

Border Cutter Silverfin Perilous Cargo

By Brydon Sinclair

Torpedo Control, *U.S.S. Silverfin*
Docking Berth 3, Star Station Freedom
Stardate: 55254.7 (April 3rd, 2378)

Susanna Leijten had been in the middle of speaking with Tunde Mbeki on Betazed, when she'd been called away, but that was just the way things were for a ship's Captain. She was disheartened to hear that nothing had changed regarding Daezan but knew that Mbeki wouldn't stop until he had answers—which also had her worried for Tunde, he looked and sounded exhausted. As she rode the turbolift down to deck five, she shook her head and tried to focus on the call from Ensign Jose Tyler the Fifth, her tactical officer and newest addition to the senior staff. It was no surprise that he was working so late, the rookie never seemed able to relax and take time off from his duties.

Though she had been onboard the *Silverfin* for almost eight years and knew the ship intimately, torpedo control was a section she never got down to often. Deck five housed little more than the Cutters three torpedo launchers and storage magazines, so it was often unoccupied. It was only due to their current refit that the section was seeing so much activity. Several months ago, they had stopped a freighter carrying salvaged weapons, including two quantum torpedo launchers—technology only used by Starfleet. In the final report back to Headquarters on the matter Lieutenant th'Shaan, her Chief Engineer, had included a requisition request for those launchers. Leijten hadn't expected for the *Silverfin* to be given the upgrade, they were after all a Border Service Cutter, but several days ago she'd gotten word the request was being granted.

The news had thrilled th'Shaan and Tyler, both of who were eager for the weapons upgrade. She was pleased they were getting the new armament, their job never got any easier and every advantage they could get was appreciated. It did mean unscheduled dry-dock time, but that wasn't of great consequence. The one thing that was a bother was that they needed to go to Starbase 200 and collect the launchers themselves—no supply ships would be heading their way for several weeks.

So th'Shaan had taken a Stallion out to make the week-long round trip to collect the launchers and a few torpedoes, whilst on the *Silverfin* Tyler was getting them ready for the replacements. So far everything had been going smoothly, so the call down to deck five had her puzzled.

When she stepped off the turbolift, all was quiet on the deck. Since Tyler had called her to torpedo control, she decided to start there and headed forward. The room was located behind the forward two tubes, with consoles that displayed their stock of torpedoes (both photon and rat-traps) and probes, as well as diagnostic scans, and other data needed for the smooth operation of the launchers. The room was only ever manned during yellow or red alert, so most of the systems were automated, but there was space available for modifying torpedoes and probes whenever needed.

It was clear to see from the moment she stepped in that Tyler wasn't there. He had been though, if the jacket and shirt draped over the back of a chair was any indication. She headed towards the port side exit, which would take her through the storage magazines and then to the launchers themselves. She found herself intrigued by what the Ensign was up to, so she kept the mystery going a little longer and resisted the urge to call out for him.

She passed the full racks of sleek black torpedo casings and came to the port launcher. The hardware was dark grey and fit snugly into place on the deck, only a few warning notices on the side belied its deadly nature—otherwise it would have looked like a dozen other of the ship's essential systems. From underneath the launcher she spotted a pair of legs, whilst the torso was obscured by metal. A hand shot out from within the bowels of the hardware, felt around until it touched the hyperspanner, then withdrew back with the tool.

Leaning on the bulkhead opposite, she gave him a few minutes to see to whatever it was he was working on, then asked, "Everything alright under there, Mr Tyler?"

She half expected him to bang his head. He didn't. Instead, he darted out from where he was and leapt to his feet, his posture stiff. She found it strange to see him in just his grey vest and not his gold shirt and dark uniform jacket, add to that the unkempt nature of his hair and the grease and grime on his clothing, arms and face, and who she was looking at was not the spit-and-polish young man who sat on her peripheral vision on the Bridge.

“Captain, I hadn’t expected you so soon. I hadn’t intended to meet you out of uniform,” he stated apologetically.

Holding up her hand, she stopped him. Smiling, she told the rookie, “Ensign, it’s after twenty-three hundred, I think I can you can be left off for being out of uniform.” She looked around at the two launchers that would soon be removed and replaced with newer and deadlier units.

“So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“Though Lieutenant th’Shaan is still several days away, I was wanting you permission to begin work on disconnecting and removing the launchers, sir,” he began, remaining ramrod straight. “If we have the forward tubes out and ready for the new ones, we can be finished the upgrade sooner than scheduled. In the interim, I can begin the software upgrades the new quantum launchers will need and the engineering teams could conduct a level one diagnostic of the control systems—just to make sure that we won’t have any future problems with the new armament.”

Leijten listened to what she suspected was a thoroughly rehearsed request and supporting explanation. She smiled to herself as she watched the young man. Tyler had been top of his class at the Academy, then aced the Advanced Tactical Training programme, had glowing letters of recommendation and a few citations for bravery (for his actions following the Breen attack on Earth), as well as a rich Starfleet pedigree—though she was glad to have him onboard, why he’d opted for the Border Service still baffled her.

