...I can't wait to see what's inside that thing!"

Cupping his chin as he gazed on the large structure almost filling his viewscreen, Alexei murmured to himself, "Some mysteries are better left unknown..."

PART 6

As they walked slowly into the obelisk, Wesley and the remaining members of his party found themselves in a dimly lit chamber, the light source apparently coming from luminescent stones affixed to the walls. Advancing further into the chamber, they confronted K'Tan and K'Temoc, advancing from the opposite direction. Readying his atlatl, Wesley challenged his Klingon counterpart, "Are you responsible for this?"

"That was my question to you, Earther." K'Tan spat out as he and his companion brandished their *d'k tahqs*. First you destroy our scoutship..."

"We didn't destroy your ship!" Robert interrupted with a scowl, "You're the ones attacking and destroying Federation starships in neutral space. Now, I want to know, what did you do to the *Voltaire*? Did you attack it without warning like you attacked our ship?"

"You were in Klingon space!" K'Tan snarled, "We destroy intruders!"

"We are not the intruders here..." Robert riposted, "You are."

Flashing an evil grin as he and his fellow warrior crept slowly forward, K'Tan sneered, "I have had enough of your lies, Earther. I shall look forward to disemboweling you and your females."

His eyes flashing with anger at the Klingon's threat to the two ensigns, Robert launched his spear at the onrushing warrior. But, much to his astonishment, both spear and charging Klingon, encountering an invisible barrier, bounced back. Wesley, seeing the spear now coming at him ducked immediately as his counterpart, thrown back several feet, landed on the floor with a thud. As the two ship captains struggled to their feet, a voice resounded within the chamber, speaking Federation Standard to the humans while simultaneously speaking the Klingon's own language to them.

"You represent the best of your races. You have triumphed over the obstacles put before you to have reached this goal. Now it is to be seen whether you are worthy or not."

"Who are you?" Commodore Wesley called out, "Why have you taken us and where are we?"

“What gives you the right?” K’Tan shouted; his voice a challenge. “To kidnap us from my ship? If you are not cowards, then show yourselves!”

Agreeing somewhat with the Klingon standing on the opposite side of the barrier from him, Robert once again called out to the voice, “We are not rats that you can run through your maze. We demand to know who you are and why you have taken us.”

“If you seek answers—prove yourselves worthy!” The voice boomed.

“Worthy of what?” Wesley asked, forcing himself to calm down as he realized that bravado was not going to get the answers he sought.

As if in answer to his question, a crystal table appeared in the center of the chamber, bearing three objects on it: a spear, a book seemingly bound in leather, and a serpent in a circular form, devouring its tail. The spear glowing, the voice once again filled the chamber, **“You have already passed the first test—that of battle. You have all exhibited physical and tactical prowess against the forces of nature.** The spear, glowing brilliantly for a brief moment, disappeared as the book now glowed. **“This test could prove much easier—or more difficult and could potentially carry great ramifications for the future. What will happen will depend solely on you.”**

“What if we refuse to play your little game?” Wesley yelled back, receiving a confirming grunt from his Klingon counterpart.

“We are Klingon warriors.” K’Tan shouted, “We will fight whom we wish and when we wish!”

Immediately after the two captains had uttered their words of defiance, the far wall of the chamber seemed to suddenly fill with a multi-colored cloudy substance. Slowly, the cloudy tendrils coalesced into an image: the Lexington and K’Mar, both standing off near a large structure resembling, in some ways, a space station. Jet black, the central portion was a central spire, pointed at both ends spokes jutting out from the spire connected it to a ring.

“Failure to comply will result in serious consequences!”

“Are you threatening my ship?” Wesley demanded, his tone now taking on an angry edge.

"We will not be intimidated by empty boasts from empty voices!" K'Tan declared, adding his voice of protest.

"We threaten no one." The voice responded. **"We simply state that if you refuse to participate, you will not be permitted to return to your people. If that happens, there is the possibility that your ships, in their desire to recover you, could meet their own demise. The choice is yours."**

"It's a bluff!" K'Temoc growled, "Nothing more."

"Do not be so quick to dismiss their claim, young warrior." K'Tan advised, his years of experience screaming out at him to exercise caution here. "Remember, only a fool fights in a burning house."

Addressing the Klingon officer standing before him, Wesley said through clenched teeth, "I think we have a good ideas as to what happened to our two ships now..."

"Ungh..." K'Tan agreed with a single nod of the head, "So it would seem."

"It seems we have no choice..." Wesley remarked, "But to go along with our host's wishes if we wish to see either of our ships again."

"Agreed." K'Tan reluctantly conceded, "For now, we have a truce. But I make no promises for afterwards."

"I guess that'll have to do." Wesley acknowledged as, raising his voice, he once again called out to the disembodied voices, "All right. We'll agree to your tests—if you agree to the following conditions. First, you tell us who you are and why you are doing this to us. Second, you return us to our ships. And finally, you promise to stop doing this to our ships and people in the future."

A booming sound that almost seemed like laughter filled the chamber. Then the loud voice once again resounded, **"You are indeed bold! But is that boldness justified? We shall see. If you complete the tests, then we shall consider your terms. Prepare yourselves!"**

"That's probably the best we're going to get..." Robert managed to get out, before the room, once again filling with thick, multi-colored fog, became totally opaque. "Jennifer? Aliz?"

“Launch shuttlecraft *Aldrin*.” Commander Alexei Kuznetsov ordered as he drummed his fingers on the center seat’s arm rest. “And raise Lieutenant Commander Zha’Thara once the shuttlecraft is underway.”

As both Lieutenants Oudekirk and Lawford simultaneously acknowledged the Russian first officer’s commands, the clamshell doors located in the rear of the giant *Constitution* class starship slowly slid open as the pad upon which the shuttlecraft *Aldrin* rested slowly rotated until the tiny craft was in launch position. Flashing a playful grin, Lieutenant Commander Talana Zha’Thara, the *Lexington*’s Andorian science officer, turned her head towards the enlisted human pilot sitting next to her, wearing a gold shirt with three chevrons on his sleeve, marking him as a petty officer, first class. “Ok, Coxsun, take us out.”

“Aye, Sir.” The petty officer, a lifer who had been on starships all his life, replied as he operated the tiny craft’s controls. The shuttlecraft slowly rose and then, as smooth as silk, exited the shuttlebay. “Setting course for the alien station.” The coxswain reported, “I’ve got the Klingon shuttlecraft.” He further announced, pointing with his free hand at a tiny dot emerging from the shadow of its Klingon mother-ship, the shark-like *K’Mar*.

Hearing the tell-tale beep of an incoming hail, Talana opening the communications channel, heard her friend Cilla Oudekirk’s Dutch accented voice, “*Lexington* to *Aldrin*...*Lexington* to *Aldrin*...”

“This is *Aldrin*.” Talana immediately responded, “We’re underway and have spotted the Klingon shuttlecraft.” Seeing the coxswain nodding his head slightly out of the corner of her eye, the Andorian science officer continued her report. “No scans of weapons or other shuttlecraft. Looks like they’re playing it straight this time.”

“Just the same...” Commander Kuznetsov cautioned, “...be careful, Lieutenant Commander and don’t forget to check in at regular intervals.”

“Aye, Sir.” Talana acknowledged with a playful lilt to her voice, “I promise I’ll call home and won’t go out with any strange Klingons.”

Hearing his science officer’s flippant response, the Bear growled in a low tone, “I’m serious, Ms. Zha’Thara. Watch yourselves—if something happens, we might not be able to help you in time...”

All traces of humor vanishing upon hearing the commander’s grave voice, the

beautiful Andorian replied in a surprisingly tender tone, “We’ll be careful, Alexei...I promise.”

The opaque swirling mist clearing, Wesley, Aliz, and Jennifer found themselves on a glassy plain gazing at the setting sun, a dull red giant. Looking about the area, Wesley immediately spotted a crystalline structure standing in the middle of a circular depression. “That’s probably where we’re supposed to go...” He pointed as he and his companions regarded the structure.

“So...” Jennifer inquired, “What are we supposed to do here.”

“Well...” The commodore speculated as he recalled the three objects on the table. “The voices said that the spear stood for battle and that’d we’d met that challenge. And then, before we were transported here, the book glowed.”

“What would be the significance of a book?” Jennifer questioned; a confused look on her face.

“Well...what’s the purpose of a book?” Robert asked, once again taking on the role of instructor.

“Let’s see...” Aliz replied, “Books contain knowledge...”

Shrugging, Jennifer added, “You can read them for entertainment.”

“What about enlightenment?” Wesley prompted with a grin

“You mean like a religious text?” Ensign Bathory questioned.

“Or philosophical or ethical writings.” Robert replied. “In other words—wisdom.” Smiling, the commodore pointed towards their destination. “In any event, ensigns, we’re not going to find enlightenment, wisdom, knowledge, or entertainment standing around here. Our answers lie over there—in that crater.”

“Aye, Sir.” The two women responded as the threesome advanced towards the depression. As they advanced towards the structure, Ensign Watley pointed at the many crystal shards littering the glassy plain on either side of where the three officers walked. “Sir...Aliz...take a look.”

"They're all different colors...but they seem to come in only a limited number of shapes." Ensign Bathory noted as she bent down, picking up two of the shards. "See..." She commented, "This ruby one has a diamond shape while the sapphire is more of an oval."

"And the emerald..." Wesley noted, "...is triangular in shape."

"And the topaz...: Aliz said as she raised a topaz colored crystal, "...is in the form of a perfect square."

"Yeah...but..." Jennifer pointed out, "...the shapes don't always match the colors. See that sapphire triangle or the green diamond?"

"Interesting..." The commodore mused as he stuck some of the shards in his boots. "You girls might want to do the same..." He said, "...they could come in handy as samples."

"Right..." Aliz grinned as she scooped up some of the crystals, "And if nothing else, Jennifer can use them for her new necklace."

"Oh poo!" Jennifer joked, "You're just jealous because I got to Ensign Friedman before you did."

Laughing as his young ensigns kidded around with each other, Robert's thoughts suddenly drifted back to his wife, *I wonder what Virginia's doing now*, the suddenly pensive commodore thought to himself as the two women with him laughed merrily.

Seeing the smile on the ruggedly handsome Wesley's face suddenly vanish, Aliz walked up to the older man. Looking up into his eyes, she tentatively asked, "Are you ok, Sir?"

"Yeah..." Robert answered back, snapped out of his reverie by the young auburn haired woman standing before him, "...I'm fine." Forcing a smile to his face, he fibbed, "I was just thinking about the ship and how it's doing."

"I'm sure everything's fine, Sir." Aliz consoled, "After all, I don't care what those stuck up snobs on the *Enterprise* say, as far as I'm concerned, we have the best ship and crew in the Fleet."

"Thank you." Wesley replied, his spirits buoyed by the youthful Hungarian

helmsman. "Now...let's see if we can solve this mystery so that we can get back home."

"Look at that!" Lieutenant Edward Forrester, one of the science specialists that Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara had brought with her on this expedition, exclaimed, pointing at where a strut had suddenly extended out from the alien ring structure, with what appeared to be a square landing platform at its end.

"Looks like they're expecting us." The Andorian science officer observed, her antennae pointing forwards. Turning towards the petty officer piloting the shuttle, she commanded, "Ok, Coxsun. Bring us on in."

"Aye, Sir." Petty Officer Miller laconically acknowledged as he steered the tiny shuttlecraft towards its destination. Pointing towards a tiny object also headed towards the landing pad, the coxswain reported, "Looks like the Klingons have the same idea."

"Is that pad big enough for both of us?" Talana asked, not looking forward to having to engage the Klingons in a race for the landing spot.

"It'll be tight..." The experienced shuttle pilot judged, "...but it's doable." Expertly piloting the shuttlecraft in, Miller set the craft down on the left half of the pad as his Klingon counterpart did the same on the right. As the craft powered down, the occupants of the shuttle felt a slight lurch. Looking out the window, one of the disguised security specialists, a Vulcan, Ensign Xylvan, noted in a flat, matter of fact tone, "It would appear that we are being brought into the structure."

"Well..." Talana smiled, "That's where we're supposed to be going anyway, isn't it? So..." She advised in a nonchalant tone, "Let's relax and enjoy the ride."

The mist dispersing around Captain K'Tan and his companion, the two Klingons found themselves in exactly the same situation as their Federation counterparts. Spotting the spire in the distance, K'Tan snorted, "I tire of playing the role of the fool, K'Temoc. Still...we might find something of use here." Pausing for a moment as he took in the stark surroundings, he sounded

a note of caution, "Be on your guard. There is more here than meets the eye."

As the two Klingons hiked towards the crater, they, like their counterparts, spied crystalline shards of varying shapes and colors. "Interesting." K'Temoc noted, holding up an emerald lozenge, "There are only these four shapes and these four colors."

"Yes..." K'Tan growled, "Another part of the test, no doubt. Collect them. I have a feeling they will prove useful."

