

Border Cutter Silverfin Lost and Found

By Brydon Sinclair

Captain's Ready Room, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470
Beloti Sector, Talarian Border
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Their routine patrol route had so far been quiet, allowing Captain Susanna Leijten time to catch up on paperwork. She had already gone through the fuel consumption reports, crew leave requests, system status reports and signed off on the months training schedule—noting that twelve of the crew had to put in five hours or more of shuttle time or risk losing their qualification and need to re-certify. That just left her with the crew evaluations. She had saved it for last, as it was actually one of the administrative duties she enjoyed. Although she always caught up on all the gossip that went around the *U.S.S. Silverfin*, and was told of any instances of good work or problems with the crew from her senior officers, it wasn't until she got the evaluations that she saw just how her crew were really doing. Sometimes all was going well, but other times there were various problems (personal matters, disagreements in the department, galactic news) that saw some falling behind.

Ever since Leijten had taken command of the Border Service cutter *Silverfin* three years ago, she had made it her responsibility to ensure that every single one of the hundred and twenty-four officers and crew onboard were alright. She knew all of their names and at least one fact about their personal lives, if not more in some instances. Though at the Academy, her instructors had drummed into her that a command-level officer needed to keep their distance from their crew, she had always seen that as being counter-productive. Since becoming the *Silverfin's* First Officer in 2370, she had led by example. Getting her hands dirty and mucking in to do what needed to be done, sharing stories and news from home, and whenever they had put in to dock, everyone's first round of drinks had always been on her. None of that had changed since the fourth pip went on her collar. The ship continued to run smoothly, the universe hadn't imploded, and the crew would come to her if they were having problems they needed help with.

So much for Emerson's lectures, she quipped to herself, thinking of the old starship Captain who had lectured them all on Command Ethics and Protocol.

As she worked, the sound of Andorian Blues filled her ready room. Currently it was the solo work of Thilishanris zh'Sohsha, playing a *zihm'ra*, which sounded like a blend of a saxophone and someone strangling a cat, but it was a sound that Leijten had always found soothing. On her desk sat a pitcher of iced tea, flavoured with mango and passion fruit.

It had taken her a while to feel comfortable in the ready room after she took command. Her predecessor had kept the space very bare; only the desk, three chairs and the carpet. She had moved what furniture there was around, so that her desk faced the small viewport, under which she had brought in a small couch and had put up shelves. She stopped short of replacing the carpet and painting the walls, but she had seriously thought about it for a while. The ready room was now decorated with her awards, pictures and holo-images of friends and family, a ceremonial dagger she had been given as a gift on Thrakkus XII, a small clay pot her niece had made for her, several fictional books—mostly thrillers or crime novels (there was nothing better than a good mystery)—and numerous other trinkets and knickknacks she'd picked up during her time in Starfleet. The space was very definitely her own.

Maybe I could put in new carpeting though, she mused once again before shaking the idea from her head with a chuckle.

She had just finished with the reports on the bridge officers, when the intercom chirped. *"Bridge to Captain Leijten,"* came the resounding deep baritone of her XO, which seemed to fill every nook of the ready room.

"Go ahead Amarin," she replied, taking a sip of her iced tea, relishing the delicately blended beverage.

"We have just picked up a Federation ship on sensors."

That made her pause. There weren't any suppose to be any other Federation ships in their immediate vicinity. "Any idea who they are?"

"Not as yet. They are not responding to hails."

Though to most, Amarin's tone seemed constant, she knew her First Officer better than that, and could detect underlying hints of caution, alarm and intrigue. "On my way. Leijten out."

She rose, went around her desk and through the doors onto the bridge. The first thing she noticed was that Amarin wasn't in his usual place, standing beside the Command Chair. Even though as the *Silverfin's* First Officer, he was fully entitled to fill her chair when she wasn't on the bridge, he never did, always standing ramrod straight, with his hands clasped firmly behind his back.

The second thing she noticed was her new Tactical Officer calling out, "Captain on the bridge."

She shot the newly assigned Ensign a *knock that off* look. Jose Tyler the Fifth was Starfleet from his regulation cut sideburns down to his immaculately polished boots, as was his father and his father, and so on all the way back to the mid twenty-third century, when the ancestor he was named for served onboard the *U.S.S. Enterprise* under Captain Christopher Pike. He had only been onboard for a month, fresh from the Academy and a few months spent at Advanced Tactical Training; he'd replaced Lieutenant Commander Ling-Na, who had been promoted to the *Oslo* as First Officer. Ever since his first day, he had insisted on the old naval tradition that was still found on the odd ship in the regular Fleet, but which was pretty much unheard of in the Border Service. If he wasn't such a good tactician she'd have had him shipped off the *Silverfin*, but the kid would learn in time that the Border Service was different to the rest of Starfleet. It usually took Fleet officers a while to adjust to the differences and Tyler wouldn't be any different.

Leaving the Ensign alone for the moment, she moved over to the opposite side of the bridge, where Amarin stood, bent at the waist looking over the various sensor displays and readouts. Three years ago, a shot from a Jem'Hadar ship had caused the power conduit behind the console to overload. The explosion had killed the former Operations Manager, Alec Murphy, as well as her predecessor, Captain Hilgrat Ja-Inrosh, whilst she had been seriously injured though remained conscious long enough to save their collective asses. For months afterwards, whenever she looked at operations she only saw the burial mound of metal and plastics. Though she had long since moved past it, every so often the memory would flash before her again and she would feel the same sense of loss and sadness she always associated with it.

She had spoken with Doctor Tunde Mbeki about it, but the ship's CMO hadn't seen anything wrong with her morose nostalgia, saying; *You respected Captain Ja-Inrosh and were good friends with Alec. I'd be more worried if you*

didn't think about them every now and then. Soon, there will come a time when you won't think about them when you go near Ops. I doubt you'll even realise it when you do. But until that day comes, just acknowledge the memory and the feelings associated with it, then keep on going.

She did just as he suggested and locked the memory away again.

Lieutenant Commander Kolanis Daezan looked up as she approached, his onyx-black eyes looking right into her very soul. She knew the Betazoid picked up on her sad reminiscing, but he also knew that she would suppress it as quickly as it happened—just like many others who'd lost close friends in the war did. Things had been different when he'd first come onboard, so she'd had to explain it to him, but he had been more understanding and accepting than she'd deserved.

“Skipper,” he said by way of greeting, which made her smile as always—it was his own little way of helping her forget the memory.

“What have we got gentlemen?” she asked, coming to a stop by the console and looking at the vast array of monitors and screens.

Daezan brought up the sensor sweep he'd been running, which clearly indicated a duranium hull signature. The Federation were the only major power that used duranium to build their ships.

Amorin looked up from the panel he'd been working. The tall Benzenite always startled those who hadn't met one of his people before. Though their names sounded similar to the Benzite, aside from some having blue colouring, that was where the similarities ended. By human standards, the Benzenite weren't an attractive race, with bulbous cranial formations on the sides and back of their heads which served as sensory organs (similar to a dolphin's melon), they also has small eyes which were sensitive to most light spectrums and as such Amorin had to wear special goggles to protect them, he also needed to wear a special breather mask over his nose and mouth to help them breathe in the rich oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere that was standard on Federation ships, from the mask came four fleshy breathing tubes, two going from his chin to where a human's ears roughly were, and then two more going from his chin down to his sternum—as such his uniform was designed differently to accommodate his physiology. Benez'ahn, where Amorin was born, was a world located on the outer edges of his systems habitable zone, it was cold and dark with low gravity, and had a very thin atmosphere

comprised mostly of carbon dioxide, with small amounts of oxygen, argon and fluorine.

“Going by the size, I would say that it is a Starfleet ship,” Amarin stated, the engineer in him going over the technical data quickly and effortlessly.

“And nothing when you hailed them?”

“Not a thing Skipper, I tried them as soon as I identified them as UFP.”

“Perhaps a colony ship off course?” she suggested, trying to think of why a ship would be out here.

“No new colony sites anywhere in this sector. Federation Colonial Operations doesn’t seem so keen about this area since the Talarian Incursion last year,” Daezan stated. It was understandable; thousands had been killed when the Talarians had attacked the outposts and planets along their territory. The Talarians had caught the Border Service and Starfleet completely by surprise, using weapons far more advanced than anything they’d had before. During the Talarian Border Conflict they hadn’t had the most powerful ships, but what they lacked in firepower, they made up with in numbers. For every Starfleet ship along the border, the Talarians had at least ten. Now, a good proportion of their militia had advanced weaponry and were willing to use it.

“Deep space explorer returning from a long-term mission?”

“None expected in this region,” Amarin told her.

“Special Ops?”

Daezan shrugged his broad shoulders. “Possible, they are a law unto themselves.”

“Hmm,” she sighed, looking at the anomalous blip on their sensors. “Open a channel to them, Mr Daezan.”

“Aye-aye Skipper,” he replied and tapped the sequence into his communications panel. “Channel open.”