“Sounds good,” she told him simply.

“Really?” he asked, surprised, quickly followed by an abashed look. “Sorry sir.”

“It makes sense to have everything ready for when Elak and the others get back. You’ll need to co-ordinate with Lieutenant Mulligan in his absence, as well as Commander Weir on Freedom.”

“Me sir?”

“This is your domain, Ensign, so it only makes sense that you take charge,” she told him as she turned to leave. Over her shoulder she added, “I’d like a timetable of work on my desk in the morning.”

“Aye Captain,” he added with a hint of enthusiasm.

Leijten chuckled to herself as she stepped back into torpedo control and headed for the turbolift. She decided to head for her quarters and get some sleep, the following day was one of meetings on Freedom and she had to be rested and refreshed for them. Though had Hank still been on the station, she’d have made plans with him for the evening, but since he was with th’Shaan and Syva she’d managed to get on with all the humdrum paperwork.

They’d be back in eighty hours or so, and she’d already been making plans for how they could enjoy their time together. As she stepped off onto deck three, she couldn’t help but smile. Whatever it was that she and Hank had, she hadn’t been this happy since the last time they’d been together.

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The Weary Traveller, Commercial Zone Starbase 200, Tregor System

The pub was bustling with activity. Elak th’Shaan gripped the three glasses tightly as he weaved and squeezed his way through the throng of people back to his table. The mix of people included off-duty personnel, station residents, freighter crews, traders and merchants, tourists and the various other transients that passed through starbases. He found it odd to be outnumbered by civilians, on star stations the dominant patrons in similar bars were Border Dogs. The wider mix of people gave the place a different feel and energy, not unpleasant but just different from what he’d enjoyed in the last seven years he’d been with the Service.

Bypassing a couple of portly Pakled, he finally got to the table where Master Chief Syva and Senior Chief Henry “Hank” Mitchell were sitting. He set down their drinks, a Vulcan brandy and a beer respectively, before sitting down again to enjoy his Arkturan Fizz. The frothy drink he held brought a puzzled look to Mitchell’s face. Th’Shaan sighed to himself, knowing what the older human was no doubt thinking, and readied himself for the conversation he’d had more times than he could count.

“Just ask what you want to ask, Chief?”

A lopsided smile appeared on Mitchell’s rugged, tanned face. “Ah was just thinkin’ it’s been a long while since ah last had a Fizz—not since Suz and ah were on Risa,” he stated in his Texan drawl.

“Really?”

Mitchell laughed. “Ah guess ye weren’t expectin’ that?”

“Most people ask why I always order them. They can’t seem to understand why I like them.”

“Not the kinda drink they’d associate with a rough-tough Dog.”

“What can I say? I like my alcohol sweet and sparkling.”

“Mighty strong from what ah recall—though that day is kinda fuzzy.”

Th’Shaan couldn’t help but laugh. Before their trip started a little over three days earlier, he’d only every had a few brief conversations with the Squadron Quartermaster about supplies and equipment, but after spending only an hour with the non-com aboard their Star Stallion he’d come to like his relaxed manner and quick wit. Of course onboard the *Silverfin* the hearsay and rumours touched on Captain Leijten and Chief Mitchell and their relationship. Usually, th’Shaan didn’t pay much attention to idle gossip—especially when it regarded the Captain—but she was happier than he’d known her and everyone onboard was pleased to see the shift, after all they had been through in recent years.

“I know what you mean, I can’t remember a thing about the graduation party we had.”

Mitchell laughed whilst Syva looked between the two men, eyebrow slightly raised.

“I have never understood the enjoyment other species take from being so inebriated they cannot recall any details,” she said, taking a small sip from her glass.

“The activity itself is enjoyable, the morning after not so much,” th’Shaan told his shipmate. “Helps people to bond, share their woes, express joy.”

That made her pause to think. “Perhaps you should try Vulcan port, a former CO of mine told it ‘knocked his socks off’.”

“Ah reckon he wer just a lightweight,” Mitchell decided after a swig of beer.

“I am afraid you are in error, Mr Mitchell. Tellarites have a much higher tolerance to alcohol than most other races.”

“A Tellarite said that?” th’Shaan asked, to which she nodded in confirmation. “Wow. Ok, remind me to stay away from Vulcan port.”

“Same here,” Mitchell added, raising his bottle.

Th’Shaan raised his glass and they tapped them together lightly before having another drink. The easy banter continued between the three of them, even sharing a few funny stories about their experiences in the Service—Syva included, though she herself didn’t laugh at any.