"Captain!" K'Temoc exclaimed, pointing at a stele at the edge of the crater that was the destination of the two Klingon warriors. His eyes carefully scanning the area around the crater, he pointed at three other, identical structures, "What are they?"

"Perhaps answers." K'Tan answered back as he approached the nearest slab.

As Commodore Wesley and his party drew nearer the crater, they, like the Klingons, immediately spied four stelae, each at opposite sides of the crater. "You know..." Ensign Whatley observed, "If you were to draw lines connecting the stelae, they'd intersect dead center."

"Right where that object is located." Aliz interjected, pointing at an irregularly shaped crystalline structure approximately two meters tall. "Should we take a closer look?"

"You two stay back." The commodore ordered, "I'll go." Approaching the first stele, Wesley examined several bas relief images decorating the top and bottom of the stele with the middle consisting of four depressions. "That's interesting..." he murmured as he motioned for the two ensigns to join him. "See how those depressions are about the same size and shape as the shards we picked up."

As K'Tan approached the stele, he growled. "K'Temoc...come here. It looks like our jailers have set a test for us."

The younger Klingon, nodding his head, grunted as he pointed at the images on the top of the slab. "Look at the pictographs, Captain. The first one is of fire."

"This pictograph resembles crossed spears..." Jennifer noted, pointing at the image in question.

"Could it stand for battle?" Aliz inquired.

"Possibly..." Wesley replied as he decoded the pictographs.

"Through the fire of battle..." K'Tan immediately translated, his lips turning up into a smile.

"...is great wealth for those who survive." Commodore Wesley finished, pointing at what appeared to be a picture of a gemstone.

Laughing, K'Tan exclaimed, "A warrior's saying!" Then examining the second set of images, he translated, "Corrosive and poisonous...the triumph of the ambush brings no reward."

"A victory attained through treachery is an empty victory." K'Temoc pronounced.

Shaking his head, K'Tan chuckled, "Ah...the vanity and folly of youth. Listen, young warrior and learn..." The grizzled Klingon veteran admonished, "Victory is victory. Whether it is achieved in combat with an alert and worthy foe...or in stealth...or through ambush...does not matter. All that is important is defeating your foe. The only true emptiness comes from defeat."

Successfully deciphering the third set of images, Ensign Watley read aloud, "Caution brings neither reward nor penalty."

“In other words...” Wesley quipped, “Nothing ventured...nothing gained.”

“Placid selflessness bears unforeseen consequences...” K’Tan translated, laughing aloud as he slapped his companion on the shoulder, “Of course it does!” The worldly captain declared, “Only a flaccid Earther would believe otherwise.”

“Or...” Commodore Wesley chuckled as he read the inscription, “...no good deed goes unpunished.” Turning towards his young officers, Robert opened the discussion, “So...we have four clues, four shapes of shards, four colors, four stelae, and four depressions in each of the stelae. Now, let’s put it all together and see what we come up with.”

“Fire is red...” K’Temoc surmised, “Therefore the red stones must stand for the fire prophecy.

“When we go to yellow alert...” Aliz grinned, “...it means that we’re taking a cautious posture. So...it’s a safe bet that the topazes stand for the third inscription.”

“Some poisons are green...” K’Tan mused, “...and some metals appear green when corroded. Which would mean that the second verse refers to them.”

“A blue sky is placid...” Commodore Wesley observed, “...as is a calm sea or lake. The last stanza must refer to the sapphire. “

“So, K’Temoc...” K’Tan smiled, “Which color stones would you put into the depressions?”

“Hmmm...” The young Klingon answered, “Before I would have chosen red, but now, after listening to your words, I would choose green.”

“Why...other than heeding my earlier words, would you have chosen green?”

K'Tan asked, stroking his beard as he gave the younger officer an appraising gaze.

Realizing that his commanding officer was carefully gauging his response and that his career—and possibly his life—depended upon how he answered his captain's question, K'Temoc carefully pondered his answer, "There are several reasons, Captain. First, what use is great wealth if it cannot be enjoyed? Also, fighting a battle now would serve no useful purpose, while at the same time possibly putting the Empire at a disadvantage. Should we fall, then the Earthers would triumph as they will surely take one of the other options. They would reap the rewards all to themselves. Had there been a few more of us, then I would be more willing to risk battle, but, as Kahless said, 'Losing a battle to win a war is no defeat...'"

"And winning a battle while losing a war is no victory." K'Tan nodded his head, pleased at his subordinate's answer. "Very good, K'Temoc—I see I was right to promote you. A fool such as D'Kor would have chosen the red stone, but you are wise in that you understand that a true warrior knows that he must never allow his love for battle to blind him to the wider view." Placing his right hand on the younger Klingon's shoulder, the grizzled veteran nodded his head, "You will go far, young K'Temoc...so long as you remember to leaven your courage with wisdom."

Picking up the green stones, K'Tan placed one of each within the appropriate depression. As the last stone was emplaced, a faint green light bathed the stele in its glow. "Now..." the Klingon captain commanded, "Let us do the same to the other slabs and we shall see how wise we are."

"Working under the assumption that we're not going to go with either the rubies or the emeralds..." Commodore Wesley stated as he posed yet another ethical question to his junior officers, even though he had already decided which set of stones he was going to use, "Which of the other two would you go with?"

"The topaz would be safe..." Jennifer began, only to be interrupted by her friend and roommate.

"But if we went with that, we would be passing up a possibly great opportunity. Aliz argued enthusiastically.

“Or a possible disaster.” Jennifer countered, “Remember, the inscription for the sapphire reads, ‘...unintended consequences’. There’s a wide range of possible results in that statement—and not all of them good.”

“If we’re afraid to take chances, then we don’t have any business being out here.” Aliz smoothly riposted, getting into the verbal exchange.

“Calculated risks...” Jennifer argued back, “Yes...I agree. But there are too many variables here. We just don’t have enough to go on to chance it.”

Watching and listening carefully as the two young ensigns debated their positions, Wesley nodding his head sagely. Clearing his throat, he interrupted their argument, “You both have made good points, but, in this instance, I agree with Ensign Bathory. The possible opportunities to learn and make contact with a new life form outweigh the possible risks. We go with the sapphires.”

As the landing platform retracted completely into the black ring and the outer doors of the structure closed, the occupants of the *Aldrin*, gazing out of the windows of the tiny vessel, could see only inky blackness until, without warning, the area immediately around both of the shuttlecraft was bathed in a dim yellow light.

“Sensors report an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere and one standard gravity. No known pathogens.” Lieutenant Forrester reported.

“See if you can raise the Lexington.” Zha’Thara ordered as she took a phaser and communicator handed to her by Ensign Xylvan, attaching them to the belt around her waist.

“No joy, Commander.” The coxswain reported, frowning at his inability to raise the *Aldrin*’s mother ship.

“Well...” Talana replied, putting on a brave face for her command, “That shouldn’t come as a big surprise. After all, if our scans couldn’t get through that structure, there’s no reason to think our communications would either. It just means we’re going to have to be extra careful.” Moving towards the shuttlecraft’s main egress, the Andorian science officer turned back to address her away team, “Ok everyone, remember, we have a truce with the Klingons. Don’t do anything to provoke them—but don’t take any crap off of

them either. Watch yourselves...watch them...and remember why you're here—to try to find out as much as we can about what this thing is and whether it had anything to do with the disappearance of the commodore and the rest of our people.” Exhaling, she punched the button to open the door, “Ok people...let's see what's out there.”

“We've lost contact with the *Aldrin*, Commander.” Lieutenant Cilla Oudekirk, the *Lexington's* communications officer reported from her station.

“Damn.” Commander Kuznetsov swore, “Even though we anticipated that possibility...” Commander Kuznetsov growled, “...I still don't like it. Keep trying at regular intervals, Lieutenant and continue monitoring our 'watchdogs'. I want to know the moment the Klingons try anything.”

“Our shuttlecraft has disappeared within the structure and we have lost contact.” D'Kor informed his acting captain. Your orders, Sir?”

“We wait...” Commander Kalas decided, “But not forever, my friend.” He smiled, “Have your warriors ready to move. Their moment will come very soon.”

Exiting the *Aldrin* first, Petty Officer Miller by her side, Talana immediately spotted her counterpart, a Klingon woman, another one of those referred to by their fellow Klingons as the 'unfortunate ones' due to the presence of human augment DNA in their system, standing next to a Klingon male. Drawing his phaser immediately on seeing the two Klingons, the coxswain cautioned, “Careful, Ma'am.”

“Lower your weapon.” The Andorian science officer ordered in a soft voice, as she held both her hands outstretched. “I am Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara!” She called out to the Klingons. “We have a truce.”

The Klingon female, also motioning for the warrior standing next to her to lower his weapon, promptly responded in a loud, clear voice, “I am Lieutenant Lyssan. Let us begin the mutual inspections so that we can commence our business.”

"You heard the Lieutenant." Talana whispered to the crewman standing next to her. "Tell the others to break out the equipment." Calling out to her Klingon counterpart, the lovely Andorian suggested, "Let's start with ourselves. We'll meet in the middle between our two shuttlecrafts." Not waiting for an answer, Talana started towards the Klingon craft, stopping dead center between the two vessels.

Approaching from the opposite direction, Lyssan made her way alone down the ramp that extended from the hatch at the side of her craft to the landing pad deck, crossing the area between her craft and the Aldrin, immediately coming to a halt as she reached the tall Andorian woman.

Taking her phaser out from its place of concealment at the small of her back, Talana handed it to the shorter olive skinned Klingon woman standing before her as, simultaneously, Lyssan handed her disruptor, butt first, over to her. Both officers nodding their heads in agreement that the terms of the truce had been adhered to—by them at least, Lyssan spoke with, much to the surprise of her Andorian counterpart, a slight smile on her face, "I would suggest, Lieutenant Commander, that we have the rest of our teams carry out their inspections of each other one at a time—that would limit the possibilities for any unfortunate...misunderstandings."

"Agreed." Talana answered back, her lips turning up into a smile as well. *This might...the Andorian science officer hoped as she said a quiet prayer to the goddess of luck...actually work.*

Placing a green oval into the final depression on the final stele, K'Tan stood back as the object began to glow. The green glow from all four slabs grew brighter and brighter until finally, four beams of green light lanced from each of the stelae, shattering the crystalline structure in the middle into thousands of tiny fragments.

As the glow around the stelae subsided, a voice boomed as the swirling mist once again surrounded and took the two warriors, **"An interesting...and most unexpected...choice. We shall have to ponder this."**

As Wesley placed the last blue lozenge in its slot, a blue glow, similar to that

which emanated from the other stela, suffused the area around the slab. Unlike with the Klingons, the blue glow, instead of shining with a brighter intensity, radiated gentle warmth as its beams bathed the crystalline object in the center, slowly melting the hard outer shell until only an amber amorphous mass remained. The mass oozed to the floor, pulsating for several moments until, much to the surprise of Wesley and the two women standing beside him, it took on the form of an avian creature totally alien to any of the humans. Flying to its benefactors, the...for lack of a better word, Wesley thought...shapeshifter flew around the three Starfleet officers as if it was studying them. Then, pausing in front of Commodore Wesley, the creature hovered for several seconds before taking off to the sky, free once again.

"What?" Aliz questioned, blinking in surprise, "Was that?"

"Did you see the way it assumed the shape of that bird?" Jennifer asked in an astonished voice.

"Very interesting...the loud voice of their host boomed...very interesting indeed. You have set forces in motion—forces that will not come to fruition in your lifetimes but that will bring both great opportunities—and great perils. This test is over!" The voice boomed as Wesley and his companions were once again taken by the mist.

Wesley and his people as well as K'Tan finding themselves once again in the large chamber, the commodore called out, "What did you mean by us setting forces in motion? Do they involve what we freed?"

"The answers to those questions must wait for future generations." The voice responded, **"You acted as we had anticipated. But you..."** the voice spoke, now seemingly addressing the Klingon captain, **"...surprised us. We had anticipated that you would choose the red stones—that you would want to engage in battle."**

Laughing, K'Tan replied, "Then you are not as wise, nor do you know us, as well as you thought. It is a foolish warrior who engages in wasteful struggle." Frowning, the Klingon warrior added, "It is also foolish to allow a potential enemy to escape."

"Your actions..." The voice pronounced, echoing the information that it had imparted earlier to Wesley, **"...will also weigh heavily on the future."**

Raising his voice, Commodore Wesley demanded in a crisp, clear tone, "We have met your conditions and participated in your tests. Now...return us to our ships."

"Not yet." The voice answered back, **"There are two more tests we must conduct."**

"What are these tests?" K'Tan demanded in a low growl.