“Federation ship, this is Captain Leijten of the Border Cutter *Silverfin*. Do you require any assistance?” She waited, but only silence filled the speaker. “I repeat; this is the *U.S.S. Silverfin* of the Border Service. Do you need help?”

“They’re not answering, sir,” Daezan said. “If you ask me that’s just plain rude.”

Almost any other time, the Ops Officer’s quip would have brought a smile to her lips. But something wasn’t right. A lost colony ship would be begging for help, a deep space explorer would be eager to talk and catch up on news and events they had missed out on, even Special Ops would reply with a coded signal, telling them politely to get lost.

“Kolanis, are you sensing anything from them?” she enquired, not for the first time, glad to have a Betazoid on the bridge.

He shook his head. “We’re too far away, Skipper.”

“Inform Star Station Freedom that we have located a Federation ship in unusual circumstances and are moving to investigate,” she told Daezan, then headed for the command arena—Amorin close behind—located in the centre of the bridge, surrounded by railings, directly in front of which was the Conn. She looked at Lieutenant Harriet Llewellyn-Smyth, with her dark brown hair tied up in an elaborate style (as it always was), flawlessly smooth alabaster skin, and slim physique—it wasn’t any wonder the crew had nicknamed her English Rose.

“Harriet, have you got that ship on your board?”

“Confirmed Captain,” she replied in her Cambridgeshire accent, with perfect elocution (which once upon a time would have been called simply ‘posh’).

“Alter our course and increase to warp seven.”

“Adjusting heading to one-one-nine-mark-two-six-four, increasing to warp factor seven,” she replied, entering the change into the flight log.

Leijten settled into the Command Chair as Amorin took up his customary place standing to her right, arms behind his back and watched everything that went on around him. As she watched the star field shift with their change in course, she couldn’t help but speculate as to what they would find.

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It took the *Silverfin* an hour and a half to reach the unidentified Federation ship, which hadn't moved or contacted them in all that time. *Things are just getting weirder and weirder*, Leijten thought from her chair—and she had once been transformed into an entirely different species on Tarchannen III.

When they were still several million kilometres away, Llewellyn-Smyth looked over her shoulder. “We are approaching the ship’s coordinates, Captain.”

“Slow us down to one-half impulse, Lieutenant.”

“Yellow alert,” bellowed Amarin, who had remained by her side during their travel to the unknown ship. They had batted about ideas of what they might discover, as well as the best approach to take when they arrived. Both had agreed to err on the side of caution, until they knew more.

The alert panels flashed yellow and the low klaxon sounded briefly.

The *Silverfin* stayed on course. Llewellyn-Smyth manipulating the ship's controls like the professional she was. The Lieutenant had been aboard since she graduated from the Academy seven years earlier, starting off as the Gamma Shift Conn Officer, before being promoted to the Beta Shift, and then three years ago, just before Captain Ja-Inrosh's death, she'd been promoted to the senior staff. She knew exactly how to handle the Albacore-Class ship, to make the most out of her warp drive, and could pilot the ship with its high power-to-mass ratio at impulse speeds, better than any combat pilot Leijten had met. There was no one she wanted more at the helm than English Rose.

“All decks report yellow alert status,” stated Tyler, from his tone Leijten suspected that he was impressed with the speed and efficiency the crew got organised. But that was one of the things the Border Service was best at, organising for an emergency and ensuring that everyone was where they were meant to be, and knew exactly what needed to be done.

“Daezan?”

“Definitely Starfleet,” he replied, peering through the old-style sensor hood that was still common place on Albacore-Class ships, regardless of how many upgrades and modifications they had. “Showing her to be Excelsior-Class, checking her transponder signal now.”

Amorin looked up at Tactical. "Try short-range ship-to-ship communications, Ensign. And if they still don't reply try laser signals."

"Aye sir," Tyler replied promptly and set to work with establishing communications.

From Leijten's left she heard Daezan mutter, "Can't be."

That was enough to peak her curiosity. She was on her feet and moving in the Betazoid's direction in a matter of seconds. "What is it Kolanis?" she asked, stepping in closer to the younger man.

"I've identified her transponder code, but it just can't be possible," he explained.

"How so? Who is she?"

He turned around to face her, his deep dark eyes locking onto hers, his face serious. "It's the *U.S.S. Cairo!*"

"What?" she exclaimed, launching herself at the monitor he'd been looking at and studied it for herself. He was right, according to the *Silverfin's* database, that ship was the *Cairo*—a starship that vanished only a few weeks before the Romulans entered the Dominion War, over four years ago! "Lifesigns?"

He turned back to the scope and checked the readings, but shook his head. "None sir. The ship is deserted." He ran several other scans and confirmed his own readings, as he did, Leijten noticed a deep thoughtful look on his face, and knew he was telepathically scanning the ship as the same time the cutters sensors swept over the larger vessel. "I'm not picking up anyone over there."

"Run every scan you can think of, Commander," she instructed then moved over to Tactical. "Ensign Tyler, anything on the comm?"

"Negative sir," the young baby faced officer replied. *Are Ensigns getting younger, or am I getting older?* she suddenly realised. She ignored the stray thought as she came to stand by his console.

"Tactical analysis of that ship."

"Aye sir," he replied and quickly set about his task. It took him a few moments to run his scans and compile data, during which time she ordered

Llewellyn-Smyth to hold position just outside transporter range, and to track back the *Cairo's* course. As the Conn Officer complied, Tyler looked up at her. "I'm not showing any signs of damage anywhere on the ship, at least not by any conventional weaponry. They could have suffered a biological or chemical weapon attack, that wouldn't damage the hull if it was snuck aboard."

"Any ships in range?"

"Negative sir."

"Keep on sensors, Mr Tyler, we don't want anyone sneaking up on us right now," she instructed him and moved back down to the command area. Amarin had moved down to the Conn to look over Llewellyn-Smyth's sensor displays, but when she moved back towards her chair, he stepped up to join her.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, trying to keep his voice low, which was difficult with his deep tone.

"I'm not sure," she admitted. "How does a ship the size of an Excelsior-Class get from the Neutral Zone across the breadth of the Federation without being spotted? Why wouldn't the crew report in? And where are they now?"

"We can't rule out a covert mission for Starfleet Intelligence," he stated.

Leijten thought about it for a moment and shook her head. "Maybe if we were still at war, but that's been over for over two years now. Why would she remain on silent running?" She looked back at the viewscreen. Something was very wrong.

"Skipper," Daezan called, drawing her attention away from the mystery ship. "I'm reading minimal power emissions coming from the *Cairo*; I'd say her warp core was shut down. Emergency batteries are almost drained by the looks of things, minimal lighting, life-support and gravity."

"It would take at least seventy-two hours for their emergency power to drain completely," mused Amarin. "Longer if they shut down systems and evacuated decks—as anyone would do to prolong their power supply."

We need to get onboard, she decided. There was only so much the ships sensors could tell them. An up close investigation would give them more

answers. "Daezan prep for SAR-Op," she told the Betazoid, who nodded then contacted his relief cover. She looked back at the *Cairo* and called into the intercom, "Leijten to Syva."

"Go ahead Captain," came the Vulcan Chief of the Boat's prompt response. Leijten noticed that Amarin was ordering Llewellyn-Smyth to move the *Silverfin* into optimum transporter range.

"Have a three-man team report to transporter room one. Break out the EVA suits and phaser carbines."

"Understood. We will be ready in three-point-five minutes."

She came off the comm as PO Jackson stepped onto the bridge to take over at Ops. Daezan quickly briefed the non-com and headed for the lift. Leijten looked at Amarin, with a look that told him, *this mission is mine*. The towering Benzenite nodded once and she headed for the turbolift, tapping her combadge and asking Dr Mbeki to join them. At the alcove she turned to her XO.

"Continue scans for other ships, anomalies or anything else what might explain what happened to them. We'll conduct a brief survey and get back ASAP."

"Aye Captain," Amarin stated.

She was about to step into the lift, when from the opposite side of the bridge, a voice called out, "Sir!" She stopped and looked over at Ensign Tyler, just as the rest of the bridge crew did. She was impressed that the young man didn't flinch under the eight pairs of eyes scrutinising him.

"Yes Ensign?"

"Starfleet regulation twenty, section A, paragraph two, prohibits the Commanding Officer from beaming into an unknown and potentially hazardous situation."

"And?" she asked simply.

That brought him up short. "Well, you shouldn't be transporting over to the *Cairo*, sir. We have no idea what happened onboard."

“That’s why I’m going, Ensign, to find some answers.” She looked back at Amarin. “The ship is yours, Commander.”

“I’ll keep the home fires burning, sir,” he replied as she stepped into the turbolift and ordered it to descend.

As they were on their way, she heard Daezan chuckle behind her and looked over at the Ops Officer, a smile spreading on her own face. “The kids got guts,” Daezan said. “When I was a raw ensign, I’d never have spoken up like that!”