It was on their second round that Mitchell perked up, his steely blue eyes watching someone weave through the crowd (which had doubled in size). Th’Shaan followed the other man’s look and spotted who he was watching, a petite redhead, in uniform with Lieutenant JG pips on her gold collar. She didn’t look old enough to be a freshman cadet, let alone an officer of active duty, what with her ginger hair in two braided pigtails, wide green eyes, and dusting of freckles on her pale cheeks and button nose. One thing was obvious though, she was heading their way.

She reached their table and looked from face to face, settling on Hanks. Th’Shaan noted she was carrying a large PADD that looked twice its usual size in her small hands.

“Senior Chief Mitchell?” she asked tentatively.

“Yes ma’am.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Lieutenant Rose Acker, Supply Officer to Starbase 200.”

“Pleasure to meet ye, ma’am.” He gestured to each of them. “This here is Lieutenant Elak ko’Parr th’Shaan, *Silverfin’s* engineer, and Master Chief Syva, her COB.”

“Lieutenant, Master Chief,” Acker said by way of greeting. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to contact you sooner, things have been pretty hectic here these last few days.”

“No worries ma’am, ah know how tough it can be.”

She flashed him a quick smile that only made her look younger. “I bet you do, Senior Chief. I’m just grateful you got here so quickly to take these launchers; otherwise they’d just be taking up valuable space in one of my holds. Which hanger are you in?”

“Hanger four, bay two, pad D,” th’Shaan told her as he’d been the one who’d flown into the station and landed the Star Stallion.

Acker made a quick note on her datapad and frowned slightly. “The cargo transporters are down for routine maintenance in that section. I’ll have to get a loader to take transfer them,” she explained, tapping on the touch screen surface. After a moment the frown relaxed. “I can get a loader to you at 0715.”

“Sounds good to me. Lieutenant?” Mitchell asked, looking at th’Shaan.

“Me too. That’s earlier than we expected.”

“I know, sir, but we’ve got a trade delegation arriving at 1000 hours tomorrow, so I need to clear as much space as possible by then.”

“It’ll suit us better, as it means the less time the *Silverfin* has to spend in dock. We’ll be ready for you.”

“Thank you. If anything changes, I’ll comm you. Have a pleasant evening.”

“Thank you,” th’Shaan replied before she turned and slinked back through the crowd. He turned back to Hank. “Is it my imagination or are officers getting younger these days?” the twenty-nine year old Andorian asked.

“Acker is a war cadet, lost a year o’ trainin’ to get her into the fleet faster.”

“She couldn’t have been very old when she enrolled, she barely looks out of her teens.”

“That may be, but she’s better than other supply officers ah’ve known who are twice her age.”

Th’Shaan conceded, knowing that there were many officers across the fleet who were in the same boat as Lieutenant Acker, who were missing a year of

training but were in important posts and duties across the Federation—even the *Silverfin* had a couple onboard.

“Well it looks like we have an early start tomorrow, so we’d best get back and get some sleep.” The other agreed and the trio quickly finished off their drinks. As they were getting up from their table, he suggested, “How about, after we get the Stallion loaded, I treat you both to breakfast?”

“Sounds good,” Hank stated with a broad smile.

“Agreed.”

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**Star Stallion 1, Berthed at Hanger 4, Berth 2, Pad D
Starbase 200, Tregor System
Stardate: 55255.6 (April 4th, 2378)**

Their morning had gone like clockwork. The three Stallion crew had been up and ready for the cargo transfer, which arrived precisely at 0715—just as Lieutenant Acker said it would be. Hank took charge of loading the two launchers, as well as the stock of eight quantum torpedoes that had also been allocated to the *Silverfin*.

Star Stallions were designed to be beasts of burden, capable of carrying a couple dozen evacuees or a hold-full of cargo, so carrying the new tech wouldn’t be a problem. The three Border Dogs worked with the three cargo handlers, so that in just under twenty minutes they had the robust shuttle loaded and secured. The loaders thanked them and then headed off for their next task. Th’Shaan ran a quick check on the launchers, whilst Syva double checked the security protocols she’d designed to keep the Stallion locked down whilst their new weaponry was onboard.

Hank had to admire the effortless way they worked together, the give and take they had with one another based on mutual respect and camaraderie—it was one of the things he had missed most when he’d left the Service and returned to Earth, though by no means the biggest aspect of the life he’d regretted leaving behind; that had been Suz. He loved her, but the death of his pop had confused him, so he’d done what he thought his old man would have wanted. Looking back on his decision, he knew that he wanted to honour the man who’d been his childhood hero, but that he should have done so in his own way.

He couldn't help but wonder, *If ah hadn't left, where would Suz and ah be now?*

Once all their checks were complete it was just shy of 0750, so th'Shaan did exactly as he said he would and took them to breakfast. They found a little cafe and ordered. Back on Star Station Freedom, Hank was fond of a little place on the Bazaar called The Greasy Spoon, which made the best waffles he'd ever tasted. This morning however, he'd opted for pancakes with bacon and maple syrup, accompanied with a large mug of coffee. Syva had selected Eggs Benedict with a mixed fruit juice, and th'Shaan had chosen an Andorian dish called *tath'aal* (which, to Hank, looked like green oatmeal with chunks of some kind of meat) and a pot of Tellarite spice root tea.