"In the next..." The voice explained as the serpent on the table glowed, **"...we shall see how you respond when faced with who you were...who you are...and who you will be. The final test, the one that will determine your survival, will depend..."** The voice declared as an image appeared of the science teams from the *Lexington* and *K'Mar*, led by their respective science officers, surveying and investigating the immediate area around their shuttlecraft, **"...upon these ones'...as well as your own...abilities to rise above yourselves."**

"Lyssan..." K'Tan whispered in a low, affectionate tone inaudible to everyone but Wesley who, while cocking an eyebrow in surprise, remained silent. Realizing that he had been overheard, the Klingon warrior gazed into Wesley's eyes seeing within them not the mocking stare or disbelieving look that he expected, but rather, the sympathetic expression that one warrior has for another when that one's loved one is at risk. Nodding his head slightly, K'Tan grunted as Wesley looked away, giving the Klingon his dignity as an unspoken bond was suddenly formed between these two totally different individuals.

"Seeing as we have no choice!" Wesley called out as K'Tan nodded his head, "We agree to your test. Now...let's get it over with."

"Very well!" The voice resounded through the chamber as once again the mist surrounded everyone within the room, **"Let the test commence!"**

PART 7

Wesley

Colors and shapes swirled before the commodore's eyes, slowly coalescing into forms—objects...patterns—until finally the images took form becoming so vivid to Robert that he wanted to reach out and touch them, but somewhere, deep in his mind, he knew that he shouldn't—that to do so would shatter the illusion.

"You sure you can take him, Bob? After all, he went three rounds with the Vulcan champ..."

"Yeah..." Cadet Robert Wesley grinned as he threw all his weight into his next punch, forcing back both the bag and the man holding it, his best friend and fellow cadet, Matt Decker. "He's fast and nimble, but can't take much punishment." Wesley explained as he stepped away from the punching bag. "The only reason he lasted as long as he did against Stylok is that ol' Sty was toying with him. If he'd have wanted to, Sty could have taken him down in the first round."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself." Decker chuckled as he tossed a towel over to his fellow cadet. "Don't forget..." Matt reminded Robert as the other man turned to walk towards the showers, "We've got a date tonight with Ellen and her friend."

"Awww..." Robert moaned as he balled up his towel and tossed it at the sandy haired Decker, "...why did you have to go and remind me for? You know how much I hate blind dates. I can't believe that I let you and Ellen rope me into this!"

"I think it had something to do..." Matt rejoined with a laugh as he tossed the dirty towel on a nearby bench, "...with me winning a bet over who would score higher on his quantum theory exam." His laughter dying down, Decker pleaded, "Come on, Robert. You haven't been out on a date since you and Gloria split up. Hell, Bob...she's moved on—she's dating Chris Pope now—it's time for you to get on with your life too. Anyway, I honestly think you'll like Ellen's friend. She's smart, funny..."

"Has a great personality..." Robert finished with a scowl.

"And she's damned good looking too." Matt fired back before once again

making his appeal, “At least give her a chance, won’t you.”

“All right! All right!” Wesley sighed in exasperated resignation. “I’ll give it a chance. What’s her name again, anyway?”

“Her name’s Virginia.” Decker smiled, “And I just know the two of you are going to hit it off.”

“I fail to understand.” The voice stated, **“You have deep feelings for this individual and yet you did not desire to meet her?”**

His face flushing in both embarrassment as well as anger at the probing of his memories by these unknown entities, Commodore Wesley replied, “I did not know her at the time.”

“Ah...” The voice exclaimed, **“You live in a linear temporality.”**

“That’s correct!” Wesley affirmed, his heart racing now that he had received some small insight into these entities, “For us time is linear— isn’t it for you?”

“Time is much more complex...” The voice responded, addressing its test subject very much as if he were a child. **“...than you are at the moment is even capable of understanding.”**

Not wanting to let go of the subject, Robert pleaded, “Then enlighten me.”

In response, Wesley heard a rumbling sound that sounded almost like laughter, **“Your curiosity is boundless. Very well, we shall indulge you—a little. You think of time either as a river or as a circular loop, but it is neither—and it is both. It is all in one and it is shattered fragments.”**

“What sort of answer is that?” Wesley responded, shaking his head in confusion, “It’s contradictory...”

“As is time.” Wesley heard before the mist came for him once again.

Aliz

Through the swirling mists an image slowly took shape before the young woman...

"Happy Birthday, *Lany!*"

"Thirteen years old, Aliz!"

"Happy Birthday to you...Happy Birthday to you..."

"Come here, little one..." Once the elderly voice spoke, the congratulatory shouts and singing slowly died down as the young girl slowly walked up to where her great-grandmother sat. Presenting a silver necklace with round silver medallion with the profile of an exquisitely beautiful young woman engraved on it hanging from it, the Bathory family matriarch placed it around the young girl's neck. "Wear this always and give it to your oldest daughter when she is of age..." The elderly woman advised, "...and it will protect you from the Dark One."

"Thank your *dedanya* and go get some cake, dear." Aliz's mother said as she pointed her daughter towards a table with a large white layered birthday cake on it. "Oh *Nagyanya!*" Aliz's mother whispered, trying to keep her voice low as she shook her head disapprovingly, "Now what did we tell you about filling our daughter's head with such nonsense."

"You young ones..." The old woman sighed, shaking her head, "You're so sure of yourself—so eager to forget the past." The Bathory matriarch's face taking on a grave expression, she warned, "Do not be too smug in your knowledge, young one. The Bathory name is an old one—and it carries a very real price with it. Do not let our little one fall to it just because you have decided to ignore who you are."

"This Dark One...what is it?"

"It's a superstition that my *dedanya*—my great-grandmother—believes in." Aliz replied. "It's not real."

"Interesting..." The voice responded, **"So, why do you still keep the object if it has no use?"**

Shrugging her shoulders, Aliz answered back, "It's a keepsake—something

through which I can remember my *dedanya*."

"A remembrance?"

"Yeah." Aliz affirmed, nodding her head as she touched the medallion, "That's all it is."

Jennifer

"Now don't go too far out into the water, Jennifer!" The young girl's mother called out, "That current's too strong!"

"I won't, Mommy!" The little eight year old girl yelled back as she waded into the crystal clear river. Confident in her abilities, Jennifer swam farther and farther out as the current drew her both further away from the shore and further downstream from where her family had set up their camp.

Laughing, the young girl swam confidently until, feeling the current growing stronger, she tried to swim back upstream by the pull of the water. Her heart beating faster as she drifted further and further away from her mother, little Jennifer cried out as she waved her arms frantically, "Mommy...Mommy...help! Help!" Her head falling beneath the rapidly flowing water, Jennifer, panicking as she flailed her arms, gasped for air, calling out one more time before once again sinking beneath the surface, her lungs filling with water.

She floated in a cloudy haze. No noise...nothing...silence. It felt so peaceful...so...right...to the young girl. Then, she heard voices.

"Come on, Jennifer...breathe!"

"My baby...my baby..."

"One cc triox compound...stat!"

Yanked roughly from her peaceful glade, Jennifer coughed as the water left her lungs. Breathing rapidly, she heard a gentle male voice, "Take it easy, little lady. You're going to be just fine." She then heard the same voice speaking to someone else, "Mr. and Mrs. Watley, your daughter'll be just fine. I want to have her transported to the clinic for observation overnight, but I don't see

that there'll be any complications."

"Thank God!" The little child heard as she once again went to sleep.

Gasping, her heart beating rapidly, the now grown up Jennifer cried out sobbing, her hands covering her face as tears flowed unchecked, "Why? Why are you doing this?"

"We seek understanding." The voice clinically replied, **"You were near the termination of your existence. We wanted to understand how it felt for you at the moment when life and death merged."**

"I don't understand..."

"Neither do we."

K'Tan

His lips turned up into a sneer as he hefted his *mek'leth*, the youthful warrior K'Tan, his adrenaline pumping as he faced his first alien combat opponent, wiped the blood flowing from his lips with his sleeve as he hurled a challenge at his adversary, "Come, Romulan *Pet'aQ!* Are you going to attack or cower in the corner like a mewling, toothless old *grishnak?*"

Bleeding green blood from his side, the Romulan centurion growled in a low, menacing voice as he raised his dagger, "It will be a pleasure to kill you, Klingon *verul!*"

The two warriors circled each other warily, each probing for a weakness, that momentary opening that would, with one sudden thrust, end the fight. The centurion, scowling, struck, his movement as fluid as a cobra, his lunge aimed at his Klingon foe's kidney. However, instead of cutting through cloth and flesh, the dagger struck only air.

Twisting at the last moment, K'Tan avoided his opponent's strike. With a triumphant shout, the young Klingon slashed his *mek'leth* across the Romulan's throat. Splattered with green blood as his enemy fell, K'Tan raised his weapon bloodstained weapon high, drinking in the applause from his

fellow warriors gathered around the dueling circle.

“This memory pleases you?”

“Of course it does!” K’Tan replied, a proud smile on his face, “That was when I became a true warrior.”

“Because you killed a man?”

“He insulted my name and my house.” The Klingon warrior replied with a scowl, “He deserved death.”

“And had he killed you?”

K’Tan shrugged nonchalantly, “Then I would not be here talking with you now.”

“Interesting...”

K’Temoc

“Come, my son!” K’Temoc’s father, Kemoc called, holding his arms out as he knelt down.

Rushing to his father’s arms, the five year old Klingon shouted happily, “Father! You’re home!” Seeing the look pleased look on his father’s face, the young boy asked, “Did we win?”

“Of course we did, Son!” Kemoc replied as he mussed his eldest son’s hair. “The Earthers never knew what hit them! Captain Kor’s plan was flawless.”

“And Kemel? Did he fight well?” K’Temoc asked, referring to his favorite uncle.

“Kemel...” Kemoc replied, his voice filled with pride, “Died gloriously.” Seeing his son’s eyes begin to tear, the warrior father’s voice took on a disapproving tone, “Do not cry for him, my son. Kemel died as all Klingons should wish to die—as a warrior serving the Empire in battle. It was because of his courage

and sacrifice that we took the Federation starship's bridge. Kor himself sang his praises. Do not tarnish his memory with maudlin' tears as a weak human would. He is in *Sto-vo-kor*, fighting and feasting with his fellow warriors. One day, my son..." The Klingon warrior said as he looked down proudly on the young boy, "...you and I shall join him—if you become as brave and courageous a warrior as I know you will be."

"I will be." The young Klingon answered back proudly, "You'll see—I will be the bravest and strongest of warriors!"

"So...courage in battle is more important than life to you?"

"Of course it is." K'Temoc replied as if the answer was obvious. "Life is fleeting. All things die. But great courage in battle lives on—through songs and stories, the brave warrior is never forgotten."

"Your answer now differs from your response to the first test when you made the choice to decline battle. Explain."

"It is as my captain said." K'Temoc responded. "It was an unnecessary battle. Had we lost the Earthers would still be here—but we wouldn't. K'Tan is right...a foolish warrior gets lost in battle, while the wise man sees the greater vision."

"Most intriguing. You are not what we expected."

"No Klingon is." K'Temoc proudly replied as the mist once again took him.

Wesley

The mist once again resolving itself into recognizable forms, Robert once again recognized Virginia, only this time looking as she did when they were saying their goodbyes just a few weeks ago.

"So..." Virginia remarked, trying her best to maintain a stoic exterior, "...a five year tour. When do you think you'll be able to make it back?"

"I don't know..." Robert gently replied as he caressed his wife's cheek.

“Probably not for at least a year...maybe longer. The Typhon Sector is a long way away and is still mostly uncharted.” Trying to keep his enthusiasm for the coming voyage in check the newly-minted commodore said, “We’re going to be spending a lot of time just seeing what’s out there.”

With a bittersweet quality to her gentle laughter, Virginia Wesley tenderly removed her husband’s hand from her cheek, holding it in her hand. “And you can’t wait to get out there and see for yourself.”

“I’ll miss you...” Robert said softly as he kissed his wife, holding her tightly.

“And I’ll miss you too, Robert.” Virginia whispered back, crying. “Come back soon.”

“Why did you not take your mate with you?”

“Because she has her work back home.” Robert replied softly as the recent memory of his wife’s touch lingered in his mind. “And it wouldn’t be fair to ask her to leave it just for me.”

“But she is your mate...”

“She is also her own person.” Wesley protested, “I don’t have the right to make her give up her life to live mine.”

“There is more...” The voice stated, **“Tell us...”**

“My vessel is too small to permit family members on board.” The commodore quickly responded. “It wouldn’t be fair to the rest of the crew if I was able to bring my family and they couldn’t.”

“You still have not adequately explained your reasons.” The voice answered back, **“Tell us...”** It insisted, demanding the full truth from the man standing before it.

Sighing, Wesley confessed, “Because it is dangerous out here and I did not want her to be put at risk.”

“So...you leave her behind to protect her? You do not think her capable of surviving away from her home?”

"No!" Robert protested, "Yes...No...I mean...She's a strong woman...stronger than me in many ways...but...I could never live with myself if I let...if I caused...something to happen to her." His voice now taking on an angry edge, the commodore demanded, "Are you satisfied now?"

"Almost." The voice responded, **"We wish to see your response to one more set of visions..."**

Aliz

"Next up on the balance beam, representing Starfleet Academy, Fourth Year Cadet Aliz Bathory!"