“Me neither,” she told him. “If we could only get him to relax a little, he’d fit right in.”

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Transporter Room 1, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470 Beloti Sector, Talarian Border

Leijten and Daezan stepped into the transporter room to find Master Chief Syva, Crewmen Mycroft and Drim already in their EVA suits—minus the helmet—each one carrying a phaser carbine, a stockier version of the rifle which was better suited to close quarters. Drim was helping Dr Mbeki with the chest plate, the tall Nigerian CMO looking incredibly uncomfortable in the spacesuit. Leijten had ordered them into the suits for two reasons. Firstly the atmosphere was thin on the *Cairo*, a result of her minimal power output, and secondly, they couldn’t rule out a biological or chemical weapon being used onboard.

Syva helped Leijten with her suit, whilst Mycroft helped Daezan. Less than five minutes after arriving in the transporter room the six-man team were suited and ready. Leijten connected her helmet in place and then took the carbine Syva offered. Taking the weapon she ran a quick check on it, then when she was satisfied that it was fully charged and operational, she stepped up onto the platform. The others, helmets in place, followed. Neither Daezan nor Mbeki carried a carbine, both favouring their type-two hand phasers. The team assembled on the dais, each one facing outward, weapon raised.

“Magnetise,” Leijten ordered, tapping the control panel control panel on her left thigh. She felt the pull of the gravity boots on the surface of the transporter pad and heard the light *thrum* as they activated, firstly from

herself and then from the others. She then looked at the controls and nodded to Chief Wilkins. “Energise.”

As the transported beam enveloped her, she flexed her body and gripped her weapon tightly, positioning it in optimum firing position. The sequence would take seven seconds and she would find herself in a totally unknown situation. *No backing out of it now*, she told herself as she began to take in details of the *Cairo’s* bridge.

Moments later they materialised, the lights on their helmets cutting through the darkness as they swept their weapons around in an arch, looking out for anyone or anything that would attack or was in need of help. Aside from the consoles and seats, the bridge was eerily empty. It was a standard layout for the Excelsior-Class, central Command Chair, forward Conn and Ops, a large two-seater Tactical station at the entrance of the rear alcove, on the wall of which was the Master Systems Display flanked on either side by a entry hatch to deck one, around the circular bulkheads were half-a-dozen other consoles and at the three and nine o’clock positions were two further doors, the port leading to the ready room and the starboard to the turbolift.

“Clear,” each of the security guards stated quickly.

Happy that the bridge was as empty as it seemed, she took the carbine stock from her shoulder, but kept a firm grip on it. She then looked at Syva, who seemed to be looking everywhere at once despite the restricted view of the EVA suit. “Secure this deck, Master Chief,” she said over the open commlink.

“*Aye Captain,*” the Vulcan replied. Leijten always found her all-business demeanour to be very reassuring, not to mention her thirty years in the Border Service and fifty years as a security operative on Vulcan. “*Mycroft, check the ready room. Drim, with me,*” Syva ordered her team, sending the more experienced guard into the bridge level office, whilst taking the rookie Bolian to check the aft rooms and corridors.

With their security being seen to, she looked back at Daezan and Mbeki; both men had holstered their phasers and instead drawn their tricorders. Daezan was approaching the Operations console, whilst Mbeki stood at their beam-in site and scanned.

“Anything Doc?”

He had his back to her but didn't say anything for a moment, and then, *"Damn suit!"* He turned to face her and shook his head—no doubt he'd done the same a moment before, but the helmet made such gestures meaningless. *"No lifesigns on this deck or the other five below us. I'll increasing my scanning radius in a moment, but decks one to six house a lot of quarters and recreational spaces. No signs of any viral, chemical or biological contamination—naturally occurring or otherwise."*

"Aren't there some chemical compounds that leave no trace and can disintegrate a humanoid body in a matter of hours?"

"Sure. The Cardassians have something like that for the special operatives to take in case of capture. But even that leaves behind residual traces."

"Residual traces', such as?"

"Dust," he said, looking up at her from his tricorder. *"The body is broken down into nothing but little piles of dust."*

She looked around at the chairs and deck, but it was all very clean—just as a starship bridge should be. "Anything else?"

"Not at present. I'll let you know if I find anything. Though accessing their medical database would prove to be useful."

"Whatever you need to do, Doctor," she told him and moved down to Ops. "Mr Daezan, anything of use or interest?"

Daezan was seated at the console, not an easy thing to do in the suit, and was using his tricorder to tap into the ships systems and run a series of checks and scans. *"Power levels are so low I've had to route a hard-line connection into my tricorder to check her status,"* he told her, and it was then she noticed the optronic wires going from the console to the handheld device. *"It'll take a little longer than usual to get a full report, Skipper. Exactly why the core is offline is a mystery. I'll have to download their logs and check them when we get back to the Silverfin. So far nothing to indicate what happened aboard."*

"Keep at it Kolanis."

"Syva to Leijten."

"Go ahead, Master Chief."

“Can you join me in the break room? I have found something...puzzling.”

“On my way.” Leijten stepped up onto the upper level, just as Mycroft stepped out of the ready room.

“The office is neat and tidy, sir. Nothing out of place as far as I can see,” the guard stated.

“Stay with Daezan and Mbeki,” she ordered and headed for the aft alcove. She stepped through the port hatch and moved aft. As with all Excelsior-Class ships, the *Cairo* had several rooms on deck one, aside from just the bridge, ready room and observation lounge at the very back. Behind the bridge there was an additional turbolift, a head, a computer interface suite, a secondary administrations office and the break room—a small mess hall for the bridge staff.

Her first posting had been to the *U.S.S. Roosevelt* and she had memorised the design of the ship, seeing as how it was to the regular fleet what the Albacore-Class was to the Border Service. The Excelsior-Class was perhaps the most successful design in Starfleet’s history and would continue to serve for many years—if not decades—to come.

Leijten stepped into the break room and found Syva standing beside one of the tables, aiming her combat scanner at the table top. All of the security personnel had combat scanners on their EVA suits, which worked as well as a normal tricorder, but left both their hands free for handling their weaponry. She also noticed that Drim wasn’t about, most likely checking one of the other small rooms.

“What is it, Master Chief?”

Syva gestured to the food in front of her, half eaten meats and drinks, ranging from coffee and croissant to sirloin steak. Leijten’s stomach growled. *“According to my scans, the thermal degradation would indicate that this food was replicated within the last thirty to forty minutes.”*

Unable to quite believe what the Vulcan was saying, Leijten pulled out her own tricorder and ran a quick scan. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe that Syva was telling the truth, but it just seemed so preposterous that it couldn’t be true. As she ran the scans, she noted that utensils were either set neatly on the plates or beside them, no signs that the crew had left in a hurry, or of

turbulence that would have knocked items to the floor. It was as if they had just gotten up and walked away.

Her tricorder displayed the results of the scan. Syva was indeed correct, though most had gone cold none of it was older than forty minutes. “How on earth is this possible?”

“I have no reasonable explanation, Captain. The facts as we know them are not providing any firm conclusions.”

“Nothing about this ship is making any sense!”

Just then, Drim entered the break room. The stocky Bolian stiffened when he saw Leijten, as all rookie crewmen always did when an officer was present—especially their Captain. *“Ma’am, all of the other rooms are empty. No signs of the crew, or indications of a struggle. All my scans come up clear.”*

“Let’s get back to the bridge.”

She led the way onto the deck, as they entered, Mycroft turned and readied his weapon, but dropped his aim the moment he saw them. Leijten was relieved to see her team still in one piece. Daezan was still at Ops, whilst Mbeki had moved to the Environmental console, and had likewise hard-lined his tricorder into the system and was downloading files from the ship’s computer. Seeing what Mbeki was capable of never ceased to amaze her—for example, she’d never had guessed he knew how to hard-line a tricorder into a console and access the database independently of the central processor.

But then the good doctor was always full of surprises. He’d once told her that after being assigned to the Border Service, he’d taken on several distance learning courses the Academy offered, to try and make himself as useful as possible what with being surrounded by dozens of cross-trained and multi-talented Border Dogs.

Daezan shut his tricorder and looked back up at her. *“I’ve downloaded what was in their active memory, Skipper. I’ll need to analyse it back onboard the Silverfin before I can give you any definitive answers.”*

“Same here, Susanna,” Mbeki added. He was the only one onboard who ever used her first name, seeing as how when she went to him for advice, constantly being addressed as ‘Captain’ or ‘sir’ had almost driven her nuts. Though he usually didn’t use it outside of private conversations, it did slip in

to use once in a while when they were on duty. Though she didn't mind, the last thing she wanted was for the suspicious-minded gossipmongers onboard to put two and two together and come up with the square root of forty-seven. Tunde Mbeki was a good friend, a valued advisor and confidant, nothing more.

"Good, get disconnected and let's get back to the boat."

"Captain, shall we remain and begin a more thorough search?" enquired Syva, referring to her security team.