They quickly fell into the easy banter that they had shared ever since leaving the *Silverfin*, sharing a few stories of their exploits in the Border Service, whilst Syva told them a couple of her time with Vulcan Security. The more time he spent with them, the more he liked them. Both th'Shaan and Syva were solid and dependable, hardworking and dedicated, that much was clear to anyone; but they both friendly and upbeat (even Syva, though in a more Vulcan way). He did note that despite the rumours which were undoubtedly doing the rounds about Hank and Suz, neither one asked about their relationship or their history—a clear mark of respect for their CO.

After breakfast, they returned to the Stallion and readied for departure. At 0830, they lifted off from the landing pad and exited Starbase 200, a full five hours ahead of their initial departure time. Once clear of the station, they set a course for Freedom and were once again underway.

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Cockpit, Star Stallion 1
En Route to Star Station Freedom
Stardate: 55261.8 (April 6th, 2378)

With the journey from Star Station Freedom to Starbase 200 taking 75.32 hours, they needed to operate a shift system to ensure that someone was always at the controls. Although the ship was perfectly capable of flying itself on autopilot, Syva believed it a prudent security measure to ensure at least one of them was on duty at all times. Lieutenant th'Shaan had agreed with her and they established a rota, with each of them sitting four-hour shifts in the cockpit until they landed once again on the *Silverfin*.

Though her precautions may have been a touch excessive, their cargo was a valuable one—which had already been in the possession of black marketers once. She was responsible for them until they could be installed on the cutter, so she would make sure that they arrived there intact and on time.

The companel flashed. She quickly tapped the control and saw that they were receiving a weak signal on a frequency designated for emergencies. In an instant she began triangulating the signals origin as she spoke into the intercom, “Syva to th’Shaan. We are picking up a distress call.”

“We’ll be right up,” came the prompt response.

It took him and Mitchell only a few seconds to get from the bunk room to the cockpit, by which time she had locked in on where the signal was coming from.

“What we got?” the Andorian asked, leaning next to her and looking at the readouts.

She tapped the companel and the message began to play. *“Thi...survey ship...are..culties with...power...in need of tec...al assi...t.”*

“That’s pretty garbled,” Mitchell stated from the entrance.

“The problem appears to be at the source,” she stated, having checked the signal strength as the message had been playing.

“Position?”

“Bearing zero-zero-two-mark-zero-nine-seven; distance point-three light-years.”

“Anyone else in range?”

She glanced at the sensor screen. “The only other ship in range to assist is a type-nine shuttlecraft; however they are another point-five light-years away.”

Th’Shaan slipped into the pilot seat and logged on. “Altering course and increasing to maximum warp. Inform that ship that we are moving to help and will be alongside shortly.”

“Aye sir,” she confirmed then opened up a communications link. “Survey ship, this is Master Chief Syva of the Border Service. We have received your distress call and are en route to assist. Any further information you could provide us on your situation would be beneficial.”

On the open channel only static responded.

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“Approaching the survey ship,” Syva announced.

Th’Shaan gave her a faint nod. “Dropping us out of warp, approaching at two-thirds impulse. Anything on sensors?”

“Sensors are clear. Just an Aerie-Class ship, two-hundred million kilometres ahead. They are experiencing severe power fluctuations. Fourteen lifesigns aboard, all stable.”

Th’Shaan spotted the small ship through the viewport and adjusted their course to bring the Stallion alongside. With two such ships in the Third Squadron, he knew the design well, however he was a little rusty on the civilian variant—which was utilised for research or survey assignments by the Federation Science Council or organisations such as the Daystrom Institute. Why one would be so close to the Talarian border was uncommon, though far from unusual.

He looked at Hank, who had slipped into the third console. “Any response to hails?”

“Negative L.T. Ah could try to establish a ship-to-ship laser link.”

“Give it a go, Hank. Let’s hope someone over there knows some old school tricks.”

It took a several minutes for them to reach the drifting surveyor. As they got closer, th’Shaan could see that their warp nacelles were dark, whilst lights blinked on and off through the viewports that peppered the hull, and the impulse engines were duller than they should have been. As he continued his visual assessment of the ship in distress, a red laser shot out from the Stallion and made contact with their communications array.

There was a pause before Hank turned back to face him, a lopsided grin on his tanned face. "We've got a comlink."

"Open a channel," he ordered. After Hank nodded, he leaned forward a little further. "Survey ship, this is Lieutenant Elak th'Shaan of the Border Service. We picked up your distress call and are here to assist."

"Lieutenant, are we glad to hear from you," came a relieved voice through the speakers. *"We've been adrift for almost a day now and had no response."*

"Your message was very garbled when we picked it up; we never caught what the situation was."