Pausing before the beam, the slender auburn haired pixie, wearing the black and gold leotard of the Academy team, leaped up in one smooth motion on the narrow four inch wide wooden board. Her lips turned up in a well practiced smile, she carried out her movements: leg splits, several 360 degree turns, handstands, poses, leaps—a near flawless program. Dismounting, she held her hands up in the air, smiling broadly as she drank in the applause.

"9.9...9.7...9.8...9.9...9.8...9.0..."

"Ignore that last mark..." Her coach grinned as he patted her back encouragingly, "That's from the Vulcan judge—he never marks anyone higher than 9.4. You're a lock for the gold, Aliz!"

Sometime later, Aliz, hearing her name called out, stepped up on the center podium. Crying tears of joy the little Hungarian woman stepped up on the podium, bowing as one of the judges slipped the medal around her neck. Taking a bouquet of flowers from a flower girl, Aliz waved to the crowd as it cheered.

"I was flying for three weeks after that..." Aliz said with a smile as the images once again disappeared into the fog.

"You take pride in your triumph."

"Of course." Aliz replied, "I worked hard for it and I beat some of the finest gymnasts of my class in the Federation. Why shouldn't I feel good about it?"

"And your opponents? How did you see them?"

"What do you mean?" Aliz asked, confused.

"What did you think of them? Did you hate them? Want to hurt them?"

"Of course not!" Aliz laughed, "Some of them I've known for years and they're good friends of mine. It was a competition—not a war! We didn't hate each other or want to hurt each other! We all wanted to win—yes, of course—but it's all in fun!"

"So..." The voice surmised, **"You compete with each other for 'fun'?"**

"Yeah..." Aliz answered back, shrugging her shoulders, "It's a sport...friendly competition..."

"Strange..."

Jennifer

"You've already got a date lined up?" Jennifer Watley's roommate on the Lexington, Aliz Bathory shook her head in disbelief as Jennifer primped before the dresser drawer mirror they shared. "We've only been here for a week and you've already got a date. So..." The auburn haired helmsman asked, "Who is he?"

"He's the helmsman...Terrence...Terrence Lawford." Jennifer replied with a smirk. "He's taking me to movie night tonight—they're showing a fully restored version of "Some Like it Hot."

"I thought..." Aliz remarked as she observed her roommate going through her usual predate ritual of make up and combing her thick, luxurious black hair, "He was interested in Cilla Oudekirk..."

"Oh, he is..." Jennifer admitted, "He's just doing this to get under her skin..."

"And you're going along with this?"

“Yeah.” Jennifer replied, her lips turned up in a wicked grin. “Leaving out that he’s a nice guy, I’ve decided I don’t like Lieutenant Oudekirk—she’s a stuck up little ice queen.” The olive skinned science officer declared, “And one of these days I’m going to tell her what she can do with that earpiece of hers.”

“You hate this Lieutenant Oudekirk?”

“Hate’s too strong a word.” A red-faced Jennifer quickly replied, shaking her head. “I just don’t like her. You don’t have to hate someone not to like them.”

“We do not understand.”

“Look...” An increasingly uncomfortable Ensign Watley sighed, “Most intelligent beings form relationships with each other. Sometimes...we like each other and want to be with each other.

“Like mates?”

“Yeah!” Jennifer answered back with a smile, “Or friends—like Aliz—she’s my friend.”

“But she’s not your mate?”

“No.” Jennifer quickly replied. “I don’t have a mate right now, but if I ever were to have a mate, it would be with a man, not a woman—although I know women who prefer being with women and men who prefer being with men...” She rambled on, “It’s just that my personal preference is for men.”

“What is a friend?”

“A friend...” The young woman tried to explain, “Is someone you like being with, but that you’re not...drawn to. I mean...” She stammered, “...it’s like this. I like going out and having a good time with Aliz, but we don’t see each other as potential mates—we just like hanging out together...”

As the mist once again grew around the young ensign, she could hear the voice responding to her last statement, **“We shall have to think more on this...”**

K'Tan

"Our scoutship has disappeared." Commander Kalas, the first officer of K'Tan's new command, the D-7 class battlecruiser, *K'Mar*, reported.

"Location of last transmission?" K'Tan demanded from the command chair of his warship.

"Here..." Kalas answered back, calling up a display of the area within the Typhon sector claimed by both the Federation and the Klingon Empire. "As you can see...It is within our space. An Earther vessel must have attacked it."

"I can read a map, Kalas..." K'Tan growled, glaring at his sometimes overly ambitious first officer. "I also know that even though this is our territory, it is mostly unexplored. We cannot be sure that a Federation ship was responsible."

Wisely taking a deferential posture, K'Tan's first officer conceded, "Understood, Captain. What are your orders?"

"Set course for the last known location and maintain a close sensor watch." K'Tan ordered, his lips turning up into a feral grin, "We shall see who appears."

"We seek clarification. Why did you come to the conclusion that the 'Earthers' were responsible for the disappearance of your craft?"

"Their ship was the only ship in the area." K'Tan simply replied, "And I did not know about you."

"Why did you not try to communicate with the others before attacking them?"

"I would have lost the advantage then." K'Tan immediately answered back, "In any event, they were intruding into our space—that alone was reason enough to attack them."

"What makes you think that this is 'your space'?"

"We were here first, therefore we claim it." K'Tan declared, his face taking on a menacing countenance, "Why? Are you challenging our claim?"

A rumbling sound once again filling the room, the voice responded speaking as if to a child, **"The folly of youth. To think that one can claim the infinite—the unknowable. You are indeed as children. As to whether you will grow up to learn the truth—that remains to be seen."**

K'Temoc

"You will have to start your service to the Empire as a common soldier, my son." Kemoc declared, putting a hand on the young warrior's shoulder. "It is a family tradition. Our house began as common soldiers raised through our ancestors blood and sacrifice to the nobility. The founder of our house—the warrior raised by the great Kamar himself, decreed that all who would lead our house must prove their worth by beginning in the ranks. If you are able, you will advance soon enough—if not, then your brother shall lead our house."

Looking his father straight in the eye, the young soldier promised, "I will bring honor to our house."

"Go then, my son." Kemoc commanded, his voice filled with pride, "And serve the Empire well."

"Your honor is important to you..."

"Of course it is!" K'Temoc responded, shaking his head in disbelief at the voice's question. "It is the most important possession a warrior has!"

"Worth more than life?"

"Honor is life!" The young Klingon answered back, "Without honor, life is worthless to a true warrior."

"And your foes? Do they possess honor?"

“Some do.” K’Temoc admitted, “And those who do, who fight courageously, I respect and honor as fellow warriors and would gladly share a barrel of blood wine with them.”

“You Klingons...” The voice declared in what seemed to be an almost exasperated tone, **“Are a mass of contradictions.”**

“We are who we are.” K’Temoc answered back as the mist took him.

Appearing together once again in the large chamber, Wesley turned towards his young officers, “You doing ok?”

“We’re fine, Sir.” Aliz answered back, Jennifer nodding her head.

“I’m ok, Sir. They...” She stammered, “...they made me remember...”

“It’s in the past, Ensign.” Commodore Wesley consoled as he embraced a sobbing Jennifer. “Whatever it was...you got through it...you survived. Never forget that.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Ensign Watley sniffed as she broke from her embrace. “I’m...better now.”

“And you, K’Temoc.” K’Tan asked, “How did you fare?”

Laughing, the young warrior replied, “They were naught but memories—and memories cannot harm a true warrior...”

“Unless you let them.” The older warrior said, completing the old proverb. “Very good, young one. Very good.”

“You are a most fascinating group of specimens.” The voice spoke, drawing the attention of everyone in the room. **“You have given us much to ponder. Now, we are curious as to how you would respond when faced with your possible futures.”**

Wesley

"I'm sorry, Robert." Virginia said through her tears, "I love you...and I always will. But..."

"But..." Her husband said softly, his face a stoic mask threatening to crack at any moment.

"But I need my husband...I need him here and I need all of him..."

"Virginia..." Robert pleaded only to have his wife interrupt him.

"Bob...even if you retired, I'd never have you here—not completely. A part of you—an important part—would always be in Starfleet. You know that."

"When?" Robert asked in a quiet, resigned voice.

"My lawyer should have the paperwork done by the end of the week and the divorce—if you don't contest it..." She paused, her voice tone rising in pitch turning the statement into a question.

Shaking his head sadly, Wesley answered, "No...I won't contest it."

Sighing in relief, his wife responded with a gentle, "Thank you. My lawyer says that it should be finalized by the end of the month. Katie will be starting University this fall. I've talked to her and told her what was going on and why I was doing it and she understands. She says she loves and very much wants you to stay in her life—as do I." She finished, looking up at her husband with pleading eyes.

Smiling a sad smile as he looked fondly down on his wife, Robert's voice cracked as he spoke. "I have no plans on leaving either yours or Katie's lives." Taking a deep breath, Wesley said in a resigned voice, "I'll move my things out by the end of the week. Don't worry, I'll find a place to stay in San Francisco." Sharing one last long kiss, the couple reluctantly broke from their embrace. Turning away, Robert walked out of the Carolina house that he and his wife had shared for most of their married life. Once he was safely out of sight of any possible onlookers, the newly commissioned admiral sat down on a fallen tree log where he stayed for hours doing nothing but sitting.

"Why?" Robert asked, his face red as he tried to restrain his anger and hurt, "Why did you show me that?"

"We seek understanding." The voice responded, **"Why did your mate wish to separate from you?"**

Sighing as he willed himself to calmness, Wesley tried to answer back, "I guess...it was because...because she couldn't take my being absent anymore and decided enough was enough." Lowering his head in guilt, the suddenly older looking man muttered, "Maybe she was right."

Aliz

Watching the images in the fog, Aliz saw herself, now an old woman, with a group of others gathered around a woman lying in bed with her infant daughter.

"Would you like to hold her, Mama?" The woman in the bed asked as another woman gently taking the baby from its mother's arms, placed it in the arms of an older Aliz.

"She's beautiful." The older Aliz smiled as she looked down on the tiny blue eyed cherub, "Have you decided on a name, *Lany*?"

"Yes..." The new mother replied, "We're calling her Elizabeth. Elizabeth Paula Shelby."

Looking down fondly on her granddaughter, Aliz cooed, "I only wish your grandfather could have seen you, little Elizabeth. Robert would have been so proud..." Her still alert eyes gazing about the room, Aliz asked, "Anna? Where is Philip? I thought his ship was still in orbit."

"He couldn't make it." Anna said with a note of sadness in her voice, "He had to attend an important meeting at Starfleet Command..."

"He doesn't know what he is missing..." The elderly Aliz said in a slightly judgmental tone as she played with the laughing baby in her arms. "Robert always found a way to make it to each of your births."

"It helps to be Chief of Staff of Starfleet Command." Michael Wesley, wearing the burgundy and black uniform of a Starfleet officer with a commander's rank pin remarked.

“He always made time for what was important.” Aliz said with a sad smile as she handed the tiny bundle back to her mother. “That’s one of the many reasons why I fell in love with him.”

“Do you possess these feelings for Robert Wesley now?” The voice asked.

“No!” Aliz vehemently responded, “Of course not!”

“Why not?”

“Well...” Aliz ticked off, “He’s my commanding officer, he’s married, and he’s a lot older than I am...”

“So...you have no feelings for him at all?”

“No...Yes...I don’t know!” A confused Aliz replied, “I respect him. I think he’s a good man...a compassionate man. But he’s still my commanding officer and he’s still married.”

“And if he wasn’t?”

“I don’t know!” Aliz answered back. “Maybe...maybe not. I can’t tell you because it hasn’t happened yet.”

“Most confusing...we shall have to think more on this.”

“Wait!” Aliz begged as the mist began to overcome her, “Answer one question for me...please? My granddaughter? The baby in the visions? What will become of her?”

“The future is always mutable.” The voice responded in what almost seemed to be a gentle tone, **“But...should this particular time line remain intact, she will chart her own destiny amongst the stars.”**

“I guess I’ll have to be satisfied with that.” Aliz sighed as the mist overwhelmed her.

Jennifer

"Hey, Jennifer!" At the sound of her roommate's thick Magyar accent, a disconsolate Jennifer Watley looked up from the still uneaten salad that she had been picking at for the past half hour.

Seeing her roommate entering the mess hall with a man wearing lieutenant's stripes on the sleeves of his gold shirt, Jennifer forced a smile to her lips, "Aliz. Who's this?"

"Hi..." The man, an attractive brown haired man with blue eyes said, introducing himself as Aliz walked over to the food processor, returning moments later with a bowl of soup and iced tea on her tray. "I'm Morgan...Morgan Bateson. I just transferred over from the *USS Cody* and Lieutenant Bathory was kind enough to give me the grand tour."

"He's taking over as senior navigator." Aliz explained in a soft voice as she took a seat across from her former roommate.

"Terrence's old slot." Jennifer whispered as she speared a piece of lettuce.