"Negative. I'd like to see what their records tell us first before starting a full scale investigation. Seeing as how every scan we can run says there aren't any signs of life onboard, I wouldn't classify this as a SAR-Op. Before committing to a full-scale search we have the opportunity to find out more, which isn't a luxury we're often afforded and I intend to make use of it."

That placated the Security Chief, who gave a slight bow—an EVA version of a nod. *"A sound and logical approach, Captain."*

"Yeah, well that's why I'm paid the big bucks," she replied, then opened a commlink up with the ship. *"Away team to Silverfin. We've checked their bridge and downloaded their logs. Ready to beam out."*

"Acknowledged. Standby away team," Amarin replied, his resounding baritone filling her suit.

She breathed a sigh of relief, as once again the transporter beam took hold, only this time she was heading back home, hopeful that she would soon have some answers.

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Wardroom, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470 Beloti Sector, Talarian Border

Since returning to the *Silverfin*, Leijten had given Daezan and Mbeki an hour to go through the logs and come up with some answers, before she called a meeting of the senior staff in the wardroom. Since her stomach was still grumbling, she had opted to go to in a little early for lunch. When the *Silverfin* was first commissioned into active duty, she hadn't had replicators and carried a catering staff to keep the crew fed, but after several refits the system

had been introduced and the need for cooks disappeared—as far as Leijten was aware, only one cutter still carried a chef.

A Starfleet brat, Leijten had only ever had replicated food growing up. It was only when she was a newly graduated ensign at the age of twenty-two, waiting for transfer to the *Roosevelt*, that she had first tasted food that was prepared and made by hand in a small deli on Spacedock 2. It had been a new and strange concept, but one she had immediately liked. Since that day, whenever they put into dock, after she bought everyone onboard a drink, she searched out a real-food restaurant and treated herself, just the once.

Sitting in the wardroom, she had a roast chicken sandwich, with a lettuce and tomato, and just a touch of English mustard on rosemary bread, washed down with a tall iced glass of Bolian tonic water with a hint of lime, and a banana on the side for when she was finished with the sandwich.

She was half way through when the doors opened and Lieutenant Elak ko’Parr th’Shaan stepped in and then abruptly stopped. The Andorian looked around the nearly empty room, his antennae twitching. “Have I missed the meeting?” he asked.

Smiling at her Chief Engineer, she shook her head. “Lunch,” she muffled around a mouthful of sandwich. She quickly swallowed and repeated, “Just grabbing a quick lunch. Take a seat Elak. I would have thought you’d be helping Kolanis out.”

“I was, from engineering. The ops centre smells funny.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Come again?”

“Andorians have a very sensitive olfactory system,” he told her. “Whenever I go into the ops centre it’s like sweaty feet. You don’t know if they go barefoot in there when no one else is around?”

“I couldn’t say, Lieutenant,” she told him, trying to keep a straight face. The ops centre was where the crew monitored the main computer, communications antenna and sensor arrays, and provided backup to the Ops Officer on duty on the bridge. Seeing as how the *Silverfin* had only one small medlab and no other science facilities, any analysis needed to be done was performed in the ops centre.

Th'Shaan took the second seat down on the right side of the table, and started going over the PADD he had brought with him. Leijten let him work as she finished off her sandwich. She had moved onto the banana when the doors opened again and Syva entered and took her place on the left hand side, two seats down from the head of the table. The doors parted again, and Amarin led Llewellyn-Smith and Tyler into the room. The First Officer took the first seat on the right, next to th'Shaan whilst Llewellyn-Smyth stopped off at the replicator with a cup of tea with lemon, then sat on the other side of the engineer and Tyler sat next to her. Almost immediately, Amarin and th'Shaan began speaking about the status in engineering. Amarin, being the ship's previous Chief Engineer (before Leijten had promoted him to XO), still liked to help out down below when he could and always kept apprised of what was happening on the technical side of things. That just left Daezan and Mbeki to arrive.

Thirty seconds before the meeting was scheduled to start, they walked in, talking between themselves and looking over PADDs. The dark skinned doctor immediately took his seat next to Syva, whilst Daezan went to the replicator for a raktajino first, before sitting opposite Amarin. Though there was no structured seating plan for the wardroom, every meeting they had saw the senior staff always gravitated towards the same seats.

She looked at the two lieutenant commanders. "Gentlemen, this is your show."

"Thank you, Skipper," Daezan said, taking the lead. "I was able to download everything that was in their active memory—we'll have to restore main power to get full access to their records. What I did manage to recover is dated over four years ago, the most recent entry was logged in by the ship's CMO—only twelve minutes before all contact was lost with the *Cairo*."

"How is that possible?" Llewellyn-Smyth asked, her hands clasped together beside her teacup as she leaned forward slightly.

"A wormhole or some other space-time anomaly?" Tyler suggested.

Leijten looked at the younger man, for the youngest in the room he never had any problems speaking up when in a meeting, then at Daezan, who was shaking his head. "No signs of subspace distortion in the ships hull. The internal chronometer also shows that since that when I downloaded what I could, only fifty minutes had passed since that log was recorded—which would be almost three hours by now."

“Which would explain the freshly replicated food in the break room,” added Syva, her posture excellent. “Also most wormholes are very unstable and cause a great deal of spatial turbulence. Any such instability onboard would have disrupted the crockery.”

“Exactly Master Chief,” Daezan agreed. “That ship still believes that it is 2374 and that the Dominion War is very much still active. Mr th’Shaan and I can’t find anything in the active memory banks that indicates why the warp core is offline, or what happened to the crew.”

“It wasn’t foul play,” stated Mbeki just as the Ops officer finished speaking. “All of my scans of the air reveal no harmful agents at work. I also checked the scans that you,” he said nodding at Leijten, “and Syva took of the food, thinking that something might have contaminated the organic replicator matter, but it was clean as well. I checked what medical records I could, as well as their chief’s logs. Aside from a dozen crewmembers recovering from injuries sustained in a recent engagement with Dominion forces, the crew were in good health. No illnesses or diseases reported and nothing that would indicate a viral contamination.”

Leijten sat and absorbed all the information her officers provided. She knew each man well and trusted their findings, both of them had saved her life and many others more times than she could count. She then looked at the two other bridge officers in the meeting. “Any activity in this region, Mr Tyler?”

“Negative Captain. No ships have entered sensor range since we intercepted the *Cairo*.”

“Any luck tracking their course?” she asked the helmswoman.

“Sensors show no sign of a warp trail or an impulse wake. Given their current positioning, I was attempted to extrapolate their heading, but there are too many variables to say with certainty which one they arrived on.”

“Engine emission would likely have dissipated by now,” suggested th’Shaan.

“Possible,” Llewellyn-Smyth continued. “However, one of our reconnaissance probes did sweep these co-ordinates less than thirty hours ago and didn’t detect the *Cairo*. That is enough time for both to dissipate, but the probe didn’t detect any warp signatures as it continued on its heading—which is roughly perpendicular to the *Cairo*’s most likely vector.”

“So basically, we have all these pieces that just don’t fit together,” stated Leijten. The assembled officers looked among themselves and nodded in agreement. “Okay, we’ll need to restore power to the *Cairo* so we can gain full access to her computer. Also I want a deck-by-deck search of every corridor, room, compartment and Jefferies tube.”

“Captain,” Amarin spoke up, “that’s twenty-six decks to search and a lot of rooms.”

“I know, Amarin. We’ll leave a skeleton crew onboard the *Silverfin* and assign all available personnel to the investigation. Lieutenant Llewellyn-Smyth, you will be in command of the *Silverfin*. Ensign Tyler, you’ll also remain onboard and keep a very close eye on the sensors. Commander,” she looked at the Benzenite beside her, “get the crew together in four-man teams and draw up the search grid. With atmosphere and gravity both low, I want all hands issued with magnetic boots and breathers. Everyone will be armed—we still don’t know what happened over their. This ship needs to be searched and secured visually. Questions?” No one spoke up. “Good, then let’s get moving people.”

* * * * *

Crew Quarters, U.S.S. *Cairo* NCC-42136 Beloti Sector, Talarian Border

An hour had passed since the meeting and the *Silverfin*’s teams were swarming all over the *Cairo*. Out of a crew of one hundred and twenty-four, only sixteen remained onboard the cutter—four on the bridge, four manning the emergency transports (who could pull all of the search teams off in less than thirty seconds if needed), two corpsmen in sickbay and six techs in engineering. The rest of the crew had been split into twenty-seven four-man teams and assigned to the operation to secure the Excelsior-Class ship. Th’Shaan was leading two teams in main engineering trying to restore power to the warp core (with no success so far) and another four-man team was at the main computer core, getting it ready for a full download and data analysis.

Leijten’s team were on deck eight, searching through the various science labs, offices and quarters. With her was Lieutenant Commander Daezan—though the Second Officer could have been leading his own team, she knew that if anyone was going to find something it would be the Betazoid officer, and so

she opted to take him with her—Corpsman Mitchell “Donny” Donovan and Crewman K8 Blue from security.