"Our power grid has gone haywire! My engineer is doing what she can, but the problem has her stumped. Any technical assistance you could provide would be appreciated."

"You're in luck. We'll beam over—"

"No!" the abruptness and force of the man's tone was like a slap in the face. *"We have some very delicate experiments running and are doing everything possible to maintain specialist containment fields around them. A transporter beam could interfere with them and ruin months of work."*

Th'Shaan glanced at Hank, whose brow was tightly furled, and then Syva, whose eyebrow was raised high on her forehead. He was glad to see that the excuse didn't sit well with the non-coms either, but they would do as instructed.

"Understood. Our ship is too large for your cargo bays, so we will have to dock with you."

"Acknowledged. We stand ready to receive you."

"We'll be docking in a few minutes. Th'Shaan out." He turned and looked at the other two in the cockpit with him, Hank was looking at him whilst Syva glanced up momentarily from her console. "That was a little weird, it's not just me?"

"Ye got that right, L.T."

“Civilian researchers are very protective of their work, some forcefully so,” Syva stated. “However, there was an edge of panic to his voice that seemed misplaced.”

There was a chirp from the communications board, which Hank quickly checked. “They’re ready for dockin’.”

Th’Shaan nodded, turning back to the controls. “Alright, let’s get to work. We might get some answers when we’re over there.”

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Docking Port, *S.S. Blackbird* Adrift, Tregor Sector

The docking procedure had been a textbook manoeuvre. Once they were connected, th’Shaan had powered down the engines as Syva and Mitchell had gone into the cargo hold to ready their gear. By the time the Chief Engineer joined them, they had toolkits ready, an emergency power cell sitting on the deck, whilst they each had tricorders on their belts and Syva slipped a type-one phaser discreetly into her pocket.

Th’Shaan and Mitchell carried the kits whilst Syva, due to her superior strength, took the power cell onto the research ship. They were greeted by two men, a human and an Efrosian, both in the utilitarian jumpsuits commonly worn by civilian crews.

“Welcome to the *Blackbird*,” the human began, his voice identified him as the man who had spoken to them over the comlink, “I’m Captain Aaron Baxter, this is First Mate Rah-Deihavar.”

“Lieutenant Elak th’Shaan of the cutter *Silverfin*. Master Chief Syva and Senior Chief Mitchell,” th’Shaan began. “Where do you need us?”

“Rah-Deihavar will take you to the engine room; my engineer has a full status report waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” th’Shaan replied politely—they were there, first and foremost, to help with repairs, not investigate their odd behaviour. They hadn’t broken any laws or protocols, so without probably cause, they would have to finish their work and then depart. Syva would of course keep a close eye on the ship’s crew—but mainly due to their mission rather than that of the

Blackbird, after all the Stallion was carrying very sensitive equipment, the nature of which was to be kept confidential until installed upon the *Silverfin*.

The Efrosian headed down the corridor without saying anything. Th'Shaan and Mitchell followed, but she hung back for a moment to secure the Stallion, utilising the new security programming she had designed specifically for the cargo run. She was aware that Captain Baxter was still close by, and obscured the control panel from him as she input the lockdown sequence. Once done, she hefted the power cell off the deck.

"Can I give you a hand?" Baxter asked, his polite tone sounded forced.

"That will not be necessary," she told him, before following after the others.

As she turned the corner, she glanced back and noted Baxter looking at the hatch to the Stallion. He glanced down the corridor and after seeing her, he headed away from the docking port back towards the Bridge. Unconsciously, an eyebrow rose slightly and continued onwards. Heading through the corridors, the others had disappeared from view. She maintained her usual pace, but took a note of the doors she passed, most of which were laboratories, a few store rooms and a computer suite.

She entered the engine room, just as Rah-Deihavar was making introductions. When she stepped through the door, she noticed him scowl at her for a moment, then look back at the others and told them, "I'll leave you to it, then."

He then moved to leave and Syva stepped to the side. Before he passed through the open hatch, he hissed at her, "*Don't* go walking around unescorted." He didn't allow her to reply, as he breezed past her and was gone.

"Is that type-J2 power cell?" a tall and slender, dark-haired woman asked, looking at Syva.

"Yes—" she began.

"Excellent! Can you hook it up to the secondary power junction; it'll help keep things stable for right now, until we can get things sorted."

Syva gave a slight nod, then quickly looked around the engine room and located the power junction. She couldn't help but realise that yet another crewmember seemed eager for them to get to work quickly—though part of

that would be because of their current problem, she could assume that it would also be to get them to leave the *Blackbird*. As she got to work connecting up the power cell, Mitchell started getting their equipment unpacked, as th'Shaan and the ship's engineer moved over to the diagnostics console and began going over the problems they were having.

Her sharp hearing allowed her to monitor the conversation, which was related only to their technical problems, nothing given away as to why they were in the Tregor System or what type of work was being carried out onboard.