"Yeah." Aliz replied, nodding her head. "Look Jennifer...it's been two months since Terrence died. I can understand why Cilla is still grieving, but you and Terrence haven't been that close in months..."

"I know, Aliz..." Jennifer sighed, "And you're right. It's just that...well...ever since I've been back..."

"You're not sure what you're supposed to feel..." Aliz finished.

"Yeah." Jennifer affirmed, nodding her head, "And that makes me feel..."

"Distant?"

"Yeah."

Feeling uncomfortable at eavesdropping in what was now a private conversation between the two old friends, Lieutenant Bateson stood up, "You two look like you've got a lot talk about, so I'd better go." Looking down on the lovely raven haired science officer, Morgan smiled as he turned to walk away, "I hope we'll get to see more of each other Lieutenant."

“What does it mean to grieve?”

“Well...” A still shaken Jennifer stammered, “When you lose someone you care about...when they die...you miss them. You want them with you and it...hurts...when they’re gone. That’s grieving—I guess.”

“Do all humans grieve?”

“Yeah.” Jennifer answered back nodding her head, “I guess so...it’s a normal response. But...” She added, “...people grieve in different ways.”

“How so?”

“It’s not easy to explain. Some people cry...some brood...some try to hide their pain or lose themselves in their work or play. There are as many ways to grieve as there are people.”

“You are a strange people...”

“Well...” Jennifer retorted in a wry voice as the mist surrounded her, “You’re pretty damned weird yourselves.”

K’Tan

“They proved their honor at Narendra III.” An older, K’Tan, now with the forehead ridges of a true Klingon declared in front of the Klingon High Council. “The *Enterprise* fought valiantly against at least three Romulan warbirds—sacrificing their lives to buy us the time we needed to send reinforcements to our colony. We have now shed blood together. Starfleet and the Federation have shown that they are worthy allies. I say we affirm the treaty!”

Watching himself speak before the High Council of the Empire as a full Klingon, no longer one of the ‘unhappy ones’, K’Tan’s chest puffed out in pride.

“If you hate humans so...then why will you embrace them in the future?”

“If what I will say in the future is true...” K’Tan replied, “Then the Earthers, by giving up their lives in battle for one of our colonies, would have shown themselves as honorable warriors and so fitting allies for our Empire. That is reason enough.”

“But now?”

“Now is now...” K’Tan declared, “The future is not here yet. Now, the Earthers are my enemy. Tomorrow they might become my friend. But it is not tomorrow yet.”

“You continue to surprise us. You speak wisely for one so young. There might be hope for you yet.”

K’Temoc

As the mist resolved itself into images, K’Temoc saw an older version of himself with the ridged forehead of a true Klingon sitting in the command chair of a warship. On the viewscreen of his warship he saw ships—strange ships from a race he had yet to encounter.

“The Cardassian convoy is in position, Captain.”

“*Cha yIghuS!*” He ordered.

“Torpedoes readied.” His weapons officer responded

“Decloak and fire!” He commanded as the battlecruiser, becoming visible, launched its lethal packages towards the enemy vessels.

“All torpedoes have impacted successfully!”

“Disruptors and torpedoes—fire at will!”

Smiling as the convoy scattered, the younger K’Temoc’s eyes widened as a second vessel, far larger than the largest Klingon battlecruiser, suddenly decloaked on the opposite side of K’Temoc’s vessel, the ships of the convoy between them. Recognizing the raptor painted on the bottom of the strange

craft, the young Klingon cursed under his breath, *Romulans*. Looking on in astonishment, he saw the strange Romulan craft fire its disruptors not at the ship his older self commanded, but rather at the convoy. Watching in fascination, it appeared to the young warrior that the two warships were herding the convoy but to what? It was then that he saw it—a Starfleet vessel, larger than even one of Starfleet’s dreaded *Constitution* class ships, but with its two nacelles slung under the saucer section. Gasping at the withering photon torpedo and phaser fire launched by the Starfleet vessel, the young Klingon looked on once again in disbelief as it became apparent to him that his vessel was allied with both the Romulans and the Federation against these unknown aliens. Cheering as the three ships methodically destroyed or disabled the alien convoy, K’Temoc’s attention was once again focused on his elder self as the images of his allied captains appeared on the viewscreen.

The first image, that of the Romulan, was that of a blonde woman, her hair closely cropped, but lacking the prominent forehead ridges and longer pointed ears of true Romulans. The human, also a blonde female, but wearing a uniform that he didn’t recognize at first except for the Starfleet emblem on her chest, smirked. “I told you it would work, K’Temoc.”

His older self laughing, the younger K’Temoc heard him laugh, a deep rich belly laugh, “You did indeed, Captain Shelby. Very well a bet is a bet, you’ll have your champagne...I will personally see to it that it is what you call ‘Kristal’.”

“And I shall deliver the Romulan ale I promised...” The Romulan Commander who called herself Sela declared, “It comes from my private stock. And now...” The Romulan sniffed disdainfully, “I would suggest that we get what we came for and get out of here. We have picked up a Jem’Hadar pursuit squadron on our sensors and I would prefer to be gone when they get here.”

The images fading into the mist, K’Temoc asked, “What was this? Who were I and these others fighting? Why am I allied with humans and Romulans?”

“What you see is a possible future.” The voice replied and then inquired, **“Does it anger you to be allied in the future with your current enemies?”**

“No...” K’Temoc answered surprisingly, “It was a glorious battle fought with courageous allies. Why should I be angry?”

“But they are your hated foes, are they not?”

“Yes...” K’Temoc confessed, “But something must have happened to make us allies—maybe these new aliens forced us to ally together. It is no disgrace to make common cause with former enemies who have proven themselves worthy.”

The mist clearing, K’Temoc found himself once again in the large chamber in the presence of his captain and the others. “I had the most powerful vision...” The young warrior told his captain, “But now I cannot remember it.”

“Nor can I...” K’Tan admitted as he gave his Starfleet counterpart an appraising gaze.

“I can’t remember either.” Commodore Wesley declared, answering K’Tan’s unspoken question. Turning towards his younger officers, the commodore inquired, “What about you two?”

As both ensigns shook their heads, Wesley remarked, “Well, it appears that none of us remember...”

“We have taken your memories of future events away from you...” The voice proclaimed. **“...for your own protection.”**

“It’s probably for the best.” Wesley sagely commented, his lips turning up into a smile as he regarded the two ensigns, “We’ll let the future sort itself out.”

“Wesley is right.” K’Tan declared, putting his hand on the younger warrior’s shoulder, “The future will wait for us.”

“You have given us much to ponder.” The voice said, its sound reverberating through the chamber as the mist once again filled the room, **“There is but one more test. It will depend not only on yourselves, but also on those you command. You and they must choose—freedom or destruction.”**

“Now that we’ve gotten that out of the way.” Talana smirked as the last members of each landing party finished inspecting each other’s kits, “Maybe

we can get down to work?"

"Like you..." Lyssan replied with again the faintest traces of a smile, "I am eager to delve into this object's secrets. You have honored the terms of our agreement and, as you can see, so have we. Let us proceed. I would suggest leaving our pilots behind in their respective crafts in case we need to depart quickly."

"Good idea." Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara agreed, "Two teams of five?" The Andorian science officer suggested, "One headed by you and one by me with each team containing two Starfleet and two Klingon specialists."

Nodding her head, the Klingon science officer concurred, "That is acceptable." Pointing towards the open passageway, she raised her eyebrows, "Shall we proceed?"

"Sounds good to me." Talana smirked, her anticipation at exploring the alien structure growing as the two respective teams sorted themselves out, "I don't know about you, but I can't wait to see what's in here!"

PART 8

Making their way through the dark alien corridor, their only form of illumination coming from their flashlights and the low pale yellow luminescence emanating from the walls, the combined Starfleet-Klingon expedition came to a halt as the corridor ended in a T-section. "This is where we split up." Talana said, addressing her Klingon counterpart. "Which one do you want?"

"My team will take this one." Lyssan decided, pointing towards the corridor to her left.

"All right..." Talana agreed, her antennae twitching as she gestured with her thumb at the corridor on the right, "We'll go the other way, then. Good luck and we'll meet you on the other side."

As the two teams advanced down their respective corridors, the illumination from their flashlights became their only source of light as the luminescence emanating from the walls slowly disappeared, leaving only an inky, Stygian darkness. That and the silence broken only by the scuffling of feet, occasional muttered curses from the Klingons in her party, and the low hum of her tricorder caused Talana's heart to beat harder and faster as she led her team down the corridor. Catching what appeared to be movement out of the corner of her eye, she raised her hand as she whispered, "Halt!" Her antennae twitching nervously, she motioned for one of the disguised security specialists, a young dark-haired ensign named, to move up. Her voice still a whisper, she asked, "Did you see it?"

"See what, Sir?" The young ensign asked as his eyes carefully scanned the area.

Looking again, the Andorian science officer shook her head, "I could have sworn..." Chuckling, she put her hand on the security officer's shoulder, "I'm sorry...I've been watching too many old horror films on movie night. Let's move on."

"Aye, Sir." The mystified ensign replied falling back to the end of the line as the group once again began to move down the corridor. Several minutes later, the ensign, pausing, turned his light on the pitch black wall. Becoming

instantly mesmerized by the constantly changing patterns the swirls in the wall made as his light played upon it, the young officer stood in rapt fascination, not even noticing the black pseudopods emerging from the ceiling until they had taken hold of him, yanking him up with a single scream.

“AAARRRGGGHHH!”

Turning about at once on hearing the scream, Talana and her group raced back to where the scream emanated. Arriving mere moments after hearing the cry, they arrived on the scene, finding only the ensign’s flashlight and tricorder on the floor, the tricorder’s flap still open as it continued to scan.

“The coward ran away!” The Klingon declared with a sneer of derision.

Wheeling on the swarthy bearded Klingon, one of the humans, Lieutenant Forrester, snarled as he cocked his fists, “You take that back you filthy Klingon or you’ll be eating through a straw!”

Laughing, the Klingon fell immediately into a combat stance as his companion looked on with anticipation. “I am ready when you are, little man.”

“That’s enough!” Talana’s voice rang out as her antennae pointed forwards. “We don’t have time for this!” Turning towards her junior officer, his fists still balled up, the lieutenant commander commanded, “Stand down, Lieutenant! Now!” Watching intently as Forrester slowly lowered his fists, Talana quickly wheeled on the Klingon. “You too.”

Nodding her head in satisfaction as the crisis, for now at least, appeared to be defused; the Andorian science officer knelt down and picked up both the tricorder and flashlight. Putting the flashlight in her belt, she pressed a button on the tricorder, “Maybe it recorded what happened.” She conjectured as a visual image appeared on the tiny screen. Watching intently, Talana looked on in horror as she saw the two black pseudopods dropping down from the ceiling, grasp the ensign where the arms joined his shoulders, moving so quickly that by the time he realized what had happened, the coils had already tightly wrapped themselves around him, yanking him up so fast that he only had time to utter a single scream as he dropped his instruments. But that wasn’t what caused the color on Talana’s face to fade to a pale blue. It was the look on the poor man’s face—the look of twisted horror as he screamed. Staring intensely at the ceiling, the Andorian woman could see nothing...just inky blackness. Feeling a cold shiver running down her spine, Talana, breathing deeply, forced the bile rising up from her stomach down as,

mustering as much confidence as she could; she spoke, "Listen up, everyone. We're not sure what happened to Ensign Giotto. There's no sign that he's been killed, so as far as I'm concerned, he's alive and we're going to find him." Her eyes gazing intently on everyone in her party, she concluded, "Right?" Seeing nothing but a stony expression from the Klingons and nods of assent from Forrester and the other security specialist, she nodded her head, "All right, then. Let's get going. The sooner we get started, the sooner we find out where Giotto is and what happened to him."

"Gitan!" On hearing his name being called out by his superior officer, the Klingon soldier stiffened his back. "Take the rear guard position." The Klingon lieutenant commanding the other joint Klingon-Starfleet team ordered as her team paused in the middle of the dark dank corridor they found themselves in. Nodding his head once in acknowledgment, Gitan, assigned to this task by First Officer Kalas because of his lowly lineage, drew his disruptor and watched, counting off the seconds as the rest of his team resumed their progress down the corridor. Counting to thirty and seeing that his teammates had already progressed a good ten meters ahead of him, the soldier resumed his progress, shining his light in all directions: straight ahead, to the left, right, up, and behind him. His senses fully alert, the courageous warrior promised himself that he would not be taken unawares.

Little did he know that he would not fulfill his promise. Watching as the rest of his group turned a corner in the passageway, Gitan cried out in horror as the formerly solid floor, turning into a gelatinous mass, engulfed him.

Hearing his scream, Lyssan wheeled about, charging back the way she came followed by the rest of her team, she encountered a solid black bulkhead sealing them off. "You two!" She ordered, pointing first to Ensign Xylvan, the Vulcan security specialist posing as a science officer, and then to Mira, the sole remaining Klingon other than herself in her team, "Get readings from that."