Every team checked in with the ship at allocated intervals, though if they found anything unusual they were to signal immediately and the *Silverfin* would then contact Leijten. But so far, all had been quiet. Part of her would rather have been fighting off a horde of hostile aliens, or zombie crewmen, or anything else other than the eerie stillness.

Her team were going through a set of enlisted crew quarters, two bedrooms with twin beds, a small living space between the two rooms and then a multiple-occupant bathroom it shared with a similar set of quarters. *Eight people to one bathroom, you’d really have to like your neighbours*, she quipped to herself, trying to keep the tension at bay. She and Donovan were in one four-berth whilst Blue and Daezan were in the other, having checked the bathroom already.

She ran her tricorder over the computer terminal in one of the bedrooms, but found nothing of interest. The room itself was neat and tidy, nothing looked out of order—exactly the same as it had been in the other ten sets of similar quarters they had already checked on deck eight.

“Captain!” a panicked voice called, followed by a series of clicks and chirps.

“Blue?” she called back, hurrying from the empty room and through the bathroom, her hand on the handle of her holstered phaser, ready to draw in a heartbeat. Donovan was right behind her as they stepped into the other cabin. The pillbug-like Nasat security guard stood in the living room, her antennae quivering and jerking constantly. “What is it?” Leijten asked as she surveyed the room and found it empty. She noticed they were short one member. “Where’s Daezan?”

“I don’t know sir,” the Crewman stated. “We split up to check each room and when I went to look in on him, he was gone.”

She tapped her combadge. “Leijten to Daezan.” There was no reply. “Commander Daezan respond!” As much as the Ops officer was a jester and an easy-going young man, it was never when on a mission. *God, please don’t say he’s vanished just like the Cairo’s crew!* She flipped her tricorder open and started scanning for Betazoid lifesigns, seeing as how Daezan was the only one onboard the *Silverfin* he would be easy to track down. It took a few moments, but her tricorder beeped and showed the bio-sign she was after.

He was still on deck eight, but was heading aft. The search team had started at the forward section and was making its way to the stern, where the science labs and warp core were located.

Maybe he's found something? But why not answer? She looked back at Donovan and Blue. "Come on!" she ordered, dashed out into the corridor as fast as the gravity boots would allow. The others were right behind her, K8 Blue skittering along on all eight of her legs. Leijten had expected her to contract into her carapace and roll ahead of them, but the guard seemed content to move beside them—no doubt under orders from Syva to keep Leijten safe.

They were still thirty meters away when her combadge chirped. *"Th'Shaan to Leijten. Captain I think I've found the problem with the warp—"*

"Understood," she said cutting off the enthusiastic sounding Andorian. "Do what needs to be done. Leijten out." She wasn't usually quite so abrupt, but with one of her people incommunicado she had to prioritise.

Rounding a corner, heading to the outer edge of the saucer, her tricorder told her that he was directly ahead, approaching the escape pods. *What the hell is he doing?* She directed her wrist beacon down the corridor and picked up a humanoid form just ahead of them; from the broad shoulders, slim waist and wavy dark-brown hair she knew exactly who it was.

"Kolanis!" she yelled, her voice echoing up and down all the adjoining corridors. Once again, her hand was on her phaser, whilst she slipped the tricorder back onto her belt. To her right, K8 Blue drew her weapon and aimed in his direction whilst on her left, Donovan had his tricorder open and scanning ahead of them.

Daezan stopped moving and stood still, his posture stiff, his hands balled into tight fists.

"Kolanis? Are you alright?" she asked moving forward. Her two team-mates moved as well, but she gestured for them to stay back. He didn't answer or move. *Something is very wrong here*, she noted, gripping her phaser tighter, but resisting the urge to draw it. As she took another few steps towards him, she remembered back eleven years ago, on the surface of Tarchannen III. She had just come out of surgery to restore her humanity after the planets indigenous humanoid species had "impregnated" her years earlier. She'd been weak and woozy, but she drew every ounce of strength she had to

extend her hand to the semi-transformed figure that was Geordi La Forge, her former shipmate and good friend. She was his only hope of returning to the *Enterprise-D*, where he would be restored as well, but for a brief moment she had almost lost him to the Tarchannen instinct to run, to hide. At the last minute, he had reached for her hand, and on taking it, he had clung to her tightly in an embrace that had saved his life.

She was only ten meters away from him when he started to turn towards her. She stopped. Heart pounding in her chest, part of her wanted to draw her weapon and fire. Whatever had happened to Daezan, he wasn't himself and there was no telling what he would do. When he faced her, she directed the light on his chest, where she saw that his jacket was wet. The light illuminated his face, and when she looked up at him tears streamed down his cheeks and dripping off his square jaw. There was no expression on his handsome face and his eyes, usually so filled with life and mirth, were hollow.

"Kolanis," she said, her voice so soft the silence of the corridor almost swallow the word.

She was about to take a step forward, when his mouth opened wide and he unleashed a deep, guttural, pained howl. A noise so filled with anguish and horror and pain that she was forced to cover her ears. Even as he screamed, his expression never changed, his eyes never locked onto her, he never showed the slightest hint of realisation that there was anyone else in the sector let alone only a few meters away.

Then he stopped, turned and darted down the corridor and around the bend. Immediately she was after him, cursing the magnetic boots she had insisted they all wear, but not wanting to waste time taking them off. She didn't have to go far, as just fifteen meters around the corner, he stood, both hands braced on the hatch of an escape pod, head bowed, his chest heaved and she could see him trembling.

This time, she did draw her weapon. "Lieutenant Commander Daezan!" she snapped, hoping her more formal approach would break him out of whatever had happened to him. She set the phaser to full stun and aimed at his chest. Behind her, she could hear Donovan and Blue approach clumsily, neither one overly experienced with low-gravity environments.

Daezan looked back up at her, straightened himself, his powerful physique intimidating in the dimly lit corridor. He opened his mouth again and she

braced herself for another scream, but this time, he spoke, his voice snarled and throaty, “No eNd...no PEAcE...NO moRE!”

He took a step towards her and without hesitation, she fired. Daezan collapsed in a heap on the deck, just as the others arrived. She moved closer to him, hearing Donovan following close behind. Crouching next to his prone body, she could see the faint rise and fall of his chest. Donovan got down on his knees next to her and ran his tricorder over the Ops officer. It took him a few moments, pausing for a long while at Kolanis’ head before looking at her.

“The phaser shot won’t be a problem, but I’m getting some very unusual neurological readings from him. I’ll need to get him back to the ship and have the Doctor take a closer look at him.”

She nodded. “Whatever you need, Donny.”

He tapped his combadge. “Donovan to *Silverfin*. Two to beam directly to sickbay.”

Leijten moved to stand up, setting her hand on the escape pod hatch to help rise to her feet, but felt something warm and wet on her palm. She raised it to the light of her wrist beacon and saw that her hand was red with blood. Just before Donovan and Daezan were beamed away, she noticed that the Second Officers fists were still clenched and saw blood dripping from between his fingers.

After they had been beamed out, she took a step back and pointed her light at the hatch. What she saw sent a chill through her body and made her gut clench tight. Written in the Betazoid’s dark red blood, in letters at least thirty centimetres high, were two simple words.

HELP US.

* * * * *

**Main Engineering, U.S.S. Cairo NCC-42136
Beloti Sector, Talarian Border**

After Daezan had been beamed out, Leijten had ordered teams to check out the quarters where he’d last been before the ‘incident’, the route he took—paying particular attention to where she had first caught up with him—and then escape pod, where he’d left the message written in his own blood. Their

efforts were made considerably easier when main power was suddenly restored and the ships lighting, life-support and gravity returned to normal.

Being more than a little agitated by what had happened to her Second Officer, she had left Amarin to head up the new investigation and gone to deck thirteen and main engineering to check in with th'Shaan. Crewman K8 Blue remained with her, the Nasat was more than a little unsettled by what had happened to Daezan and now wasn't going to let Leijten out of her sight.

Leijten stepped into the dual-levelled room that housed the now throbbing warp core, as well as almost a dozen work stations and various other pieces of hardware that she ignored at present. She spotted th'Shaan—the only Andorian in the room—at the main command console where he was thoroughly engrossed by what he was looking at. She noted that his antennae curled as she approached and he looked up at Leijten and her bodyguard. He seemed to perk up at seeing her; obviously he hadn't taken her bluntness earlier to heart. The other seven engineers he was in charge of were all busy at other consoles, moving from one to another in what looked like a carefully choreographed dance.

“How's Daezan?” he asked, concern etched on his face for a brief moment.

“Doc said he'd comm me when he had something,” she said as she approached. “How'd you do it?” she asked, coming to a stop at his console.

“It's all a matter of perspective, Captain,” he replied. “Sometimes the problem isn't in the hardware. If an object measures a meter long and a meter stick is wrong, that doesn't make the object a meter.”

She thought over his cryptic response for a moment and then it dawned on her. “A problem with the diagnostic sensors?”