At one point th'Shaan asked, "Captain Baxter said there were some experiments being run onboard that needed special containment, could they have affected the power grid?"

"No," was the instant reply.

The Lieutenant didn't press the matter, hearing the force and certainty in the woman's voice. But Syva's suspicions were raised higher than before. There was something going on onboard the small ship, something all the crew had been sworn to secrecy about.

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Engine Room, *S.S. Blackbird* Adrift, Tregor Sector

Th'Shaan didn't like mysteries, and the little research ship was a big one. Every diagnostic he had run had been done with the ship's engineer, Heather Daniels, watching over his shoulder. He had only been able to access all records on the propulsion systems; the computer, sensor and communication systems were all restricted, whilst the power flow diagrams showed that nothing was going to any of the labs onboard. The amount of internal security made him nervous, but every time he had raised the matter Daniels had told him that she'd fully checked the restricted sections and none of them were responsible.

A couple of times he had needed Syva to return to the Stallion to get a tool he'd forgotten or an additional power pack, Daniels had called a member of the crew to take her there and back. They had been kept on a tight leash since coming aboard, which did little to make him feel welcome. Captain Baxter calling down every thirty minutes for a progress report didn't help matters.

He suspected that as soon as they found and/or fixed the problem, the Starfleeters would be promptly escorted back to their ship.

“Lieutenant,” Syva said quietly, as she joined him at the warp core monitoring station. “Someone has tried to gain entry to the Stallion.”

He shot her a sharp look. “Are you sure?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yes sir. The new security system is designed to alert me should anyone scan it or attempt to enter an authorisation code. It has just done so.”

Casting a look at Daniels, who was watching over Hank’s shoulder, he asked, “What are they up to? They don’t want us to know about them, but there’re trying to gain access to the Stallion. What if they tried to beam in?”

“The system includes a dampening field on a modulating frequency, which prevents transporter lock and sensor sweeps.”

“I have to wonder if they’ll ask us about what’s onboard,” he mused aloud.

“Time will tell, Lieutenant. Shall I return to the Stallion?”

He thought about it for a moment and shook his head. “Negative. I have every faith in your arrangements, also I don’t want to let them know about how good it is or that we know they’re snooping.”

“Agreed.”

“Baxter to engine room.”

“Daniels here. Go ahead, Captain.”

“Is Lieutenant Shaan available?”

She looked over at him, puzzled at the request. “He’s here sir.”

“Lieutenant, we’ve just picked up an anomalous reading from your warp reactor.”

Th’Shaan shared a look with Syva. With her dampening field in place, they wouldn’t be able to detect anything onboard, anomalous or otherwise.

“I locked down all systems onboard, with a telemetry link to my tricorder. It’s picked up nothing unusual, but I’ll send Master Chief Syva to check it out.”

“Mr Rah-Deihavar will be there in a few seconds to escort her. Baxter out.” The channel closed.

Looking at Syva once more, he said softly, “It looks like they’re being more blatant than I thought they would. Run a full check; make sure that the system is still secure.”

Just then the First Mate entered, scowling at Syva once again. She gave th’Shaan a single nod. “Aye sir,” she confirmed before heading for the exit once more.

He watched her go, then turned his attention back to the warp core. What had started off as an annoying mystery was becoming more serious. They may have been Federation citizens, but he couldn’t let anyone know about their cargo. If it was threatened, he would have Syva and Mitchell return to the Stallion and stand guard, he could handle the repair work himself.

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Docking Port, S.S. *Blackbird* Adrift, Tregor Sector

Syva let Rah-Deihavar lead the way. Once again, she never saw another member of the crew. There were fourteen onboard, but she had only seen the Captain, Rah-Deihavar, Daniels and a Deltan labtech called Lahlo who’d accompanied her to the Stallion before. The ship wasn’t so large as to offer many places for ten people to conceal themselves.

Upon reaching the Stallion, she obscured the key panel and entered her authorisation, ensuring the *Blackbird* crewmember couldn’t see. She heard the door release and step up to it, aware that her escort was right behind her. Stopping in the hatch, she turned towards him, standing stiffly at her full height which gave her five centimetres on him.

“Yes?” she asked, eye brow raised.

“You might need some help.”

“Doubtful. If I do however, I will call for the Lieutenant. I am afraid you are not cleared for entry.”

“What are you hiding in there?” he challenged.

“You are not cleared for that information either. Please remain here,” she told him and took a step back. Once inside the Stallion she tapped the panel next to the door which sealed and secured the hatch.

“Computer, run a level five diagnostic on the security system. Authorisation: Syva-alpha-one-one-five-epsilon.”

“Commencing diagnostic.”

“Any activity on system?”

“Three authorised entries made by Master Chief Petty Officer Syva. One unauthorised entry attempt. Three sensor sweeps detected,” the computer informed her. It chirped a moment later. *“Diagnostic complete. Security system is operating within specified parameters.”*

“Any problems with the warp reactor?”