Both officers acknowledging her orders, they carefully approached; their tricorders active and scanning. Shaking his head, Ensign Xylvan reported first, "The substance appears to be a composite of organic and inorganic compounds bonded together by a resinous compound."

"Ensign..." Lyssan suggested, addressing the Starfleet officer, "Do you think that we might be able to cut our way through?"

"Possibly." The Vulcan answered back, "However, to do so would violate the terms of our truce."

"I'd say at this moment." The Klingon woman dryly replied, "We have more important things to worry about than our truce."

"I would agree." Ensign Xylvan responded, drawing his phaser from the small of his back as Lyssan drew her disruptor out of its holster. Both officers simultaneously unlocking their weapons, they turned the settings to produce a narrow cutting beam.

"Now, Ensign!" Lyssan ordered as both officers fired in unison, the high pitched whine of the phaser mixing with the deeper pulsing resonance of the Klingon's disruptor as the blue beam lancing from the Vulcan's weapon struck the exact same spot as the disruptor's invisible sonic beam. At first, it looked like the weapons would cut through as the black substance at the impact spot oozed, dripping to the deck like blood. But, Lyssan's joy proved illusory as the more of the black goo flowed into the hole, filling it in as quickly as their weapons could cut through. Uttering a single, especially vile oath, the Klingon woman shouted as she ceased fire, "Enough! This is useless." Calming down, she declared, "Our time would be better spent moving forward. Hopefully we will find our answers as to what happened to Gitan there."

"That would be the most logical choice." Xylvan agreed. Glancing down at his phaser, he then asked, "What should we do about our weapons."

Her lips turning up into a crooked grin, Lyssan answered back, "It would probably be best for the two of us to keep our weapons as they are now in case we run into the need to use them at higher settings in the future. I think we can count on each other's honor not to violate the truce. Now, let us finish what we have started here."

Wesley and the others could do nothing but watch as they saw Gitan and Giotto ripped away from their comrades. Frozen in place, unable to move, the only thing the commodore and his Klingon counterpart could do was speak.

"Why are you doing this?" Wesley called out in his rage as he saw poor Giotto aged, in literally a matter of seconds, from a young man in his twenties to someone who appeared to be in his hundreds and then back again.

"What gives you the right?" K'Tan yelled as he watched his soldier literally transformed from warrior to adolescent to child to infant to fetus before once again being returned to his original age.

"Interesting..." The voice boomed, unconcerned with the righteous indignation expressed by its test subjects. **"...the progression of your life cycles. But there is more we need to learn. We shall commence the next series of tests now."**

"Still no word from our landing party?" Kalas asked, turning toward his communications officer.

"No, Sir." The Klingon subaltern promptly replied.

"We have waited long enough. Kalas to D'Kor..." The acting captain spoke into the intercom, "*Qapla!*"

D'Kor, wearing an armored spacesuit and carrying a disruptor rifle at port arms turned to his warriors who were similarly equipped. "Victory!" He shouted, triumphantly holding his rifle with his right hand over his head. Turning towards the airlock, he punched in the access code. The heavy inner door slowly opening, D'Kor led his warriors into the chamber. Moments later, the noise of the door sliding shut was replaced by a hissing sound as the chamber depressurized. The outer door then sliding open, D'Kor stepped out into space. Tapping the control button for his personal propulsion unit, the Klingon officer felt a momentary lurch as the quick burst propelled him forward. His troops formed up and ready, D'Kor giving them the signal to attack, again tapped his thruster control, steering a course for his prize, the bridge of the *Lexington*.

With Talana at the lead, her team continued its cautious advance until they entered a chamber. As she and her group entered the pitch black room, the walls began to glow a dull yellow, at first very faintly, but gradually providing more and more light until the chamber was fully illuminated. As her eyes adjusted to the light, Talana, her eyes scanning the room, gasped in a mixture of astonishment and fright. In the center of the chamber were two empty slabs. Approaching closer, Talana noticed one of the walls slowly becoming

more transparent. Drawing nearer the wall, the Andorian science officer gasped at the sight she saw: Klingons, humans, a couple of Vulcans, and an Andorian were each affixed to a wall behind the transparent chamber wall. Several of the unfortunate bodies had their chests splayed open, internal organs removed. The crowns of the skulls of two of the humans, two of the Vulcans, and the Andorian were cut off, their brains apparently scooped out.

"The crews of the *Voltaire* and the Klingon scoutship." Talana conjectured

"My God..." Forrester gasped, "They've been..."

"Dissected." Talana completed, forcing the nausea rising up her throat down.

"Is this what happened to Giotto?" The young science specialist asked as the blood rushed from his face. His eyes widening in growing panic, he cried, "Is this what's going to happen to us?"

Pushing away her own growing fear, Talana grabbed Forrester by his shoulders. "Lieutenant!" She commanded loudly, "Look at me! Look at me..." Fixing him in her gaze, she lowered her voice, "Giotto's not here. Until we find out otherwise, as far as I'm concerned, he's still alive and waiting for us to rescue him. You got that, Lieutenant?"

"Y...y...yes...Commander." Forrester stammered as regained control.

"Good." Lieutenant Commander Zha'Thara said, forcing her lips to turn up in an encouraging smile. Raising her voice so that the two Klingons could hear her, she ordered, "All right. Let's take scans of everything before we move on. And remember, we all stay in sight of each other."

"Sir?" Cilla Oudekirk called out as she swiveled in her seat to face the man currently occupying the high backed center chair of the *USS Lexington*, "The 'watchdogs' have detected movement coming towards us from the Klingon ship."

"What sort of movement?" Commander Alexei Kuznetsov, the first officer of the *Lexington*, inquired as his finger hovered over the intercom button on the command chair arm.

"At least twenty human sized figures..." The Dutch communications officer

replied, "...if they maintain course and heading they will be on the saucer section near the bridge airlock in no more than three minutes."

"Damn!" Alexei swore as he punched the intercom button. "Lieutenant Mtolu...get your people on the saucer section at the bridge airlock in two minutes—company's coming."

"Aye, Sir." The Zulu security chief crisply acknowledged from the helmet communicator of his armored spacesuit. "All right, people!" Nealo ordered as he pointed at the airlock, "You know what you're supposed to do—Let's get out there and show those filthy Klingons what we're made of."

Entering a chamber similar in size to the one Talana's group had entered, Lyssan's team saw, as the illumination emanating from the walls slowly filled the room, one wall that was transparent, revealing a chamber filled from floor to ceiling with a fluid. Floating in the fluid was, what appeared to the Klingon science officer to be, body parts. Barely restraining the immediate impulse to retch at the sight, Lyssan detected what appeared to be a human leg, an Andorian hand, and a Klingon head.

"Lieutenant!" Ensign Xylvan called out, pointing at the ceiling where two pseudopods, suddenly appearing, were lunging towards her. Screaming, she fired her disruptor at one of the pseudopods at the same moment the Vulcan security officer fired his at the other. Accompanied by a high pitched screeching, the pseudopods, cleanly severed from their host, fell to the floor, still twitching.

Regrettably, because everyone's attention was focused on the pseudopods attacking Lyssan, no one spotted the pair that grabbed Ensign Maria Sanchez, lifting her up screaming to the ceiling where she was immediately engulfed by the thick black fluid. Watching in horror, Lyssan and the surviving members of her team saw her reappear moments later in the fluid, her face a frozen macabre mask. What happened next was so horrendous that Lyssan and her fellow Klingon, even though they had seen death most of their lives, were forced to turn away. Even Xylvan's normally stoic exterior cracked momentarily as he also turned away in revulsion at what was happening to his shipmate.

Recovering first, a still shaken Lyssan called out, pointing to the exit, "Get out! Now!" Grabbing her fellow Klingon roughly by his shoulder and shoving him

towards the exit, she urged, "Move! Unless you wish to join her." Turning toward the remaining Starfleet officer, she nodded her head as, recovering just after her; he was already following her orders. Last to leave, Lyssan let out a breath of air as she the chamber door closed shut behind her, not even knowing that that two more of the pseudopods had just missed grappling her as she fled across the doorway. Breathing deeply, the olive skinned Klingon woman gasped between breaths, "We have to continue on...find our way out of here...or find a way to destroy this thing!"

"Agreed." Ensign Xylvan concurred, his stony mask now back firmly in place again. "What happened here must be reported to our respective superiors."

"And you call yourselves advanced beings!" Wesley's face reddened with anger as he was forced to watch while young Ensign Sanchez, on her first assignment out of the Academy, was slowly dismembered before his eyes. "You're nothing more than butchers! You're worse than the child who pulls the wings off of butterflies—at least the child could claim ignorance. What's your excuse?"

"We need not justify our actions to you. Do you explain yourselves to those you experiment on?"

"That answer doesn't cut it!" Wesley riposted, "We've reached the point now where we do not have to conduct experiments on live animals as much as we used to—and even when such experiments were common, the experimentation on intelligent beings..."

"...was done. We have scanned your historical databases. We are familiar with the names Joseph Mengele, Colonel Green, Khan Nonnien Singh, Arik Soong, Antaak, K'Vagh..."

"And if you'd have done your research properly..." Wesley countered, "...you'll find that those names are reviled throughout the quadrant!"

"Yet you still use the results of their research..."

"Because by doing so, we honor the memories of those whose lives were destroyed and ruined by those names you mentioned and others like them." The commodore replied, "Otherwise their deaths and suffering would have been meaningless."

The voice, devoid of emotion and even, to Wesley's ears, empathy, simply declared, **"The experiment will proceed."**

"There will be an accounting one day!" K'Tan silent until now warned, "You will pay for what you have done!"

"Wait for it..." Lieutenant Mtolu ordered his men, their white and silver suits providing ideal camouflage as the security team blended in with the body of the *Lexington*. "Let them come closer..."

D'Kor, his hunger for battle overtaking him, urged his warriors on. "A bottle of my best blood wine to the first one who sets foot on the *Lexington's* bridge!" His objective in sight, the Klingon second officer, he touched the control panel on his chest. Following a brief hiss from the thruster pack on his back, he sighted the outer airlock door to the Federation starship's bridge dead center in his helmet display. With his rifle in his hands and his *mek'leth* secure in the scabbard on his thigh, D'Kor smiled with anticipation as he imagined the glory that he would win in the coming battle.

Mokath, an old grizzled veteran sergeant who had served on many campaigns for the Empire, seeing his superior officer and many of the other warriors rushing headlong towards the Starfleet vessel growled. Holding his hand up, he halted the five warriors under his command. "Wait! D'Kor is leading our warriors into a trap." He ordered, switching to a different communications frequency from that used by the mission commander. "Watch and learn," instructed the old hand instructed as his instincts once again proved true.

"Now!" Nealo ordered, firing his phaser rifle as D'Kor and his warriors entered the security chief's kill zone. Soon after, the rest of Mtolu's team opened fire, taking the Klingons totally by surprise. The blue beam from Mtolu's weapon striking true, the warrior next to D'Kor grunted as he passed out of consciousness, the hand that was on his thruster control still pressing the button. His thruster jet now out of control, the felled Klingon impacted on the saucer section of the giant starship, his faceplate shattering under the impact, the warrior died almost instantly, never regaining consciousness.

Watching with alarm and anger as the warrior next to him and another warrior, also hit by the withering phaser fire, tumbled end over end to be lost within the tendrils of the nebula, D'Kor growled as he fired his disruptor. "Kill

them!" He shouted, exulting as the body of one of his enemies slowly disintegrated under the impact of his weapon's sonic disruption beams. Laughing as he heard the poor man's screams of pain, D'Kor urged, "Close with them! Our blades will drink their blood!"

"Shoot and scoot, people!" Lieutenant Mtolo commanded as, activating his thruster pack, he and the rest of his squad jetted away from the onrushing Klingons, hugging close to the saucer's hull. Cursing as he saw one of the Klingons grappling with a security trooper who had allowed the warrior to get to close to him, Mtolo snapped off a shot from his rifle, stunning the Klingon. It was too late for the poor trooper though as the Klingon managed to get his *mek'leth* through a chink in his foe's armored pressure suit, driving the wicked blade through not just the suit, but also into the flesh of the young trooper. Globules of blood appeared and froze when exposed to the vacuum of space as the air hissed out of the young man's suit. Soon, the trooper's anguished cries ended, whether from the blood loss or the loss of air, Mtolo wasn't sure and, as the disruptor bolt that had just missed him attested, the Zulu security officer didn't have luxury to consider at the moment as, activating his thruster pack once again, he and his team scooted back from the attacking Klingons.

Seeing and hearing the sounds of battle outside his bridge, Kuznetsov barked, "Get a team to the bridge at once." Standing up, he addressed his bridge crew, his voice a harsh guttural growl, "Everyone into pressure suits! Now!"