“Got it in one, Captain,” he picked up a small cylinder off the top of the console, roughly thirty centimetres in height and five in diameter, covered in various controls and lights. “The sensor relay in the antimatter injector assembly that monitors the fuel flow and conducts a series of diagnostic sweeps every two hours. It was completely depolarised. All of the readings were completely off and because of that the computer shut the entire warp assembly down, which cut main power.”

She looked up at the large warp core, which spread across fourteen decks and watched as the pulses of energy met at the dilithium chamber in the middle.

Although holding a level four engineering certificate, she had rarely spent much time in the engine room. The qualification had come in handy many times in the past, during her years spent as a Search-And-Rescue Officer both in the Border Service and the Fleet—just like her training as an emergency medical technician, sensor and computer analyst, and her proficiency with just about every weapon Starfleet issued. All of her skills made it easy for her to go between the two sides of Starfleet (the regular Fleet and the Border Service), not something many could boast of, and had made her a solid all-rounder, capable of handling just about anything that was thrown at her.

But despite all of that, I couldn't do a damn thing to help Kolanis, she scorned herself. Stop that Susanna! He's safe and sound back on the Silverfin and Tunde will find out what happened to him.

“What could cause that?” she asked, getting her thoughts back onto the *Cairo* and the mystery it presented.

“Not sure as yet, sir. These sensors are designed to be pretty near foolproof, seeing how the function and safety of the warp core relies on them,” he said studying the faulty relay.

“No theories?” she probed.

He smiled at her. “Well one. Problem is its pretty specific. Only someone who knew the intricacies of a Starfleet warp reactor would have been able to do it.”

“What is it Elak?”

“A tightly-compressed high-frequency ion pulse. It would have to be delivered directly onto the relay. Failure would be instantaneous.”

“So...sabotage?” He nodded. “Any way to check your theory?”

“I'd have to run a full metallurgical analysis in the workshop, once we get back to the *Silverfin*.”

She gestured at the relay he held. “I take it that's the culprit?”

“Yes sir it is. Luckily we were carrying a spare, so I had it beamed over. We're running a full diagnostic as we speak, but so far everything looks to be checking out.”

“Beam it back to the *Silverfin* and have Lieutenant Mulligan begin the analysis. We have far too many questions and not nearly enough answer for my liking,” she instructed him. He nodded and as he contacted the ship to arrange transport and give his assistant her new orders, Leijten’s combadge chirped. Tapping it she said, “This is Leijten. Go ahead.”

“Mbeki here, Captain. I have something to show you,” the Doctor’s voice was calm and composed.

“On my way. Leijten out.” She looked at th’Shaan and held out her hand. He handed her the sensor relay. “Keep me posted of any developments, Lieutenant,” she told him, before calling for immediate beam out.

“Aye sir,” the Andorian replied as she dematerialised.

* * * * *

**Sickbay, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
Beloti Sector, Talarian Border**

After she beamed aboard, she’d left the sensor relay with the transporter operator and quickly hurried towards sickbay. She kept down on her imagination, which was going to ever worst case scenario she could imagine, and just focused on the corridor in front of her. She found it odd not to pass any of the crew, but with so few people onboard who were all at their duty stations, there wouldn’t be anyone wandering around. Best estimates put the search of the *Cairo* to last another two to three hours, with every team moving methodically throughout the Excelsior-Class ship, those that finished one deck then moved on to help search another.

On her way to the medical facility, she’d checked in with the bridge and was relieved to hear no signs of any other ships. The last thing they needed was to have to deal with the Talarians, pirates or scavengers whilst trying to secure the mystery ship.

She rounded a corner and saw the doors to sickbay. Taking a deep breath she stepped inside. Daezan was on the central biobed, the monitors beeping softly in time with the beating of his heart and respiration—both were slow but steady and strong. Petty Officer Echor stood by the bed, running a scanner over Daezan’s head, whilst Corpsman Rice was on the other end of sickbay working at a computer terminal.

The Tellarite at the bed looked up and didn't seem surprised to see Leijten suddenly standing a few meters away. "The Doctor is in the lab, sir," the young medic told her.

Leijten looked up from Daezan's still form and gave the young woman a faint smile. "Thank you," she said and headed into the adjacent medlab. Mbeki stood next to a monitor, whilst Donovan tapped away on the console beside him. It wasn't a surprise the corpsman was helping the CMO out, as Donovan (at 45, three years her junior) was older than the average third class petty officer. Having spent years as a forensics technician on New Sydney, a planet renowned for its high levels of crime, he had enlisted into Starfleet five years ago and specifically requested a posting to the Border Service.

"You have something, Doctor?" she asked as she entered.

Mbeki looked over his shoulder at her, a serious scowl on his face, and then back at the readouts he was studying. "Yes. Something that doesn't make sense however."

She came up beside him. "What about this day *has* made sense?"

"Very true, Susanna," he replied, enlarging one of the windows on his display screen. "Using the readings that Donny took on the *Cairo*, it looks like Daezan was comatose when you confronted him in the corridor."

"How is that possible, Tunde?"

"It shouldn't be. He should have been collapsed on the floor, not walking around and screaming," he enlarged another window, this one filled with writing. "I've checked with all the medical records we have on Betazoids and have found nothing like this before. There have been instances when some can become overpower by extremely strong emotions—occasionally to the point where they lose consciousness. I also found several instances where Betazoids have been coerced or possessed by alien species, depending on their psi-strength. But in those instances, the person affected remains conscious, though they may not be aware of what's happened to them."

"What about those unusually neurological readings Donovan picked up?" she asked, looking at non-com.

"I've conducted a preliminary analysis of the readings—which have since dissipated. His psilosynine levels peaked at nine times above normal, the telepathic and memory centres of his brain were hyper-stimulated, and there were residual traces of a type of bioelectric energy I've never seen before throughout his motor cortex and brain stem," Mbeki explained. "Nothing like this exists in the medical database we have. I'd need to contact the central medical archives on Betazed to see if they've seen anything like this before."

"Will he be alright?"

Mbeki turned to look at her, the scowl had softened, but his expression was still serious. "Physically he's fine. He's resting right now. But mentally and emotionally I'm not sure. A Betazoids empathic ability makes them very sensitive to others and going by what was reported by the rest of your team, he has suffered a very serious emotional trauma."

"Doctor," Echor called from the ward, her voice loud but not panicked.

Mbeki hurried to the ward, with Leijten close behind. They entered to find Daezan slowly coming to. The CMO grabbed a tricorder and a hypospray off the equipment tray by the door, while she continued on to his bedside. Echor stood at the head of the bed, monitoring his vital signs. Mbeki stood opposite Leijten, running the scanner over the Ops officer's body, though he scrutinised the results he didn't seem alarmed by them.

Daezan groaned.

"Kolanis, you okay?" she asked, her voice soft, a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. For a second he looked like his normal self, but then his eyes moisten, and a look of fear and agony ghosted over his face. He tried to sit up, his deep dark eyes alarmed, warnings sounded on the medical screen Echor monitored. Mbeki gripped onto Daezan's shoulders and held him down.

"Daezan, you're alright. You're safe. You've on the *Silverfin*," the doctor tried to reassure his startled and terrified patient, whilst keeping him from harming himself or anyone else.

"Oh gods!" the Betazoid cried out, tears running down his face. "The suffering! They only wanted it to end!" He looked from Mbeki to Leijten, his

eyes pleading with her, as his gestures and struggles became more forceful. “We have to help them! Even to end the torment! Peace...they only want peace!” Leijten never saw Mbeki retrieve the hypospray from his coat pocket, all she heard was the soft hiss as he pressed the device to Daezan’s neck. “No...” he moaned, before his eyes rolled back and he fell into a deep medicated sleep.

When sickbay fell quiet once again, Leijten looked up at Mbeki, who was once again running scans on his patient. She looked back down at the younger man, who had become such a welcome addition to the crew, well known for his pranks and practical jokes, as well as his tremendous warmth and compassion. His colloquial nickname for her, that made Leijten smile the first time she heard it everyday, his reassuring calm on the bridge which she had come to rely on, all of that seemed to have vanished from him.

“Doctor?” she pressed the CMO.

“I’ve got a few more tests to run, Captain, in the meantime I’ll keep him sedated. I don’t know what’s still affecting him, but I don’t want to take any chances,” he said, finishing off his scans. “You’ll have to excuse me, Susanna,” he said and headed back for the lab. She didn’t need to tell him to keep her posted.

Looking down at Daezan once more, she headed for the exit, suddenly feeling very weary and tired, and the beginnings of a throbbing headache coming on.

* * * * *

**Captain’s Quarters, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470
Beloti Sector, Talarian Border**

Leijten had informed the bridge to notify her of any change, and gone to her quarters for a few moments of peace. She had sat down at her desk and brought up all their findings so far on the *Cairo*, trying to look at the bigger picture—rather than all the individual pieces—to try and determine what happened onboard the Starfleet ship.