“All routine diagnostics show the warp core to be operating within normal parameters.”

She stepped over to a terminal and brought up the security system. It didn't take her long to switch to her backup security code. When she'd touched the keypad, she had felt something on the smooth surface—she suspected a sensorial membrane, which would record the code she had used. It was a trick used by some criminals and one she hadn't had to deal with for over a decade, but she had been ready for many eventualities—including someone attempting to clone their access codes.

Syva had been in the Stallion for four minutes and three seconds, more than long enough to maintain the ruse of checking the warp core. Once complete, she exited the Stallion and stepped back into the docking port, where she used her old code one last time (after which it would be scrambled and useless to anyone).

“Well?” Rah-Deihavar asked.

“There is no problem. I ran a full diagnostic; it detected nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Alright then, I’ll get you back to engineering,” he replied with a fake smile.

* * * * *

Engine Room, *S.S. Blackbird* Adrift, Tregor Sector

Almost an hour and a half had passed since Syva’s return. It had only been six minutes after she got back to the engine room that she had alerted th’Shaan of another attempt to get into the Stallion. Whoever it was had only tried once, then after seeing the code had been changed, didn’t try again and nothing more was said to them about the ‘problems’ with the warp core. Seeing what they had done to ensure the security of the shuttle, the *Blackbird* crew must’ve known they’d been made—even the calls from Baxter stopped coming.

The work progressed smoothly. Th’Shaan had to admit that Daniels was a thorough engineer, though he did note that she was a little over-reliant on the computer to run all the checks for her. Being in the Border Service meant that he was used to a computer that was a couple generations removed than more modern units, so the level of automation was less which meant having to do more hands on work and checks. Seeing that, he’d taken it upon himself to start looking at everything with his own eyes.

He’d found the fault in an EPS node. Several isolar chips had been fused (either from the excess demand place on them or from some kind of energy discharge), resulting in a disruption to the nodes diagnostics unit and glitches in the power distribution network. These glitches would have gotten worse over time, frying more circuits and making the problem worse as more and more was demands from them. With the damage to the unit designed to check it, the scans showed that it was working within its acceptable range, and the unit wouldn’t be properly checked until the ship was in for a routine check up at a station.

After he’d found the problem he’d alerted Daniels, who hadn’t liked the fact that he’d usurped her approach to things and found the problem by physically looking for it. He had done all he could to reassure her that it could have happened to anyone, but she hadn’t been interested in listening. Instead she had informed Baxter, informed him that the power grid would need to be

rerouted to the backup before the problem could be fixed. That hadn't made the Captain any happier by the sounds of things, but he'd agreed to the plan, so long as the work was done as quickly as possible. Fortunately, there were sufficient chips onboard the *Blackbird* to swap out for the damaged ones, once they were properly formatted and the programmed.

Daniels and Syva were working with the chips, leaving th'Shaan and Hank to get the node ready. They were in the Jefferies tube alcove on the opposite side of the room from the ship's engineer, affording them some privacy and able to watch for her approach.

"Ah would've thought they'd be happy with an explanation," Hank murmured in his Texan drawl.

"You and me both, Hank. But it looks like they can't cope with any disruption with their forcefield network. That worries me."

"How so L.T.?"

"Their forcefields use the kind of power needed for triple redundancies, so there will be a backup for the backup if needed. I've only ever seen that kind of set up in medical isolation bays, where they're working with viruses and other contaminants; situations where the crew need to be safeguarded from infection."

Hank glanced over at Daniels, who was still focused on the computer. "Do yer think that's what they're up to?"

"I don't know. I would hope if that were the case then they would have told us before we came onboard."

"That'd be common decency."

"Can you do me a favour once we get back to Freedom?" he asked the Quartermaster, who nodded. "Can you check to see if they've stopped by the station for any supplies or repairs?"

"Sure thing. Ah can check with Lieutenant Acker on 200 as well, give her a heads up that they'll be needin' some repairs."

"Thanks Hank."

Just then Daniels picked up the chips and headed towards them, whilst Syva remained at the console, finishing off the command protocols to reroute the energy flow. When the engineer reached them, they had the panel open, isolated which circuits needed replacing and were ready to get them swapped out for the new chips.

“Let’s get this done,” she said simply.

* * * * *

From start to finish, it had taken them just under twenty minutes to swap over the chips, run a thorough diagnostic and then close up the panel. After routing power but through the mains, everything returned to normal. The lighting rose to its normal levels, the impulse engines and warp drive were restored and all the previous hiccups were gone.

Hank would have felt some measure of accomplishment for their success in such a short space of time, but the crew of the *Blackbird* made it hard to feel relaxed. As soon as the work was completed and everything checked out, Captain Baxter appeared in the engine room just as they were finishing packing up their tools and equipment.

“We’re getting normal readings on the bridge,” he told Daniels. “Any more problems?”