Barely managing to keep his five warriors back from the terrible carnage being played out before them, Mokath waited until he found what he was looking for. "There!" He smiled, pointing at an unguarded secondary airlock. "While D'Kor and our other warriors keep the Earthers busy, we'll take the prize!" And the glory, the old veteran thought as he and his team, activating their thrusters, skirted the combat area, moving very carefully to avoid attracting any attention as they made their way towards their goal until, reaching it; they crouched low by the airlock door. Signaling with his hands, Mokath set three of his men on watch while he and another began cutting into the airlock with a pair of cutting torches. *Soon...Mokath thought...soon and it will all be over.*

Entering the chamber simultaneously, both Talana and Lyssan observing the losses suffered by their teams, shook their heads sadly. "This must be the central chamber." Talana noted, seeing several different entrances into the

circular room. Her attention then fell upon eight slabs arranged in what almost seemed to be a cross pattern, six of the slabs empty, but the two in the middle very much occupied. "Giotto..." Talana whispered as she saw the withered husk of the young security officer.

"Gitan." Lyssan then said, immediately recognizing the Klingon warrior, also little more than a husk, occupying the other table.

A table slowly extruded from one of the sides of the chamber. Above the table on the wall, patterns swirled, eventually forming letters. "Knowledge." Lyssan read before the letters once again became a swirling mass of shapes and patterns. "This must be their database." Taking out her tricorder, she attempted to scan the console, only to find that her instrument began to grow hot. Quickly dropping the glowing tricorder, the Klingon science officer looked on in shock as it glowed first a dull red, then yellow, and finally blue and white until disappearing.

"I guess they don't want us scanning it." Talana wryly observed as the swirling pattern once again transformed itself into writing. "The path towards life or destruction..." the Andorian woman read, "...rests upon your choices now." Immediately after finishing her sentence, the writing once again became swirling patterns as they slowly reformed once more into letters.

"None all die..." Lyssan read, "One saves some but dooms all..."

"Two of the same dies but ensures triumph for theirs." Talana continued, "But two that differ ensures both grow."

"Six saves all but loses growth." Lyssan finished. Turning to the others, the Klingon science officer pondered, "It seems we have to make a decision..."

His pressure suit donned and phaser in hand, The Bear cursed under his breath as he saw the airlock door glowing around the edges. Sighing in relief as the armored security detail he had ordered rushed on to the bridge, the Russian commander barked out orders. "All non-essential bridge personnel...evacuate immediately. That means you G'arv!" Alexei growled as the Tellarite engineer looked about to protest. "I'll need you in engineering just in case we go down. And you too, Lawford...Senak..." He ordered, turning his attention to the English navigator and Vulcan relief helmsman, "Get down to auxiliary control. Once you leave, I'm going to depressurize the bridge and

lock the controls. Now..." He commanded, raising his voice, "Go!"

Seeing the man he assumed to be the commander of the Starfleet forces mere meters away from him, D'Kor, crying out a guttural war cry, fired his disruptor. Growling in disgust as the weapon failed to fire, the Klingon warrior, drawing his *mek'leth*, launched himself towards his opponent, confident that even should he be stunned or killed, the momentum from his charge would carry his foe with him to a shared death.

Nealo, seeing the onrushing Klingon, snapped off a shot from his phaser rifle. Cursing as the beam missed the warrior, the Zulu security chief knew at once that he would not be able to get off a second shot or be able to dodge the oncoming warrior. Bracing himself, Lieutenant Mtolu saying a short prayer that his magnetic soles would hold fast, grappled the wrist of the arm wielding the dangerous war knife with one hand while simultaneously striking at the Klingon's chest with the armored glove of his other hand. Releasing his angry opponent with a shove, Mtolu heaved a sigh of relief as he watched the hapless Klingon, his thrusters firing out of control, race tumbling into the heart of the nebula.

"Lieutenant Mtolu..."

Hearing Commander Kuznetsov's guttural voice through his comm system, the security chief immediately responded, "Sir?"

"Get to the secondary airlock with anyone you can spare, we're about to be boarded."

Pointing to the two men nearest him, Mtolu ordered as he activated his thruster controls, "You and you...you're with me. Move!"

"What does it mean?" One of the Klingons asked.

"Count the number of unoccupied slabs." Talana instructed. "How many do you see?"

"Six." Lieutenant Forrester immediately responded.

"Now..." Lyssan, interjected, "How many of us are there?"

"Six." The other Klingon answered.

"Therein lays the answer to the riddles." Ensign Xylvan observed. "If none of us choose to occupy the beds..."

"Then all die." Forrester completed. "But does it mean all of us here...the commodore and the rest of them taken...or does it mean everyone on our ships?"

"It would be safest to assume." Lyssan replied, "The last answer."

"I agree." Talana declared, "Someone...or someones...will have to get on those slabs. But who? And how many?" Pausing she pondered the question, until, coming up with the answer, she exclaimed, "I've got it! If two Klingons or two of us..." She said, pointing at the Starfleet officers, "...get up on the slabs, those two would die, but their people would gain...probably the database."

"It would be a worthwhile sacrifice." One of the Klingons declared, his hand slipping towards his disruptor. "If our deaths result in triumph for our enemies."

Catching the Klingon's movements out of the corner of his eye, Xylvan's hand went for his own phaser. However, before either one could draw their weapons, Lyssan's voice carried through the chamber, "Hold! We cannot be sure that that is the meaning. Let us hear the rest before doing something that might be foolish." Nodding her head for the Vulcan to continue, the Klingon science officer kept a wary eye on her charges.

"The next statement..." Xylvan conjectured, "Probably means that if one of each of us gives their lives that both sides would gain the information. The last statement seems to imply that if we all go on the slabs, the lives of all...including, I would assume, our missing people and the crews of both our ships...would be spared, but that we would probably be denied the information on the database."

"Looks to me like we have the following choices," Talana declared, laying it out for everyone in the chamber, "One: we do nothing and everyone dies..." Her lips curling up into a wry grin, she quipped, "I think we can safely rule that one out as well as the second option. Next: we fight it out over who goes on the slabs, winner take all, but there's no guarantee that the winner will get what they're thinking they'll get. I know some of us..." She said, looking pointedly at the Klingon whose hand still hovered dangerously near his

disruptor, "...think that's a good idea, but...before you decide to chance it, I want you to consider this: what if we all stun or kill ourselves—it's awful close quarters in here...can you guarantee that you'll come out on top in an all out phaser and disruptor fight?" Seeing the Klingon's hand wavering just the slightest, Talana smirked inwardly, "Our next option: one of each of us sacrifices themselves so that both of us get access to the database."

"I would be the most logical person to choose..." Xylvan stated in a plain voice, "...as I am the least experienced of our group and am not a pure scientist. You, Lieutenant Commander, are the senior science officer. You are too important an individual to sacrifice. And you..." The Vulcan continued, addressing Lieutenant Forrester, "...are a promising science specialist. While I..." He concluded, am just a security specialist. I can be easily replaced, "...you cannot."

The other Klingon, a young science specialist from an unremarkable family named Kassan, who had been quiet through much of the mission, then spoke, "I gladly volunteer to sacrifice myself for the Empire. Lieutenant..." Kassan pleaded as Lyssan shook her head, "Allow me to do this. I am not a warrior...my family does not come from noble lineage. Please allow me to do this for the Empire."

"There is a third option..." Lyssan interjected, rejecting her subordinate's request, "We all go on the slabs. All of us are freed, our men are healed, and none of us get the data."

"In other words...a total wash." Talana declared.

"That would be the safe option..." Xylvan stated, reading at once Kassan's non verbal cues, "But not the best one. The needs of the many..." He quoted as one hand went smoothly behind the neck of his commanding officer while the other grabbed the phaser concealed in the small of his back, "...outweigh the needs of the few." Immediately on finishing his statement, Talana slumped to the floor, the victim of a Vulcan neck pitch. Simultaneously drawing his phaser, set to stun, and firing, the young Vulcan watched as Lyssan slumped to the floor. Kassan, striking at the same time, clubbed the warrior standing next to him with the butt of his disruptor pistol, knocking him unconscious.

"We must hurry." The Vulcan stated flatly as Kassan joined him, "They will awaken soon."

Nodding his head, the young Klingon jumped up on the slab next to the

withered husk of Giotto while Xylvan took his place beside that of Gitan. Lying on the slabs, both men closed their eyes as they were encased in black. Moments later, the only sound coming from the chamber was that of screams.

“Take your positions.” Alexei ordered as the glowing threads from the Klingon cutting torches finally met at the top. Then, with a boom, the door collapsed, hitting the deck with a great clang. “Fire!” The Bear commanded as he and the security team opened fire with their phasers, bathing the inner chamber with their light.

“Nothing...” One of the security officers, glancing into the chamber, reported glumly. “We didn’t hit a...” Hearing a clanking sound at his feet, the crewman looked down to see a small baseball sized cylindrical object, “Grenade!”

Ducking behind the command chair, Alexei activated his faceplate’s light polarization control as the section around the airlock was bathed in bright light. Growling as he heard the sounds of those crewmen unfortunate to be caught in the grenade’s area of effect, the giant Russian popped his head up to see that only he and one other trooper remained on their feet. “Get ready...” The Russian warned as he heard the sound of metallic soles striking the deck, “They’re coming.”

As soon as Alexei had finished his words, Mokath and his men, brandishing their *bath’leths* and *mek’leths* in their hands, rushed on to the bridge screaming a blood curdling war cry. Snapping off a quick shot from his rifle, the Bear smiled grimly as two Klingons went down—the first from his shot and the second from the surviving trooper. His smile was brief though as the other Klingon had eviscerated the hapless trooper and Mokath was upon him. Ducking quickly, the vicious blade of the bath’leth just missed Kuznetsov as he punched up; delivering all his strength into a savage uppercut that struck the giant Klingon in his midsection. His blow staggering the Klingon, Alexei followed it up with a karate chop to the warrior’s side, only to have the grizzled veteran sideslip the blow.

Smiling as he faced the large human before him, Mokath thanked Kahless that this time he was blessed with a worthy opponent. Signaling the surviving members of his team to withdraw, the Klingon declared, “This fight is mine and mine alone. If the human defeats me, then you may attack.” Sizing his opponent up, Mokath’s lips once again turned up into a smile, “Now, Earther...” he said as he held his weapon in the guard let us battle as warriors

should.”

“Oooooohhhh...” Talana groaned as she struggled to her feet, massaging her neck. “When I get my hands on that...” Falling silent, her mouth agape as her eyes took in the sight before her, the Andorian woman gasped, “You fools...you didn’t have to...”

“What...” Lyssan moaned as she arose from the floor. Her eyes falling on the now healthy appearing Giotto and Gitan lying beside the withered husks of Xylvan and Kassan, she declared in a solemn voice, “These men died as heroes.”

“They didn’t have to die.” Talana flatly declared as both Forrester’s and Lyssan’s tricorders beeped.

“My tricorder...” Lieutenant Forrester exclaimed excitedly, “It’s downloading...”

“Mine is too...” Lyssan interjected as unknown symbols appeared and disappeared on her tricorder screen faster than the eye could see, “It must be from their database.”

Groaning, Ensign Giotto struggled to a sitting posture, his feet dangling over the edge of the slab, “What happened to me? The last thing I remember I was looking at something on the wall...”

“You don’t remember anything at all about what happened to you?” Talana queried as she helped the young security officer to his feet.

“No, Sir...not a thing...” Glancing at the slab next to him, Giotto blanched, “Is that...”

“Yes.” Talana replied in a soft voice. “I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Sir?” Lieutenant Forrester interrupted, pointing to his tricorder, “The download appears to have been completed.”

“I wonder what happens now...” Talana reluctantly ventured as the room suddenly became filled with a bright light. The light, vanishing as soon as it had appeared, left an empty chamber in its wake, the only occupants the two

husks lying on the slabs.

Watching with both pride and sorrow what he had just seen, Wesley called out, his voice a mixture of anger and anguish, "Are you bastards satisfied now? Have you learned enough? Or are you going to pull more wings off of more butterflies?"

"The experiment is concluded." The voice responded in a cold matter of fact tone. **"You will now be returned to your people."**

"That's all!" Aliz jabbed, "Not even a 'We're sorry for the torturing and killing,' or a 'We promise we won't do it again!'"

"Ensign..." Commodore Wesley warned in a low tone as a bright light filled the chamber, leaving behind an empty room.

"Not into fair fights, are you?" Alexei taunted, jerking his head first at his fists and then at the Klingon's *bath'leth*. "So much for Klingon courage and honor!" He sneered.

Immediately picking up on the human's gestures, Mokath called out to one of the Klingons standing watch. "Kamoth—your *mek'leth*!" Taking the short blade in hand, he tossed it at the human's feet while, discarding his own *bath'leth*, he drew his *mek'leth* from its scabbard. "Now we are evenly matched, human. Defend yourself!"

Picking up the blade, Alexei hefted it, a cold grin on his face. Falling into a defensive stance, he waited, allowing his opponent to make the first move.

Feinting towards the left, Mokath watched with satisfaction as the human, not falling for the deception, maintained his position. "Very good, Earther..." The grizzled veteran muttered under his breath, "It is rare that one finds a worthy opponent."