She had been unsuccessfully working for thirty minutes when her door chimed. The sudden noise in the silence startled her. “Come in,” she called, after quickly composing herself once more.

The doors parted and Commander Amarin stood in the opening.

“Problem Commander?” she asked.

He ducked through the doorway, which closed up behind him. “Negative sir. I thought it would be best to give you my report in person.”

She gave him a faint smile. They had served together for eight years, the last three as the *Silverfin*’s command team, and as such they had gotten to know each other very well. He knew that she would be locked in her room kicking herself and questioning her actions (which had led to Daezan’s condition), under the guise of working.

“What have you got then, Commander?”

“Our teams will be finished a complete search of the ship in just under two hours. We are currently finishing off the larger decks, as well as going through all the cargo containers in the holds. I’d recommend that we start rotating the teams back to the *Silverfin*, so that we can try to get the shift rosters back to normal,” she nodded at his recommendation and made a mental note to pull off the team members from Beta Shift, so they could get some rest before needing to be on duty.

“All across the ship, we found evidence of recent habitation,” he continued. “No signs of damage or struggle. Elak’s repairs to the warp core have fully restored main power,” he told her with a hint of pride in his deep voice, “and the computer analysis team have started on the ships full records. They did report that although most of the records support the information we’ve already gathered, the sensor logs have a gap in them...a four-year gap.”

“What?” she asked, leaning forward.

“Yes sir. I had the analysis team check three times, and each time they came up with the same results. The *Cairo*’s sensors have been operational for over three years—except for when the ship lost main power. However they’ve been wiped clean, from the time all contact was lost with her in 2374, until power was restored. And I mean *wiped*. No chance of data retrieval.”

“Yet another mystery to add to the list,” she told him, massaging the bridge of her nose, feeling her headache throb. “What else is there?”

“The main armoury and weapons lockers throughout the ship were all secure, no weapons missing. All shuttles are still onboard, and all but one of her escape pods are in their berths—”

“The one where Kolanis went to,” she finished for him. He nodded. “Have the teams found anything that could have affected him in such a way? Anomalous energy readings, the presence of a non-corporeal life-form, some piece of alien technology?”

“Nothing Captain. The quarters he was in before he vanished were clean and I had teams follow his path looking for trace evidence, but they found nothing except for the blood at the hatch of the escape pod.”

She got out of her chair and started to pace. Amarin stayed quiet as she worked out some of the anxiety and trepidation she felt—something she would have preferred to have done in the ship's gym, but a brisk pace back-and-forth in her quarters would have to suffice in the meantime. Nothing was stacking up and they were coming to the limit of what a single border cutter could handle. The escape pods the *Cairo* carried were designed for a maximum of eight people, there was no way five hundred and fifty people could fit into just one of them. On top of that was the evidence of sabotage caused by a Starfleet engineer, a deserted ship that looked like its inhabitants had just been there, but whose sensors told them it had actually been missing for four years, but it just didn't know where, no signs of damage or distress anywhere, and now one of her officers—a man she considered a friend—was lying half-mad in sickbay.

She looked over her shoulder at Amarin. “Any other pieces of the puzzle?”

“One more thing. When Petty Officer Sa'Qwa was taking in the arboretum she noticed a Termillian orchid in full bloom, something she tells me happens only every five years. Apparently it's a very strict timetable, no matter where they are in the galaxy. And the last blooming was a little under a year before the *Cairo* went missing. That means that plant has been doing what plants do for the last four years, and is perfectly synchronised with the orchid that Sa'Qwa has in her quarters.”

Leijten nodded as she paced, taking in the information and also finding it surprising she never knew about Sa'Qwa's green talons. The towering Skorr must have felt right at home in the large arboretum, enjoying the chance to stretch her wings and search from the air for a brief time.

She came to a stop by the viewport, which offered her a perfect view of the *Cairo*, and glanced at the chronometer on her desk. It was still three hours until Beta Shift came on. “Alright Commander, have all the crew on Beta return to the ship for some bunk time. After the search has been completed, I want a full report put together. Have Elak prep the ship for a warp tow, we’ll take the *Cairo* back to Star Station Freedom, where they can organise a full forensic investigation,” she said looking out the window at the majestic Excelsior-Class ship. She hated the idea of leaving the ship as an unsolved ghost story, but the *Silverfin* wasn’t designed to handle a full-scale investigation. That would have to be done by specialists back in a starbase, where they could spend weeks or months studying every intricate detail of the ship.

“Aye Captain,” Amarin replied.

“I’ll inform Freedom what we’ve got and that we’ll be there in a few days, they can inform HQ and get the ball rolling on the full research team.” The Benzenite nodded, but made no move to leave her quarters. “Something else Amarin?”

“It wasn’t your fault, Captain,” he told her bluntly. Leijten had a speak-freely policy with Amarin whenever they were alone, he didn’t need to ask for permission. “Daezan is an officer in Starfleet, he—just like the rest of us—knew the risks that come with the uniform. As the saying goes in the Border Service, ‘we have to go out, we don’t have to come back’.”

“That’s been one motto I could never get behind,” she admitted to him. “When someone drops the ball, we get the call. But I will fight tooth and nail to make sure that everyone gets back home.” There was silence for a moment; the only sounds were her breathing and the muffled hiss of Amarin’s breather mask. She gave him a small smile. “Thank you, Amarin. Every so often I need someone to give me a kick in the pants, to help me see straight again.”

Amarin shrugged his shoulders. “It’s one of the perks in the job description.”

She chuckled softly, took one last look at the *Cairo*, and then headed for the exit. She had a job to finish and locking herself away wasn’t going to help one damn bit. Amarin was right behind her as she left her quarters and headed for the bridge. But at the T-junction before she got to the turbolift, they split up. She continued on to the bridge, whilst he headed back towards the transporter room, to finish up the investigation and carry out her orders.

Three years ago when she had promoted him up to her First Officer, he had protested and had tried to convince her that she was making a mistake, but she had known then that he would make a fine XO. Since then, he had proven time and again to be the best second-in-command she could've asked for.

Stepping into the lift, she ordered it to the bridge.

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Deck 4, U.S.S. *Silverfin* NCC-4470
En Route to Star Station Freedom, Beloti Sector
Five Hours Later

The *Silverfin's* crew were all back onboard the Cutter, and those that were off-duty were finishing off their individual reports, which Amarin was compiling for the official log. The *Cairo* had been secured, her structural integrity field and warp assembly rigged for a warp tow. Due to the size of the ghost ship, the *Silverfin* was limited to warp five which would see them back at Star Station Freedom in four days. As well as their regular duties to perform, the crew were continuing to analyse the readings taken aboard the *Cairo*, as well as going through her complete database, studying samples of metal, food, carpeting, anything that might help them discover what had happened to the ship.

Leijten had every faith in her crew, but this mystery seemed to be too complex, too bizarre for anyone to figure out. Usually she was a fan of thriller books and mystery holonovels, but in works of fiction there were always answers, all you had to do was follow the clues. But in this instance, the clues contradicted each other and no pattern emerged as to what had happened to the ship or crew.

One person might know, she said to herself as she headed through the corridors. Daezan's incident still couldn't be explained. From his ramblings she suspected that he knew at least some of the answers to their questions, but he was sedated and Mbeki had said that was how he would stay until they got to Freedom.

Despite that, she still felt that she owed him an apology. If she hadn't been so hell bent on solving the puzzle the *Cairo* represented he would be alright. *No he wouldn't*, a firm voice, that sounded vaguely like her father's (or at least her mental imitation of Captain Richard Leijten), told her. *He would have*

volunteered to be on the away team, and would likely have been affected in exactly the same way. He's an officer, he does his duty and he knows the risks.

She stopped in front of the door she wanted, knowing that what she was telling herself was true. Daezan was never one to shy away from an away mission, no matter what the risks were. Taking a deep breath she stepped closer to the doors, the sensors of which registered her approach and opened.

Sickbay was quiet. There was no sign of Mbeki or any of the other medical staff. The central biobed was now empty, Daezan having been moved to one of the four on the outer wall. But he wasn't alone. A slim figure sat on a stool by his bed, a hand gently placed on his forearm, as the person looked down at his handsome face, which was peaceful in his resting state, all traces of the emotional turmoil he had been in the last time Leijten had seen him were gone. Seeing the private moment, she was about to turn on her heel and leave, but then the person standing vigil at his bedside looked up at her.

"Captain!" Llewellyn-Smyth yelped in alarm, then winced at the pitch and tension in her own voice, quickly removing her hand from Daezan's arm and standing up. "I didn't see you there. I...I just came to see how he was doing," she stammered. "The bridge was so quiet before, it just didn't seem right," again she visibly winced, this time at the fact that she was babbling. "I'd better be going."

"There's no need Lieutenant, I just came to see how he was doing," Leijten told her, suddenly feeling embarrassed at her own need to apologise to him, and interrupting what had obviously been a moment that English Rose hadn't wanted anyone else to witness.