“None down here, Captain.”

“Good,” Baxter replied, before turning to th’Shaan. “Thank you for your help, Lieutenant. Sorry to have kept you. I will show your team back to the docking port.”

“We’re glad to have been of help,” th’Shaan replied politely. “We could escort you to Star Station Freedom, where you—”

“That won’t be necessary. We’ll keep an eye on things from here.”

“Are you sure? We’re heading there now, it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“We don’t need any more of your help. Now if you’ll come with me.”

There was a moment of silence as the two men faced off against each other, neither one willing to back down. Hank looked from one to the other;

Baxter's face was set hard whilst th'Shaan's antennae were tightly curled against his skull. Watching the young Andorian, he had to admit the powerfully built man could be very intimidating man when he wanted to be.

However, it was th'Shaan who was the first to back down, knowing that they wouldn't get anything more from the crew of the science ship and that antagonising them would be even less productive. He nodded at the two non-coms and picked up two toolkits, whilst Syva get the power cell and Hank took what was left.

Bidding Daniels a polite farewell, they stepped back out into the corridor and headed forward in silence. Once again, no one else on the crew was to be seen. Following their conversation earlier, Hank eyed up a few of the labs they passed, but aside from a name on the door there was nothing to say about what went on behind the closed hatch. As they neared the docking port, he noticed Rah-Deihavar waiting for them, arms crossed and a scowl on his face.

Upon reaching the Stallion, Syva entered her security code and led the way inside, Hank following after her and th'Shaan at the rear. Before he entered, he turned back to Baxter.

"If you need any more help, we'll be in comm range for a few hours."

"Thank you," was the curt reply.

Th'Shaan stepped aboard and closed the hatch. Setting down the cases, he looked at the two non-coms. "We'd better get going then."

* * * * *

Torpedo Control, U.S.S. *Silverfin*
Docking Berth 3, Star Station Freedom
Stardate: 55267.5 (April 8th, 2378)

The detour to help the *Blackbird* had added another three and a half hours to their travel time, so they hadn't reached Freedom until almost 1500 hours the day before. After decoupling from the science ship, they'd continued on course for the Star Station, monitoring the *Blackbird* as they'd left the scene. The civilian ship had set off at warp one, their course taking them back towards the normal shipping lanes, though in the opposite direction from

Starbase 200. They had tracked them until the ship dropped out of their sensor range.

The entire experience had left th'Shaan uneasy. He'd made a full report to the Captain, who likewise shared his confusion about the ship and her crew, but with nothing else to go on, they couldn't start prying. So he had focused on the work that needed to be done.

He was surprised to arrive at torpedo control to find the two old launchers removed, the new control software was installed and being connected with the main tactical command interface, and his team were standing by to get the quantum launchers installed—all the work of Ensign Jose Tyler. He'd praised the younger man for his work, as they were set and ready to get the new launchers installed and get back out on patrol quickly. The work would take almost two days, so he had told Leijten that everything would be completed by 1200 hours tomorrow and since he never padded his estimates, the job would be done and ready to go by then.

One launcher was already in place and being connected up whilst the second was still sitting in the hangar, it was due to be moved into place shortly. He was working with Tyler in connecting up the circuit pathways, trying to get the brand new technology integrated into the older systems the *Silverfin* used. It was always tricky, but he liked the challenge, as it often meant they needed to develop a whole new way to make them work. Tyler was proving up to the task, whilst the young Ensign had a lot of sheer muscle to throw at the heavy lifting and carrying that was needed.

His combadge, which was still pinned to his jacket draped over a railing, chirped. Pushing out from under the launcher, leaving Tyler to work, he picked the badge off his uniform and tapped it. "Th'Shaan here, go ahead."

"Howdee L.T. How're things goin' with those new launchers?" Hank asked over the comlink.

"All good so far, Hank. What can I do for you?"

"Ah was lookin' over our records, as yer asked me too. There's no sign of the Blackbird ever dockin' here for repairs or supplies. Ah also checked with Starbase 200, and they've got nothin' either. Looks like they're keepin' a low profile out here."

"You're sure?"

"Yup. I looked for any and all Aerie-Class ships, just in case they used another name. Aside from the H'krii and the K'Shod there've been no others in the last two years."

"Damn," he cursed, the same annoyance he'd felt onboard the ship returning. "Thanks for your help, Hank. It was a long shot, but worth a try."

"Acker said she'll keep an eye out for them and so will ah. A ship like that has to gettin' support from somewhere nearby."

"Appreciated. I'll catch you later, Hank."

"Sure thing. Mitchell out."

The channel closed, leaving Elak th'Shaan as confused and irritated. But he couldn't dwell on it now, he needed to get the launchers installed, then there were all the status reports from when he'd been away to review, as well as venting the impulse manifolds. There was a lot to be done and of course not enough time to get it done to his satisfaction.

* * * * *

END