The two fighters circled each other, probing for weakness. Alexei, pleased at the balance of the unfamiliar Klingon weapon, carefully kept his guard up, remembering what his old hand to hand instructor had told him about Klingons—that they preferred slashing tactics to simple thrusts. Smiling

grimly, the wily Russian decided to take a gamble as, feigning fatigue, he allowed his guard to drop just a touch. *Now...if he'll only take the bait.*

Noticing the subtle dropping of the human's guard, Mokath carefully weighed the action. Was the Earther fatigued? Possible...the combat had been going on for some time and it was a known fact that Earthers weren't as sturdy as Klingons—even those 'unhappy ones' such as himself. Was he feigning fatigue? Again, very possible. Mokath had already gauged this human to be a cunning and cagey opponent and he did not put it past him to set up a deception such as this. The human's blade was in a poor position to render a successful slash attack but it was, the grizzled veteran noticed, in an excellent position for a quick thrust. *You truly are a devil.* Mokath smiled grimly as he almost regretted having to kill this valiant warrior before him. *We will surely meet again in Sto-Vo-Kor, my friend.*

Reappearing before their shuttlecrafts, Talana cried out in astonishment on seeing Commodore Wesley and the others. "Sir! We weren't sure they'd...we thought that...they..."

"I know, Commander..." Wesley replied with a sad smile. "We saw everything..."

"Husband." Lyssan stated formally as K'Tan approached his mate. "I am honored to report that Kassan died well."

"I know." K'Tan answered back, a surprisingly tender smile on the warrior's face as he regarded his wife. "You performed nobly on your first command, my wife."

Raising his voice so that everyone could hear him, Commodore Wesley proposed to his opposite number, "Captain K'Tan? I would suggest that we maintain our truce until both of our ships have at least cleared the nebula. Do you agree?"

"Yes." K'Tan answered back. "Now...let us be away from this *Gre'thor*."

"You heard the man." Wesley ordered, pointing at the *Aldrin*, "Let's get the hell out of here."

Smiling as his opponent slashed at his chest, Alexei twisting left, stabbed at what the Russian had figured would be the Klingon's ungarded kidney. Unfortunately, the blade struck nothing, the wily Klingon, anticipating the human's move, had pivoted as well. Reversing his arm motion and jabbing upwards, Mokath's *mek'leth* struck true, stabbing through the lightly armored portion of the pressure suit that covered the armpit. Withdrawing his blade, the Klingon warrior watched as his opponent sunk to the deck, bringing his blade up in a wordless salute for his valiant foe.

Hearing the air rush out of his suit as the blood escaped, Alexei's vision grew blurry, the last image being the giant Klingon warrior bringing up his blade in what appeared to be a gesture of respect before seeing bright flashes of light and then...darkness."

Rushing on to the bridge after stunning the large warrior that had stood over his first officer, Lieutenant Mtolo knelt down next to the burly Russian. Acting quickly, he connected the commander's suit to his suit's oxygen supply. Then, taking out his spray applicator, he applied a quick acting coagulant gel to temporarily seal the still bleeding wound. Next, the lieutenant applied emergency sealant to the gash under the first officer's arm, restoring again the integrity of the fallen commander's suit. All of this taking less than thirty seconds for the quick thinking and quick acting security chief to complete.

Speaking through his suit communicator, Mtolo issued orders, "Medical team wearing environmental suits to the bridge at once. Security teams Charlie through Foxtrot—I want you suited up and outside cleaning up what's left of that Klingon raiding party. Golf through Kilo—you're on reserve. Be ready to move at a moment's notice. Mike through Quebec—I want you in the hangar deck, armored and prepped for action in no more than five minutes. The Klingons paid us a visit—I think it right that we return the favor." Turning towards his men standing next to the blown airlock, the lieutenant snapped, "You two—see if you can scrounge a plasma torch or two somewhere and seal up those goddamned doors." Checking the vitals display on the commander's chest, the Zulu security chief cursed in a low voice, "Don't you dare die on me, Alexei—Talana'll skin me alive if I let anyone kill you other than her."

"D'Kor, you fool!" Kalas cursed as he witnessed his attack fail. Activating his intercom, the acting captain of the K'Mar ordered, "All warriors—prepare to repel boarders."

As the shuttlecraft approached their respective ships, the sights of battle appeared obvious to the two commanding officers. "What the hell did your people do to my ship?" An outraged Wesley demanded of the Klingon captain in the other shuttle.

"It wasn't under my orders." K'Tan replied in an angry voice, "Kalas must have ordered this attack."

Speaking up, Lyssan offered, "Before leaving, I overheard Kalas order D'Kor to choose twenty of our best warriors—those with experience in zero-gravity combat—for a special mission."

"That *qoH!*" K'Tan spat out before addressing Wesley once again. "Wesley...I did not know of, nor approve of this attack. I will order the attack called off and I will personally see to it that the one who ordered it is punished. You have my word as a Klingon warrior."

"That'll do." The commodore acknowledged tersely as he terminated his transmission with the Klingon vessel. Opening a new channel, Wesley attempted to raise his ship, "Wesley to *Lexington*, come in. Wesley to *Lexington*, if you can hear my transmission, please respond."

"*Lexington* to Commodore Wesley..." As Lieutenant Lawford's English accented voice came through the *Aldrin's* speakers, Wesley sighed in relief, "Is that really you, Sir?"

"Yes it is, Mr. Lawford." The commodore replied, "Now what the hell happened to my ship?"

"The Klingons tried to board, Sir.' The navigator replied, "They broke through the bridge airlock and Commander Kuznetsov has been hurt. Lieutenant Mtolo is organizing security teams for a counter attack."

Alexei! Robert gritted his teeth as he said a silent prayer for his sparring partner's recovery. "Belay that attack!" Wesley immediately ordered, and then, switching channels sent the following message in the clear, "Commodore Wesley to Lieutenant Mtolo. You are to immediately abort your attack. Do you understand?"

"Sir?" The security chief responded, astonished by the orders he had just received. "The Klingons have attacked us...killed my people...critically wounded the first officer..."

"You heard me Mister!" Wesley snapped back, not giving his security chief a chance to continue, "You are to immediately call off your attack. Stand the men down. The truce is still in effect."

"Aye, Sir." Lieutenant Mtolu immediately acknowledged. Switching to another channel, Nealo ordered, "Security teams—stand down. EVA teams—continue what you're doing—pick up any survivors you can find and begin cleaning up this debris."

Hearing the exchange between Wesley and his security chief, Captain K'Tan opened a channel with his own ship, also sending his message in the clear. "Kalas. You will immediately cease all actions against the *Lexington* and stand our warriors down."

Cursing under his breath the fact that the *K'Mar's* weapons were still off line, Kalas reluctantly complied with his captain's orders, "All warriors...stand down at once."

Swiveling his seat so that he faced Petty Officer Miller, Wesley sighed wearily, "Cox'un...take us home."

Epilogue

Striding on to the bridge of his ship, Captain K'Tan, flanked on either side by K'Temoc and Lyssan, glowered down on Kalas who was at that moment still seated in the command seat of the Klingon battlecruiser. "Kalas." K'Tan stated flatly, immediately recognizing the implicit challenge in his first officer not vacating his chair. "On your feet. Now!"

Slowly rising to his feet, the first officer stole a quick glance at the *K'Mar's* communications officer as he regarded his captain with scorn. "Why did you call off my attack against the Federation ship?" He demanded, "We would have won!"

Spotting at once his rebellious executive officer's stray glance, K'Tan signaled his two trusted officers on either side of him. "Fool! I do not explain my actions to the likes of you." Knowing that his next words would immediately provoke a violent response, K'Tan sneered, "You are relieved of your position and reduced three steps in rank. Report immediately to engineering for your new assignment." Drawing his weapon immediately on hearing Kalas' cry of rage, K'Tan fired, the sonic waves from his disruptor hitting his opponent before the former first officer's weapon even cleared its holster. Hearing a second disruptor fire, the captain wheeled about, smiling as he saw his wife's weapon pointed at where the communications officer used to sit. "Well done, my wife." K'Tan praised as he turned towards K'Temoc, who, weapon also drawn, was keeping a wary eye on the rest of the bridge crew. "And you also, my friend." Addressing his bridge officers, K'Tan spoke in a loud clear voice, "Does anyone else wish to challenge my authority or fitness to command?"

Nodding his head in satisfaction at the answering silence coming from his crew, K'Tan turned once again towards K'Temoc. "You are now my first officer. Learn well from the mistakes of your predecessor." Pointing at a junior subaltern, the captain proclaimed, "You are now the communications officer. Hail the Federation starship at once."

"Sir?" Cilla Oudekirk announced from her position in the auxiliary control room, "The *K'Mar* is hailing us."

"Put it on speakers." Wesley ordered from his chair.

“Commodore. The one who ordered the attack on your ship has been punished.” K’Tan’s voice, coming in loud and clear through the speakers, declared. “Our terms for maintaining the truce are as follows: First, you will release all Klingons that you are holding as prisoner. Second, we will set and maintain a course that will take us out of the nebula and to our nearest outpost at warp factor two. You will set a similar course to the nearest Federation outpost at the same speed. Finally, neither ship will divert from their course for twenty four Earth hours. These terms are not negotiable.”

“Klingon way of saving face,” Wesley whispered *sotto voce* to Aliz. Speaking aloud, the commodore replied, “Your terms are acceptable. As transporters are still down, we will transfer the Klingons we are holding to you by shuttlecraft in fifteen minutes and we will comply with the other terms of the truce once our shuttle has returned.” Turning to his communications officer, the commodore ordered, “Have Lieutenant Mtolo transfer all his prisoners to the *Cabot*.” Addressing K’Tan once again, Commodore Wesley declared, “The transfer is commencing now.”

Watching his prisoners, his phaser drawn and pointed at them as the forcefield keeping them in their cells was dropped on his orders; Lieutenant Mtolo motioned with his weapon. “You’re being returned to your ship.”

As the Klingons filed out of their cell, Mokath turned towards Nealo. “The human I fought...does he still live?”

“Yeah.” Nealo snarled, “No thanks to you.”

“He is a valiant warrior.” The Klingon declared, “Tell him that Mokath honors his name and looks forward to the day when we meet again in battle.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him.” Lieutenant Mtolo answered back with a scowl. “Now, move—I want to get you lot off my ship as soon as possible.”

“How is he?” Talana asked as she gazed down on Commander Kuznetsov lying on a biobed, the instrument panel above his head sounding a steady rhythm as the indicators, while on the lower end of the scale, were at least remaining stable.

"He'll make it, Talana." The *Lexington's* Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Charles Vincent, replied in his usual New England twang as he brushed back what was left of his sandy blond hair. "He's got a strong constitution and Lieutenant Mtolo did a good job on his wound and getting him here to us in time. He'll be laid up for a while..." he grinned, "...but it won't be long before he's back to his usual self terrorizing the junior officers and making the crew's life a holy hell." Giving the Andorian science officer an appraising look, the doctor asked, "Now, how are you feeling, Talana?"

Shaking her head as the experiences of the past several hours rushed through her mind, the troubled Andorian woman replied softly, "Like I've been through hell, Charles."

"Well, young lady..." The doctor declared as he motioned for the lieutenant commander to follow him into his office, "I think I have the perfect answer for that." Nodding his head in the direction of the chair before his desk, he signaled for Talana to sit down as he took his seat behind the desk. Opening one of the desk drawers, Vincent took out a bottle filled with a blue liquid and two glasses. "Andorian ale." He grinned as he poured the cerulean liquor into the glasses, filling them. "Here..." He said as he handed one of the glasses to the blue skinned woman sitting opposite him. "Drink..." Charles urged as he took a sip from his glass, "I guarantee it's good stuff." Smiling at the pleased reaction on his friend's face, the doctor gently prompted, "Now...tell me all about it. Start at the beginning and don't stop until you're finished. We've got plenty of time..." He smiled as he refilled the glasses, "...and plenty of ale."

"Sir..." Lieutenant Oudekirk reported from the auxiliary communications console, "Damage control reports that repairs to the bridge airlock should be completed in twelve hours. Our other systems are fully repaired and operational and the *Cabot* has returned."

"Good." Wesley replied as he addressed his helm officers, "Mr. Lawford, plot us a course for Starbase 31. Ms. Bathory, take us out of the nebula at maximum impulse and then once we clear the cloud, take us to warp two." Rising to his feet, the commodore went from station to station in the small control room, putting his hand on Aliz's shoulder, slapping the back of the navigator sitting next to the Hungarian helmsman, flashing an encouraging smile at Jennifer Watley currently manning the science station, nodding his head in appreciation at Lieutenants Mtolo and Oudekirk, chuckling at a muttered curse coming from his Tellarite engineer. As he made his rounds,

Wesley nodded his head in satisfaction. His young crew did damned good their first time out of the blocks, the commodore thought, damned good.

The End