"Doctor Mbeki said he's doing well. Resting comfortably—all things considered. He's in the lab, shall I get him for you?" she asked taking a step towards the exit.

Leijten held up her hands in a motion that told Llewellyn-Smyth to stop. "That's alright, Lieutenant. Give Kolanis my best," she said and headed towards the medlab.

Harriet and Kolanis? How could I have missed that? she thought to herself, quickly followed by another stab of embarrassment at interrupting. She really didn't have anything to ask Mbeki, but she thought it best to check in with the Doctor seeing as she was in sickbay and feeling more than a little sheepish.

Mbeki was alone in the lab, working at one of the consoles, a pot of very strong real coffee by his side and a mug that was steaming in his hand. He was sitting back, watching as numbers and data scrolled across the screen too fast for a human to read.

“Doc?”

He looked up at her and smiled softly in the dim lighting of the medlab. “Evening Susanna.”

She approached and gestured at the screen. “Can you read any of that?”

“No, not really. I have the computer running an analysis on Daezan’s neuroscans, I just like to watch the data streams. It helps me unwind,” he told her, running his free hand over his shaved scalp—which he kept that way to hid the fact it was starting to recede. “Is she still in there?” he asked, looking towards the ward.

“Yes, I disturbed her though,” she felt her cheeks redden. “How long has she been here?”

“Since the end of her shift. She came in, made awkward small talk for a few minutes, then I had Corpsman Dal-Tohga go and run a full inventory check and I came in here.”

“I take it they aren’t common knowledge,” she said, moving closer and lowering her voice so as to not be heard.

“I don’t think there is a ‘they’, Susanna.”

“Oh,” she replied slowly, looking back at the ward and feeling even worse than she had before. Llewellyn-Smyth was carrying a torch for Daezan, who—even though he was a telepath—hadn’t noticed. That must’ve been hard for the younger woman to deal with, working so closely with someone you were attracted to was never a good thing, after all Leijten had been engaged twice in the past—firstly to the Chief Operations Officer aboard the Cutter *Osprey* nineteen years ago, which had ended after he was reassigned and they had both come to realise that it was a more physical relationship than anything more substantial; and secondly to the Assistant Chief Engineering Officer onboard the *Victory*, a man who she thought she’d judged

too hardly, but who really was as arrogant and full of himself as she'd first thought.

She looked back at Mbeki. "Anything new to add?"

The Doctor shook his head. "Nothing so far. I suspect that I will need to get him back to Betazed for a more thorough analysis; they are the experts in this kind of trauma."

"How long will he be signed off on medical leave?"

"Can't say for certain. However long it takes him to recover. I'll have a better idea once I speak with their Chief Physician."

"Okay, thank you Tunde." She left him to his work once again and headed for the exit. In the ward, Llewellyn-Smyth was gone. Leijten paused for a moment then stepped over to his bed. She leaned in closer to his ear. "Kolanis, if you can hear me, when you wake up, you are going to have to open your eyes to those around you. If you don't, you might miss something incredible." She gave him a pat on the shoulder and then left sickbay.

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Bridge, *U.S.S. Silverfin* NCC-4470
Approaching Star Station Freedom, Tamsen System
Stardate: 55029.1 (January 11th, 2378)

"We are approaching Star Station Freedom, Captain," Llewellyn-Smyth stated from the Conn, her voice level and confident as it always was.

"Understood Lieutenant, reverse engines. Drop us out of warp, nice and slow."

"Confirmed sir," the pilot replied and masterfully manipulated the controls. As the *Silverfin* and *Cairo* slowly came out of warp the cutters powerful impulse engines took over, towing the larger starship with little effort. It was one thing that Leijten had always liked about *Albacore's*; they weren't the biggest or the prettiest ships in the fleet, but they were true workhorses that always got the job done.

“Star Station Freedom is in visual range,” stated Tyler once they were out of warp.

“On screen,” Leijten ordered. A moment later, the tiny grey dot that had been barely distinguishable against the blackness of space expanded to fill the screen. Like all the other star stations, Freedom was getting on in years, her original design—once sleek and stylish in the mid-23rd century—had been added to and added to as needs must, including several repair bays and large-bulk cargo modules. Star stations were intended to service the Starfleet ships and crews that used them; they weren’t trading or diplomatic outposts. They could be counted on to have almost whatever supplies and equipment a ship needed, as well as a good assortment of bars and recreational facilities for crews to unwind in—since both were limited on Border Service ships.

One thing was very different about Freedom however, or rather one of the ships that were in a docking orbit around the facility: a large Nebula-Class ship.

She looked over at Amarin, who was seated at Ops covering for Daezan. Mbeki hadn’t tried to revive him since the last time, worried about the undue mental stress it could put him under and further complicate his condition.

“It’s the *Sloane*, sir,” he replied to the unasked question. The *Sloane* was the largest ship the Starfleet Corps of Engineer’s had at their disposal, and acted as part repair ship, part research vessel, part emergency response cruiser. In place of the triangular pod that was most common on Nebula-Class ships, the *Sloane*’s was larger and boxier, fitted with several heavy tractor beams (like the ones used on the *Silverfin*), large cargo holds, machine shops, engineering labs, one of three industrial replicators on the *Sloane*, six hangers that held a swarm of Workbees, atmospheric and impulse engines—making the module capable of detaching, landing on and taking off from a planetary surface. It was also one of the only ships in the entirety of Starfleet to have two Captains onboard—one commanding the ship and the other commanding the S.C.E. personnel.

“The *U.S.S. H’krii* is also in dock,” he added after checking the transponder codes of the other three ships either docked around or at the station. Mbeki had been in contact with the Chief Physician of Betazed and had been told to get the traumatised officer back to his homeworld as soon as possible. Leijten had asked Rear Admiral T’Rona, the Commander of the Third Cutter Squadron, for a ship to do just that, and the Aerie-Class *H’krii* had been made available to them.

“Incoming hail from the *Sloane*.”

“Put them on, Commander,” she replied. The image of Freedom and the *Sloane* was replaced with an old, heavily wrinkled but kind face of Bolian Captain Zaldum Drix and beside him stood Captain Sarah MacDougal, a shorter woman with a serious expression, whose blonde hair was piled high on her head. Whilst Drix wore the normal red undershirt for an individual of his rank, MacDougal wore gold, which clearly showed their different positions onboard the ship. “Captain Drix, it’s been a while.”

“Not since your days onboard the Victory and that was what four, five years ago?” he replied with a grandfatherly smile on his face—despite the fact that he didn’t have any grandchildren.

“More like twelve,” she corrected.

“Far too long then! How are your parents doing?” Captain Drix had been a classmate of both her parents at the Academy and the friendship had lasted ever since their first day on campus.

“Dad is loving the challenges of commanding a surveyor again, especially after so long on combat ships. And mom is very comfortable whipping the new Cadets into shape.”

Drix laughed, shaking his slightly portly stomach. *“I feel sorry for those poor kids. We have to catch up, Susanna. I’ve found a delightful little Trill restaurant on Freedom and you will be joining me tonight.”*

“I look forward to it,” she replied instantly, having learned long ago that it was impossible to argue with the Bolian. She then looked at MacDougal. “We will stand ready to surrender the *Cairo* to you.”

“Very good Captain Leijten. We will be good to go by the time you arrive in docking orbit. Also can you have all your data and logs on isolinear chips for us?”

Leijten looked up to Amarin who nodded at her and then quietly contacted the ops centre to get started on the new task. She looked back at the viewscreen. “It’s being done as we speak, Captain.”

“Excellent,” Drix stepped in. *“Once we get finished up, shall we say 1800 on Freedom?”*

“I’ll see you then. Silverfin out.” With the *Cairo* being seen to, she had one other thing to see to. *“Commander any word from the H’krii?”*

“Yes sir. They have given us the all clear signal. They are standing by to receive their passengers.”

“Leijten to Mbeki,” she called into the intercom.

“Go ahead.”

“Doctor, your ride is standing by for you.” Though she didn’t particularly like the idea of being without a Doctor for a while, Mbeki had asked to go with Daezan, to ensure that he was alright during the trip, and to help out anyway he could on Betazed. She had been told by Admiral T’Rona that temporary replacements for both Mbeki and Daezan would come onboard once they were docked at Freedom.

“I’m packed and Mr Daezan is secure. We’ll head for the transporter room now.”

“Understood Doctor. Good luck. Leijten out.” She sat back in her chair and watched as her crew went about their duties, preparing to hand the *Cairo* over to another ship and crew, who would be responsible for unlocking the ship’s secrets. Despite all the hard work and time her people had put into cracking the mystery, she doubted that they would be mentioned on the Federation News Service broadcasts, most likely referred to just as a ‘Cutter from the Border Service’. But they didn’t do the job for fame or glory, honour or prestige. They did it because it needed to be done, because lives depended on them, and because they were just crazy enough to do whatever it took to save them.

That’s just what Border Dogs did.

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END